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In January I read with delight and excitement Sr. Joan Chittister's keynote address to the Fourth International Oblate Congress. I am a Franciscan and Covenant Companion, and her words inspired, invigorated and comforted me.

I was reminded of a day of reflection that I offered for an inter-congregational group of sisters and associates. The theme was "The Journey Toward Interdependence: Grounded in our Charisms."

I have been exploring the theme of interdependence as it relates to the associate-religious relationship for several years. Sr. Joan Chittister and her consistent message that *we are all called* have helped me explore more deeply my own sense of how the associate-religious relationship might evolve.

My dream for the associate-religious relationship is that we become compassionate collaborators living in respectful mutuality — that we become a "we and us" and not a "they and them."

This dream is not only for the associate-religious relationship itself, it is for the witness "we" as carriers of our community's charisms provide to our hurting world. As Sister Joan said, "Each of us — lay and religious — carries a piece of the truth — but only a piece."

The dictionary defines mutuality as "a condition or state of reciprocity or sharing felt by each of two or more for or toward the other(s)." Mutuality isn't sameness. Mutuality honors the uniqueness of all of God's creation while valuing our one-ness with the Divine and one another.

At that day of reflection, I shared the following experiences:

A few years ago, I was out visiting with my covenant companions. We, like many associate communities, had experienced some significant changes and I wanted to touch base with covenant companions who had not been part of the process. On one of my visits a covenant companion asked, "What do *they* (the vowed community) need us for?"

And:

At a North American Conference of Associates and Religious (NACAR) gathering in the fall of 2016, a sister overheard a conversation I was having with some other participants. I had been asked what I was working on then. I shared that my current focus was on the concept of "interdependence." The sister said, "I don't like the use of that word in this relationship. It implies that the sisters share dependence with the associates. I don't see that. What do we need *them* for?"

There was a small gasp in the room after I finished sharing these experiences. I am not sure why. Was it because I shared such a story or because there is an element of truth in the experiences we don't want to face?

So frequently it seems to me that our relationships are based on transactional needs — money, time, service — a *quid pro quo* and not our common call to *be* for one another.

I went on to say to the group, "I don't remember how I responded in either situation or if I responded at all, but from my perspective, we need each other. We need one another to help us recognize our gifts and to encourage us to share our gifts for the sake of God's creation. We need to challenge one another and encourage one another as spiritual beings. We need to be accountable to one another and to the community that we have chosen. We need to support one another in good times and in bad. We need each other as companions on the spiritual journey."

I truly believe that associates/oblates/covenant companions, whatever name is used, are called to embody the charism of our communities — enliven it — incarnate it — represent it — live it — so that it is a part of our very being and our gift to the world.

This is more than a statement; it is *a way of life*! I have lived my commitment as a covenant companion with the Wheaton Franciscans for almost 23 years. I have come to know in my heart that this is not a private/individual contract with God that somehow makes me different from others.

It is a way of living Gospel values for the sake of others. This way of life is a commitment to God, through the Wheaton Franciscans, and for the world. I am not a sister "wannabe," I am not here to "save the sisters," or "do for" the sisters, and I am definitely not here to "tell the sisters" how to live their lives.

I am simply a child of God seeking to deepen and strengthen my relationship with God and to share my own journey and life experience with others on the journey. I believe, as Sister Joan wrote, "It is the wisdom we seek together that will be most likely true. ... We must look to one another for the wisdom of experience each of us brings to the table from a different part of life."

This seeking of wisdom comes to pass with commitment and respect for one another. For me, this commitment means being present to my community of sisters and covenant companions in balance with my commitment to my family.

This commitment to being present isn't an afterthought or "if nothing better comes along." It is a true, and sometimes very challenging, balancing of all that life presents.

Yes, thank you Sister Joan! It *is* time, more than ever, "to carry these vibrant and world-changing charisms back into a world that needs them so badly." We cannot do the work of being gospel people on our own. We need each other, and all people of good will, to be all that God has called us to be for all of God's creation.

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