

Reflections on our Apostolic Journey

An Open Letter from the NCC to All CLC-USA Communities

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The Washington Assembly

Each National Assembly provides an opportunity for us to affirm that God is forming us as an apostolic community. In July, more than 300 of us gathered in Washington D.C. Our theme for the Assembly was “Called to Be a Prophetic Community” and in the spirit of communal discernment we were invited to *be fully alive, be fully ourselves, and take our position in the Community.*

At the NCC meeting in July, reflecting on the graces of the Assembly, we felt confirmed in an unshakable conviction that CLC is such a great treasure, a treasure we wish to share with others. This sentiment was apparent at the Assembly in the active participation of the members gathered. Drawing on the wonderful energy and the Ignatian way of proceeding—emanating from the Holy Spirit—we wish all of us in CLC to move beyond our comfort zones and to be fully alive and truly ourselves.

The Washington Assembly was a convergence of movements that emerged from many CLC initiatives over the past five years: the work of the Diversity & Organization Committee (D&O) and the Pittsburgh Conferences, the work of the other CLC national committees (Formation, Apostolic Action, Advancement, Communications), and yearnings from many in the community for a sense of confidence and competence to move forward in living their vocation in their own life circumstances.

The discerning circle that was formed at the Pittsburgh Leadership Conferences was broadened at the Assembly to embrace more of our members in the process of communal discernment. The work of D&O shifted our focus from concerns about a “management structure” to the graces and challenges of our community’s multiple relationships; we recognized that an improved structure should flow from these growing relationships. This helped breathe new life, energy and freedom into us at the Assembly. We were more fully alive, more fully ourselves, and we did take much greater responsibility for our richly varied parts in the apostolic life of CLC.

We desire that ALL of our members join in the communal discernment of our national community. If you were able to be with us at the Assembly, we ask you to share your experiences with your local community. To assist us as we continue to discern how God is forming us, we offer these reflections on the Assembly experience. We hope each community will take time with each section in these pages over the coming months.

The Assembly Process

1. Telling Our Stories and Encountering the Reality of Our Secular World

Over the past two years we have had many occasions to reflect on our graced histories at local and regional gatherings. At the Assembly, we shared those histories with the wider community. As we shared, we came to see more clearly how God has gathered and nourished each community over the years; each story is a sign of God’s presence and love. We began to see more clearly the graced history of CLC-USA as an apostolic body. Each local community is like a stream pouring its water and energy into a larger river – groups to regions to CLC-USA to World CLC – heading out to the vast ocean, to God. In these stories, we could see and find affirmation of the grace of being chosen and called to be a lay prophetic community. We rejoiced in God’s graces! We were re-energized with a sense of newness!

2. Immersion Experiences – Opening Ourselves to the World Around Us

On Saturday morning, we were humbled to hear of the tragedy of the genocide in Rwanda and its impact on our CLC sisters, their families and their communities. We heard how many in the Church stood silent, allowing the violence to go on. We listened to how, as the war ended, people sought forgiveness, needed by all in order to reconcile and heal. We heard how several CLCers in Rwanda served in the country's reconciliation and healing process. Additionally, we heard how CLC Rwanda discerned as a national community to be present to those afflicted with HIV/AIDs and to serve them. We pondered these events in our hearts.

In the afternoon, we set off in groups on trips to meet with about a dozen Congressional leaders and their staffs at the Capitol and to visit with several advocacy networks around DC. We shared our concerns and our stories on issues of the day including healthcare reform, immigration reform, human rights, rights to life, and environmental justice. On these trips, we journeyed in solidarity with one another as we advocated on behalf of those most vulnerable in our world.

3. “Open Space” – Exploring Issues and Possibilities

We felt confirmed that each one of us is a treasure of graces, of living experiences, of expansive loving capacity, of unselfish creativity and of heartfelt concerns for our communities. We used the Open Space methodology to share the issues dear to our hearts and to explore collectively the possibilities that might spring from them.

Using Open Space, we raised our concerns in a plenary session much like an “open market”. Then in various locations, people gathered with others who shared similar interests and concerns. We shared our experiences and we worked together to put forward some possible ways of proceeding. We did this in the spirit of discernment, in our sincerity and in our love and care for one another. These discerning circles for our sharing transcended all the artificial boundaries that we inadvertently had built for ourselves – group boundaries, regional boundaries, age boundaries, circumstantial boundaries. Open Space provided a model for us to move beyond sharing our general hopes and visions, to forming discerning circles that transcend boundaries, where we could focus on specific actions for our community life and our apostolic involvements.

Open Space is in many ways a free forum for all. We expected that there would be varied focus areas and personal opinions, just as the Spirit calls each of us differently in our life experience, and so we expected everyone to listen attentively and respectfully to one another. We value and allow freedom of individual expression, even in cases that are not in line with a prescribed way of thinking with traditional Church teaching. However, it is important to clarify that as CLC-USA is an organization of the Catholic Church, we always stand for the dignity of all human life and seek to be faithful to the Church and her teaching.

4. Fruits of Open Space

The culmination of all our sincere and collective efforts was gathered together in the Open Space Journal. The reports in the journal give us a clearer picture and a better understanding of the issues our members value. The Open Space process and journal embodied, first of all, a gift from the Holy Spirit to our Community so that we can move toward living our charism more deeply and become more effective as an apostolic body.

Secondly, it provided a snapshot of where we are as a community on our journey of becoming an apostolic body. It highlighted the issues that many local communities had discerned in preparation

for the Assembly. Issues of concern were confirmed as people gathered in discussion groups to examine these concerns at a deeper level by sharing their experiences and brainstorming constructive suggestions.

Thirdly, it embodied a moment of transformation for our Community when many individuals took the initiative to stand up and raise an issue of concern, inviting others in an open forum into discerning circles to examine the issues that were brought forth. We saw that no longer do we need to wait for others at the so-called leadership level to serve us, but as demonstrated during the Open Space session at the Assembly, each one of us can assume a position of leadership on the subjects that move us deeply.

And fourthly, the Open Space process and journal has provided us with a rich resource for our leadership and formation teams—nationally and regionally—as well as for our local communities.

5. Communal Discernment

Many of the activities of the Assembly included the use of communal discernment, something that many of us had not experienced, at least not in such an impressive way as was done at the Assembly. Communal discernment is an aspect of Ignatian spirituality that is an essential part of CLC life. It is not just a method for decision-making; it is a mindset and lifestyle, a habitual attitude of ‘Holy Spirit, guide us’. Communal discernment takes time, patience, lots of prayer, and not lobbying for a personally-decided outcome.

During the Assembly it became clear that God’s voice is stronger in a discerning community. In our immersion experiences on Capitol Hill and in our Open Space process, communal discernment was our standard way of proceeding. In all of our efforts, we were listening. Now we are asking: *As we place ourselves in the mind and heart of Christ, how are we being called as a national apostolic community?*

Preparing for the Journey Ahead and Moving Forward

Equipped with the learnings of the Assembly, with the prayer and support of our broader national community, and with God’s grace, we resume our journey. Each of us can bring back to the regions and local communities the experiences we received at this Assembly and accompany them into a national communal discernment already underway. The Open Space Journal can be a rich resource for each group to discern and prioritize issues for an ongoing formation programs and action over the next few years.

1. Using the “Open Space” Journal

During the Assembly delegates spent an entire day with the Open Space process, sharing, discussing, responding, evaluating on the 45 topics proposed – all with great enthusiasm and openness to the Spirit. The result of those discussions is the Open Space Journal available to all on our website www.clc-usa.org. This journal provides us with a snapshot of where we are as an apostolic body.

The issues and concerns documented with lived experiences and suggestions for solutions will provide each community with a rich resource to prioritize a formation program that would best reflect the group’s unique situation. To use the Journal, we suggest the following:

- 1) **Read and Pray:** Prayerfully read ***General Principles Part I: Our Charism*** (<http://clc-usa.org/gpcharism.htm>). Read the reports from the Open Space Journal. *What speaks to you and your experience of CLC? What resonates? Challenges? Where might you wish to seek greater understanding?*
- 2) **Discern and Confirm:** Prioritize and identify an issue from the Open Space Journal that speaks to your group. *How has the Spirit called you in this issue? In what direction do you and your group feel drawn?*
- 3) **Implement and Execute – Take Ownership and Designate Drivers:** For an issue, identify one or two people who will take responsibility for keeping the issue before the community; and who will promote to assure input, lived experiences, and sharing the process and fruits to the leadership so that we all can learn from the experience.

Delegates at the Assembly experienced the guidance of the Holy Spirit during this process. Hearing the voice of God calling us into a way to follow him as one apostolic body, we believe that each local community can do this too. We ask you to take the time to let the Spirit speak to your group.

2. Some Principles for Ongoing Formation

General Principle #4 states: “*To prepare our members more effectively for apostolic witness and service, especially in our daily environment, we assemble people in community who feel a more urgent need to unite their human life in all its dimensions with the fullness of their Christian faith according to our charism.*” In that spirit, we offer the following suggestions as steps toward achieving confidence and competence in each member of the community, hence building and/or restoring competence and confidence for the entire local community:

- Promote ongoing formation for all members, in accordance with God’s desire to never to stop re-creating us. This may include participating in national programs and/or creating programs tailored for members and local communities.
- Have a guide or guides available for groups to turn to for direction in time of need.
- Help members gauge their growth; periodically use the General Principles in local groups to maintain the spirit of CLC. We recognize that coming together in the Ignatian way of life is the foundation for CLC.
- Empower others. Seek to find their gifts and talents and encourage them to bring these to light. Help members to feel the authentic love of the Spirit within the group, helping them be more committed and to take more ownership of the group.
- Accept the different pace of personal growth of each member in the community. Avoid making others feel inferior or intimidated by your behavior or manner of expression. In recognizing that God wishes to work with individuals in their own here and now, we can be more sensitive and generous toward our companions, so as to empower them for deeper awareness and openness in the CLC way of life.

3. Apostolic Networking

As members of the pilgrim People of God, we have received from Christ the mission of being his witnesses before all people by our attitudes, words and actions, as well as becoming identified with his mission of bringing the good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives, bringing sight to the blind, setting the downtrodden free, and proclaiming the Lord's year of favor. General Principle #8 states: "*Our life is essentially apostolic. The field of CLC mission knows no limits: it extends both to the Church and the world, in order to bring the gospel of salvation to all people and to serve individual persons and society by opening hearts to conversion and struggling to change oppressive structures.*"

At the Assembly, we experienced opportunities of giving witness to Christ's saving grace in the political arena in the story of CLC-Rwanda, on our field trips to downtown DC, and in the Open Space sessions that dealt with corporate action, projects aiding people in need, and education in Catholic Social Teaching. These experiences were compelling and energizing for our community, and comments in the final open forum confirmed our desire for CLC to be an agent of social transformation.

There are many forums and apostolic works that CLCers can and do engage to carry out the CLC mission in building the reign of God. As we experienced, we desire to act in solidarity on many issues that confront us in this country and in the world. Here are some recommendations to facilitate these solidarity efforts through communication, education, and action. Some of these come out of the Assembly experience and the July NCC meeting and may help empower our members and local communities to act within and across communities.

- Look to Social Action Networks on our CLC-USA website; these are carefully selected because of their alignment with our charism and their expertise on particular issues of concern.
- Refer to the Open Space Journal for suggestions of apostolic action already engaged by our members.
- Prayerfully discern a response to action alerts from our Apostolic Action team and our CLC WG at the UN.
- Consider ways to participate in the JustFaith program locally. The JustFaith ministry offers a wonderful variety of programs on Catholic Social Teaching that "help participants to expand their commitment to social ministry within their faith communities."
- Make use of John English's book *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, reflecting his own CLC experience.
- Organize ways to share news (and pictures) about what each region and 'affinity group' is involved with.

Unity in Diversity – ‘Structuring’ Our Relationships

At the Washington Assembly, we saw the many cultures—Vietnamese, Latino, Korean, Filipino, African, Anglo and more!—in the faces of our members and in our beautiful daily liturgies. Additionally, we saw the many good works that our members are involved in, especially in the great display of posters.

The desire to grow, to connect, to be with one another, to be free, to live the CLC charism, to be in community, to engage with the world, to evangelize, to contribute to greater justice in our world, to feel we belong to the Church – these were all clearly displayed at the Assembly. But we all know that what we shared at the Assembly is only ‘the tip of the iceberg’. There is so much more in us as a national community, and we are still becoming more aware of who we are and what we are called to become.

We are called to burst forth in many directions in our personal vocations. We all have our own direction and speed, but we share the same core, the same charism in the Church – being with and in the heart of Christ through Ignatian Spirituality and CLC. The ‘magic’ and the mystery are in this ‘one-ness in diversity’.

The challenge for us will be in how we maintain and grow in our connectedness amidst our great diversity and many ‘separations’. As we continue to work together in being formed as one apostolic body, we will find clearer ways to keep ourselves connected and enriched. We will need to build on the experiences of the Pittsburgh Conferences and the graces of the Washington Assembly to bring communal discernment deeper into our everyday grassroots life as CLC.

In our desire to move forward in participative leadership, we all share a part in making CLC more visible, by what we do and by how we do it. We are all challenged to facilitate the existence and growth of CLC in the USA, and to empower one another to be a more deeply prophetic lay community. Moving forward from this point is the work for the entire community. Every single member of CLC-USA has a position in this enterprise, in this effort to become a prophetic lay community.

Each one of us in the community is called to be a catalyst for others in listening to the Lord's calling and in being part of the Lord's Mission through the Church. It is our response to Father Nicolas' challenge in Fatima that we would always deepen our formation by further desiring Jesus' hearing, embracing Jesus' vision, moving with Jesus' heartbeat and living in Jesus' mission.

Being united in this relationship with Jesus will be the surest ground for us to form a deeper unity amidst our diverse reality, and allow a truly supportive and empowering ‘structure’ of our apostolic relationships to emerge.

May God continue to bless us abundantly with Jesus' wisdom, courage and love on the journey ahead.