As I was preparing this address, I went back to past Chapter Themes, decisions made, memories of my own early days, listened to the stories of other sisters’ early days, the Rule & Constitution, etc., and considered how this could all come together with who we are now. So much blended together; that’s when I realized that evolution is a process and we have been and are evolving. **(Evolution is a dynamic process of emerging consciousness.)**

After examining all of the above and more, I recognized that all during these times of change and growth, God continues to be with us, dwelling within us and because of our faith, we not only believe this, we **know** it. God is always with us and we do our best to act on God’s invitation to us.

My speaking with you today is meant to try and situate us from where we were, to where we are and to suggest some challenges of where we need to go.

**Where we were! Before and after** **Vatican II.**

* We changed our dress, so as not to be separated from other laity.
* Our names, to deepen the living out of our Baptism.
* Our manner of being in Community; more relaxed, less structured.
* Our relationship with each other and our world; we know each other better and we have grown in our awareness and response to our global reality.
* Our prayer is more contemplative, more creative.
* Our Ministry is less institutional, more pastoral.
* Our understanding of the vows; Let me digress a moment…

Our interpretation of the vows has changed over time as we and our world have evolved. Please excuse my simple observations.

Obedience is not necessarily doing what we are told but more listening to the Spirit working within us, and each other, to life’s deeper meaning, to be attuned to the voice of God, to our world: our response always has to be in and doing the loving thing.

Chastity is not just not marrying and being chaste, but being in a loving relationship with our God, with each other, with the whole world. It is valuing the other, because everyone has human dignity, no matter whom. Chastity is purity of heart.

Poverty is not just living with nothing of our own, but in sharing what we have, our gifts, ourselves, taking no pride in the good that God does through us. Loving each other especially when one is sick or weak. Poverty is understood to be the power that makes us a friend of God.

So, when we read The Rule of The Third Order Regular, we hear it differently, more deeply and more challenging according to the times we live in now, in the 21st century. And I quote, “The Form of Life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular is this: To live the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ in obedience, poverty and chastity.”

Our passion is still the same – to be on fire with love of God expressed in the way we live the Gospel wherever we are. We are still on fire, we still have life, and we are still interested in our world, in each other, in the Congregation.

We are still living The Rule with joy and energy as the world beckons us to do.

**Where we are now!**

When we look at the Actuarial Report of our decreasing numbers, our aging and then look at the Chapter Report as a unified congregation, it shows us **what marvels God can accomplish in** **a soul that leaves God absolutely free.** It is Maraveloso! Maravilloso! Marvelous! So much has been and is being accomplished. Let us take a moment now to look at some excerpts from the report. Please note the involvement of laity associates, partners and co-workers. We have always appreciated the laity we’ve worked with, but we’ve come to realize even more how important this is and how grateful we are to have such wonderful people in our lives. We are really Franciscan Sisters in relationship! Let us view this with hearts of thanksgiving and eyes of wonder!

In the last four years, we have been attentive to our initiatives, to The Year of Consecrated Life, The Year of Mercy, The Actuarial Report, and of course, “Laudato Si” and “The Joy of The Gospel”.

We have taken stands on Immigration Reform; the use of fracking; we are faithful to having Respectful Dialogue regarding the role of women in the Church. We are against gun violence; we are working to reclaim the land of indigenous people; we have raised up the role of women’s diaconate; we have advocated and supported refugees; we have been in solidarity with those who are against the diversion of rivers for economic gain; we worked for fair wages and safe working conditions; and are involved in responsible investing.

I wish you could have been with us as we listened to the reports from our corporations:

* Canticle Farm, cooperating with the health department to provide education and fruits and vegetables to those who are poor.
* The Franciscan Center, having a focus on first responders to tragic situations with an intensive program for holistic healing.
* The Dwelling Place, offering room and board, counseling and direction to those women who have lost employment and giving them the help they need to get back on their feet.
* The Renodin Foundation, supplementing local organizations to provide needed services.
* St. Elizabeth’s Mission Society, reaching out to all our sisters and partners who are working to change systems that deny people access and providing materials to improve education.

All that we are and do is **evangelization**—to be and to witness the Good News of Jesus Christ. I thank you for participating in the mini retreats, entitled Living the Gospel in the Manner of Francis and Clare.

We need to look with new eyes. Some examples:

1. We are tending to the old Motherhouse property. We have a committee to tend to the **healing** of the land. We will be using indigenous plants, creating a meadow, refashioning the land to be an example and educating for all who come to visit.
2. We have invited two Vietnamese sisters to come to the Motherhouse in Allegany to learn English and the culture of our country;
3. In Jamaica and Brazil, we are growing crops, teaching others how to farm, learn good nutrition and supplying food to those who have little.
4. We have influenced Allegany Franciscan Ministries through their ACOR grants to give up to $15,000 per grant so we can think more broadly and deeply on what we need to do to respond to the needs of our times. Allegany Franciscan Ministries also gives us a million dollars a year as a sponsorship fee which helps us take care of our expenses
5. The Franciscan Spirituality Committee has developed a booklet entitled, “Beloved of God” dealing with present social issues. They are actually world issues.
6. We are encouraging our sisters to have an exchange program to and with each country in which we minister.

I realize that we will be attentive to the Environment in the days ahead. However, I would like to share the following with you as an example of **living the gospel in the manner of Francis and Clare.** For instance, the predominant secular society story is: Humans have **dominion** over nature… to make underdeveloped land and resources productive to generate wealth. The mainline Catholic story that there is a God-Human-Creation that we must **serve as caring stewards** to protect it and ensure that the goods of the earth are shared and serve the common good. Both of these examples are hierarchical. Humans on the top of the pyramid. However, the Franciscan story is very different.

The God-human-Creation-other human relationship is a loving family; poor people (other humans) are beloved and have a special place in our relationship. **All** creatures are our brothers and sisters; Creation helps us to know and love God. This is a circular model. Thomas Berry, SJ says that the way we treat the earth is the way we treat each other. Really something to think about!

**Where we need to be now.**

Being Prophetic is not only the call of the Pope or the need of the people but being prophetic is the call of our Baptism. I define the role of the prophet as**—looking at the original** **intent of God** which is the love of each person, and all peoples; that we live in peace.

**Mourn that this is not happening;** this is not what is happening in our world today. I am only going to name some of the deplorable inhuman tragedies… murders, suicides, wars, drugs, lack of values, devastation of the earth, break up of families. We know them. I suggest that we not be narcotized by these realities, but continue to develop a heart that mourns. The heart will move us to act.

**Provide an alternative future,** a future that is of love and peace. The only way we can do this is with others, be that with people of other faiths, of different races, different cultures, those who share the same values as we do. Human dignity is an inestimable value. It is the Incarnation imperative.

I would like to include what Pope Francis is saying to us. “Wake up the World!” “I want a church of the poor and with the poor.” “Take care of our common home.”

**Leadership**

Everyone is called to be in leadership. We keep hearing that we are to **author** our lives. What is God calling us to from the future? I believe that God is calling us to “humanize” our world, not merely by what we do but also, by our lives, our presence, and our prayer. I look at Clare’s leadership. She opted for a creative and alternative leadership which is reflected in her structures of governance. She preferred a much more egalitarian, participative and empowering framework. All of her sisters, inspired by Clare’s vision, took an active part in creating the life they shared, as we are doing in this Chapter.

And Francis. He led by living the Gospel radically, by being an example of courage, by attracting followers, by being totally conformed to Jesus. He was charismatic.

**How can we do this?**

We can pray for the needs of the world. Any or all of us are capable of doing this. When we consider all that we are and do, especially when we look at our financial resources, we need to remember that our budget is a moral document. We can live more consciously and attentively to those who are poor. We can open our homes to others. We can share our resources. We can advocate on behalf of the marginalized and poor so they can have a voice at the tables that make about their lives. We can reach out to those who hunger for food, clothing and affordable housing.

I go back to where we were. We taught children of immigrants who needed to learn a new culture, a new language; we can do this, especially those of us who were and are teachers, **English as a Second Language-Portuguese as a Second Language-Spanish as a Second Language**; we taught children of color when they were denied access to other schools. We have a long history, which continues today in healthcare in which we always treated people with dignity, whether they had the resources to pay or not. We are seeing the signs of the times regarding the environment and its devastation. We need to continue this work. We are bringing the Gospel not only through education, but through our lives, our presence. There are so many possibilities for everyone. We are declining in numbers but we have partners, associates and laity. We need to cultivate our relationships even more with them. I listen to our employees, who love being around us, be that in the United States, Jamaica, Brazil or Bolivia.

We stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. In my letter convoking the Chapter, which was written on August 6, 2015, The Feast of the Transfiguration, I explained the meaning of Griehog. Those who have gone before us are the ones who practiced Griehog, the process of burying warm coals in the ashes at the end of their day so that in the morning we who followed them could start the fire of a new day. The old fire did not die out; it kept its heat in order to light a new fire. That is our heritage to this very day. We will be concluding our afternoon session in celebrating the lives of the 42 sisters who have died in the last 4 years. We are light a new fire for our world today. Let us look at the signs not only of our native countries, but our world, our common home. Let us look more deliberately to those who are poor and accept wheat they have to offer us through their relationship with God; **let us be a Church with and for the poor.**

**Let us Wake up the World**

Let us return as the disciples did after being on the road to affirm the risen Christ in our lives. That’s where the fire is! That’s where we get our passion. Jesus Christ is risen and dwells in us. The Jesus of history has become the Christ of Faith in us.

A few weeks ago, I sat at a table with Alice and Jan Sloot from Holland. He is a medieval historian who came to give a talk at St. Bonaventure. He has done research on the Poor Clares. He traced the story of the Poor Clares from Medieval times to Post Vatican era. The title of his talk was, “From Cloistered Nuns to Contemplative Sisters”.

My hope is that someday, if someone is writing about the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, they will say, “they lived contemplatively and acted prophetically”.