



Convocation 2024
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“We didn’t start the fire.
It was always burning since the world’s been turning.”

This is the refrain of Billy Joel’s epic song of the same name, *We Didn’t Start the Fire*.

Joel was inspired to write the song after a conversation with a friend about how much has happened during their lifetime. He did this by creating a rapid-fire list of these events set to music. The list contains a total of 119 events, people and cultural references spanning from the year of his birth in 1949 to the year the song was released in 1989.

The list includes references to a wide range of topics...historical events...political figures...cultural icons... and advancements in science and technology.

Listen to the first two stanzas:

Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnnie Ray
South Pacific, Walter Winchell, Joe DiMaggio
Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, television
North Korea, South Korea, Marilyn Monroe

Rosenbergs, H-bomb, Sugar Ray, Panmunjom
Brando, "The King and I" and "The Catcher in the Rye"
Eisenhower, vaccine, England's got a new queen
Marciano, Liberace, Santayana goodbye

He continues with the last two stanzas:

Birth control, Ho Chi Minh, Richard Nixon back again
Moonshot, Woodstock, Watergate, punk rock

Begin, Reagan, Palestine, terror on the airline
Ayatollah's in Iran, Russians in Afghanistan

"Wheel of Fortune", Sally Ride, heavy metal, suicide
Foreign debts, homeless vets, AIDS, crack, Bernie Goetz
Hypodermics on the shores, China's under martial law
Rock and roller cola wars, I can't take it anymore

“We didn’t start the fire. It was always burning since the world’s been turning.” suggests the idea of collective responsibility and the interconnectedness of humanity. Joel is communicating that the challenges and struggles faced by each generation are not isolated incidents, but part of a larger on-going human experience. This perspective invites reflection on how individuals and societies contribute to the world’s collective history and the impact of our actions on future generations.

Joel’s life review is stunning. The numerous historical events such as wars, political movements, and societal changes provide the listener to reflect on several spiritual implications related to collective responsibility, resilience, social justice, and the human condition. All of these are timeless themes that shape our spiritual journey.

Joel’s refrain constantly reminds us. “We didn’t start the fire. It was always burning since the world’s been turning.”

Sisters, let us take just 2 minutes of reflection. I want you to think of your own life and all the changes that have taken place within your lifespan.

The Universe Story

Upon reflection it is easy to connect the events that Billy Joel relates and if we had the time we could add our own list to Joel's and make even more connections.

Judy Cannato in her well-known work, *Field of Compassion*, provides a gentler re-telling of the powerful connections that Joel's rapid-fire staccato list proposes. She relays the "overarching narrative" that has emerged from modern scientific discoveries (Cannato 17). Cannato asserts that the story of the beginnings of the Universe clearly shows the connectedness of all life. We are all part of a single community that is rich in diversity. We are joined together at the most fundamental levels since all of creation comes from the same source and continues to unfold moment by moment (Cannato 21).

We do not have the time or the space today to delve into all that we have learned from modern scientific discoveries such as the advances of knowledge from the Hubble telescope to the insights of quantum physics or the more recent discoveries of the James Webb telescope.

What we do know in a scientific version of the Universe Story is that origin and development of the Universe began what scientists call the "Flaring Forth" or some may refer to as the Big Bang (Cannato17).

No! "We didn't start the fire. It was always burning since the world was turning."

And the mystery of it all is that we are learning and discovering that our Universe continues to evolve in a dynamic process. In other words, creation is not static. It is unfolding minute by minute. Our Creator God is a dynamic presence.

Science and theology are helping us to make sense of the Universe Story. Cannato states, "Ironically, in modern times, it is science that has told us of how life is connected in a fundamental way – a story that the world's mystics have been telling for centuries" (Cannato16).

Science and theology agree that we “all flow from a single source.” The scientists may call it quantum vacuum – the theologians...the Holy Spirit. The scientists call it mystery. The theologians call it Love Energy.

Pope Francis reiterates this notion of connectors in his Encyclical, *Laudato Si*. He states, “This is the basis of our conversation that all of us are linked by unseen words and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect” (Pope Francis 65-66). The theologian Diarmuid O’Murchu reiterates this by stating the Universe Story “gives way to a new view of continual cooperation, strong interaction and mutual dependence among all life forms” (O’Murchu 153-154). O’Murchu goes on to assert that “The beginning does not mark a single abstract origin but a beginning-in-process. For O’Murchu the creative agent at work is “none other than the Spirit who moves over the waters.” Scripture scholar John Dominic Crossan highlights our role in the notion of “in-process.” In several of his writings, he posits that as we grow in our understanding of the nature of evolution and in the incarnation, “Jesus has left us a strategy for a different quality of engagement, one of collaboration and of not being mere passive recipients forever waiting for a divine rescue.” In other words, we are called to be co-creators with our Creator God (O’Murchu 129-130).

It seems to me that so many of our Sisters really understand that “We didn’t start the fire. It was always burning since the world was turning.” It is really clear to me that especially after attending so many funerals where the Sisters choose to sing *How Great Thou Art*:

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy pow’r thru-out the universe displayed!

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

When thru the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze,

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

The IHM Story

We all know our Founding Story and delight in retelling it over and over again.

Founded in 1845 by Father Louis Florent Gillet with Mother Theresa Maxis and our first Sisters, we know that from our very humble beginnings we evolved as a Congregation. We speak about our accomplishments as we recount story after story of our building of schools, teaching the Breaker Boys, assisting the flu epidemic, traveling to South America, expanding our pastoral ministries, opening up a literacy center, establishing Mother of Mercy House, or more recently the Tri-IHM Collaboration of our ministry at the border. We are in awe of the Sisters who went before us. Their foresight and vision are at times so unbelievable to comprehend.

I encourage you to go to the Heritage Room and the Archives and immerse yourself in our stories. Sit in our beautiful cemetery and quietly drink in the stories.

One of my favorite IHM story is a happening at St. Laurence Convent in 1933. According to the annals our Sisters had to abruptly leave the Sellers Estate, the home of the convent at the time. While we are not told why they had to leave abruptly, it is a good enough guess that it really wasn't our decision. You know what happened next? Now remember we are talking 1933. The Sisters commuted from the Motherhouse in West Chester. As it was getting closer to Easter, the commute became too much for them, So in true IHM fashion, they converted the fifth-grade classroom into

a dormitory for six Sisters. There is no mention of how they cooked or took showers etc. But it is clear that they were mission minded and found a way when it seemed there was no way.

And listen to this letter written in 1951 from Reverend Raymond P. Campbell to Mother Maria Alma:

Reverend and dear Mother,

I do not know if it is necessary for me to once again express my wish in regard to the staff of teachers in St. Laurence School, as I have done so on several previous occasions.

However, to the point of being tedious I do so once again.

I desire to have the Superior of the school free from teaching; also two more sisters, to replace Mother in the class room and the other to take the place of a lay teacher.

My kindest personal regards.

Sincerely yours,

Raymond P. Campbell

Mother Alma's reply:

Dear Father Campbell,

This is to acknowledge your letter of the twenty-seventh. Father, we do realize the desirability of having a free Superior in St. Laurence's School and also a Sister in place of the secular teacher. Unfortunately, it is not possible to alleviate the situation for the coming school year.

As you are already aware, Father, the living conditions of the Sisters are very much crowded and there would not be facilities for the accommodation of additional Sisters until a convent is available. Furthermore, Father, we are still experiencing an acute shortage of Sisters because of ill health and advanced age forcing the retirement of many more than we had anticipated. It is true that God is blessing our Community with numerous vocations, but the number is far less than the demand for replacements. We regret that we cannot support your request at this time.

May we ask a remembrance in your prayers, Father? In return, may Our Immaculate Mother obtain many blessings for you.

Sincerely, in Mary's Immaculate Heart
Mother Maria Alma C.I.M.

No! "We didn't start the fire. It was always burning since the world's been turning."

When considering Our IHM Story do we believe, or can we conceive how the individual stories of the Sisters who have gone before us have shaped us and are interconnected to our Personal and Congregational Story.

You just need to look at your own life review.

Somewhere along the line you were influenced by someone who embodied the IHM Charism that influenced you to hear your vocational call to be an IHM. It is not a coincidence. It is a manifestation of the ever-evolving presence of the mystery of God continuing his creative act of Love. You cooperated with the divine presence to unfold for you the creative act of your vocation. You experienced Love and you responded in Love and in doing so you are intrinsically connected to the IHM Story. What is better yet, the witness of your life and the collective witness of our community life has influenced countless others.

No! "We didn't start the fire. It was always burning since the world's been turning."

The Contemplative Story

Billy Joel provides a pop culture picture of a rapidly changing connection of people, places and events. The Universe story in all its complexities gives us an evolving picture of the unfolding of all creation. Coupled with the insight of theology we are now able to grasp the dynamic relationship of the Divine Presence in our individual and collective lives.

If we truly believe that all is evolving and all is connected how does that speak to us for our IHM Story. Let us take a look at our IHM Legacy in light of today's realities.

You have been paying attention to the information at Chapter and at our yearly Cooperation meetings, so you are fully aware that at present we have 533 Professed Members 3 Junior Professed members, and 1 Novice . Our median age is 79 and we average 35 deaths a year. We have been consistently blessed in the past few years with one new member. This coming September we will be blessed with two Postulants and one returning member who is discerning her possible re-entry.

You have been paying attention, so you are fully aware that financially we are fully funded. In other words, as of today we have enough money to take care of all our members into their retirement and death.

You have been paying attention, so you know that all our efforts are being put forth to sustain our sponsored works such as, Immaculata University, the IHM Center for Literacy, our IHM Academies, our missions in South America, our house at the border and affiliate ministries in the parishes. At the same time, we need to listen and be convinced that perhaps these ministries are just steppingstones to being something more for God's people or perhaps in time we will need to let these go so that we can be available for new possibilities. Remember! "Behold I make all things new. Listen!" We said that just one year ago, didn't we?

Unlike many religious communities we are blessed with a healthcare facility, and we still live and own our Motherhouse.

As a community of educators, I certainly do not need to explain the complexities of how all this data interacts and informs one another. You are living it daily. You are experiencing the reality of changing how we do the most mundane things like grocery shopping, hiring more lay employees, to the larger decisions such as withdrawals.

It is right in front of us. I cannot but think that the foresight and courage that caused Mother Camillus to purchase the land for Immaculata University is the same foresight and courage that is operating within all of us to let go and repurpose Gillet Hall at the University. You are experiencing the changes that all our data is informing us that we have to make.

These are just some of our realities in which we are called to embrace as we move forward into the future. As a Congregation through a Master Planning Process, we will be discussing together all of our realities and the possibilities that lie within those realities to respond to the call of responsible membership in shaping a divinely inspired future. As that process unfolds, all of us will be engaged in that conversation. However, all the planning in the world will not serve us if we do not intensify the work of that inner journey to become intimately aware of whose we are, who we are, and the very purpose in which we profess to be Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Billy Joel reminds us that change speaks to us; the Universe Story informs us that our God is inviting us to full participation; the IHM Story inspires us to respond with Love, Fidelity and Creative Hope.

We all know that we have an unknown future. We all know that Religious life like all creation is evolving...and it is here that I would like to put our energy for the moment.

As I meet with Congregational leaders and our conversation centers around the changing face of religious life, they often bemoan that one of the deadliest phrases that challenges them most is “We have always done it this way.”

Personally, while I understand the crippling nuances of the phrase, I tend to disagree with them that this is deadly. No, as I look at our IHM history, at the Universe Story, and at the rapid-fire changes we are experiencing in our culture and our worldview to me this phrase can serve us well.

Sisters, as IHMs we have always done it this way. Here is my list. You can make your own.

- We have done it with a Eucharistic Center
- We have done it with Prayer
- We have done it with Community Life

- We have done it with Relationships
- We have done it with Creativity
- We have done it with Joy
- We have done it with Hospitality
- We have done it with Gratitude
- We have done it with Loyalty
- We have done it with a Sense of Mission
- We have done it with Love of the marginalized
- We have done it with Looking out for the common good
- We have done it with Trusting in Divine Providence
- We have done it with Collaborating with others

The list can go on and on. Yes, we have always done it this way steeped in the recognition of all the gifts and graces that have been lavished upon us. The good news is that the more we are conscious of the evolving nature of Religious life and we focus on these and all of our foundational assets, we open ourselves and the Congregation to embrace a future full of hope.

This is part of the evolutionary shift of our present realities. Our Creator-God is asking for our cooperation, our participation....and the real good news is that we have always done it this way. I encourage you to take this list, add to it, pray over it, talk to one another about it.

I encourage you to take this list and put it against the evolving nature of religious life. How does we have always done it this way fit into:

- Our understanding of contemplative prayer
- Our understanding of Presence
- Our reaching out to the marginalized
- Our evolving understanding of the nature of God
- Our efforts to deepen our understanding of the vowed life
- Our reverence for the Earth and for all of Creation

- Our openness to seek diverse views
- Our interactions with our lay colleagues
- Our ability to open ourselves to the grief involved in letting go of institutions, life-threatening attitudes, uninformed judgements, and a sense of entitlement
- Our understanding that the Paschal mystery is a daily event
- Our acceptance of our own limitations and the limitations of others
- Our conscious effort to eradicate violence by regulating our attitude and our spoken and written words
- Our awareness that all is gift

Chapter has provided us with a direction in which to embrace the complexity of our present reality while at the same time integrating that reality into an ever-deepening desire to become intentionally conscious of the Holy Spirit's transformative action in our lives.

Our Chapter Direction Statement invites us to “accept God’s loving invitation to reserve an inner and sacred space through a consistent practice of contemplative listening, reflection and dialogue with the Divine.” It is the first and the primary step of doing the same with one another.

Evelyn Underhill calls this intentionality of contemplation a mystical experience. She posits that “various things may result from it; a total change and reorientation of life, a long hard discipline, and inward growth, an immense transformation of personality or great creative power” (Underhill 109). In her estimation those who engage and seek this everyday form of mysticism are “seldom dreamy contemplatives but are people whose whole lives have been re-made in harmony with this overwhelming experience of God” (Underhill 109). Sisters, this is the question that we need to ask ourselves. Do we believe that we have the capacity to open our hearts to the overwhelming experience of God?

Our Chapter Direction Statement is calling forth from us a contemplative stance that will lead to personal and communal transformation. We are the generation that will animate future IHMs to take the bold steps necessary to galvanize the IHM Congregation in a transformative stance that will shape the course of religious life.

No! “We didn’t start the fire. It was always burning since the world’s been turning.”

We are called to step into the fire and to fan the flames by our overwhelming experience of God.

That is our call in our life as consecrated religious women. We are called to be conscious and be intimately aware of our overwhelming experience of God. We have been freely given all the gifts and graces to do so.

Psalm 46 instructs us to “Be still and Know that I am God.” It is simple and yet profound. Sisters, within our present day IHM realities, we are seeking, and our daily lives are responding to the ultimate Reality: “Our Creator God.” The psalmist is clear to how we attain it. “Be Still.”

Together we gather today as Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary may we ponder all these things in our heart and say, “Pray for us O holy Mother of God.....that we may be worthy of the promises of Christ.”

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