

12 Gems from Sr. Anne Joan Flanagan, FSP

1. St. Paul was the unlikeliest Apostle, and my community's founder, Blessed James Alberione, was the most unlikely media Apostle. But Alberione became a living exegesis of St. Paul. His life mirrored Paul's in several important ways. He had a surprising encounter with Christ that gave his life this fundamental direction. For Alberione, this was an encounter with the Lord during Eucharistic Adoration.
2. Blessed James Alberione was someone who was very forward-thinking, and even though he lived in a very rural part of Italy, just south of France, he was aware enough of what was going on in the world to realize that the developments in the fields of communication were going to just grow exponentially throughout the 20th Century. And so, he set people in place so that whatever new technology would be developed, there would be consecrated people ready to take it up for the Gospel.
3. Before St. Paul ever speaks about collaboration, he speaks about adoption. We're not simply partners in a noble endeavor. We're not associates bound together by shared goals. We're not united for the sake of efficiency. We are adopted children of God, sons and daughters in the eternal Son...And so, St. Paul's characteristic form of address is "brothers and sisters." He's not using that for rhetorical purposes. It's theological. St. Paul is giving family bonds to people he wouldn't have chosen as neighbors. His language is born from lived experience. The first time he heard this was Ananias coming and saying, "Saul, my brother." So, from then on, St. Paul began to absorb this idea that we have become Children of God, we are brothers and sisters.
4. Paul's first imperative for collaboration is welcome one another as Christ welcomes you for the glory of God. So, this fraternal collaboration comes from divine adoption. We cooperate in mission because we already belong to each other in Christ. And that makes our collaboration the necessary and natural expression of communion...And one of the people that most expresses this kind of interior union that flows out into exterior works is Timothy. Paul could trust Timothy because he knew Timothy shared Paul's concern for all the churches. You know, others, Paul said, may seek their own interests, but Timothy's collaboration with Paul came out of single-hearted devotion to Christ and His people.
5. Communion saturates the Letter to the Philippians. From that letter, we see how Paul trusted his collaborators and entrusted them with enormous responsibility. He didn't attempt to control every detail. And this is what extended his reach. Paul could evangelize in more places than one because of these people who shared his mind and his mission. And he didn't take their faithfulness for granted. He praised their efforts, acknowledged their partnership, counted on their prayers.
6. The second Pauline imperative for collaboration is, "Do not stifle the Spirit." He wrote that to the Thessalonians in his very first letter...Collaboration is not how St. Paul started out. It's not a strategy he adopted for efficiency; it's the form his life took once he belonged to Christ. And that demands something very difficult. It means recognizing, respecting, and promoting the gifts of others.

7. Barnabas welcomed Saul when others were afraid of him. He vouched for him in Jerusalem, he introduced him to the community, and when it was time, he brought him into Antioch. Without Barnabas' hospitality, we would not have Paul as we know him. Because of Barnabas, Paul stands at the center of one of the most relational and inclusive circles in all antiquity. Paul learned to see the invisible people and make room for them in the circle.
8. The third Pauline imperative for collaboration, and it's the deepest, it's the most intense, it's the one—the form that will never, never stop: offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable your spiritual worship.
9. Paul never presumes that our lives will be free of pain, sorrow, or failure any more than his was. But he gives suffering a new spin: it isn't ours anymore. He says, "I rejoice in the sufferings I bear for you," and that "for you" is what reveals Paul's sufferings to be the sufferings of Christ and not just a stream of misfortunes. Paul suffers for the Colossians almost as a sacrament of Christ's suffering and redemptive presence.
10. So, what does all this theological language really mean? Offer it up. Yeah, offer it up. It's Catholic shorthand for the meaningfulness of suffering. And Paul says that this suffering in the context of mission is the suffering of Christ overflowing to us. It's collaboration in the grace that burst out of the tomb on Easter morning. And any weakness could be a starting point for collaborating with Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church. And when you want to say, "I just can't," that's the moment when the power of Christ can rest upon you and radiate through you if you offer it up.
11. I came across a book about a vivacious lady from Jersey City. She lived this intensely. Her name was Mary Varick. She spent her life in a wheelchair, and it wasn't just the childhood polio, there was bone cancer too, and a string of other ailments along the way. But this mother of four mobilized a collective apostolate around people with disabilities and chronic pain. And her nephew wrote the book that I found, and he was reflecting on the way his teen years have been commandeered by Aunt Mary to help with the disabled's needs on these pilgrimages that they would make every year, not just pushing wheelchairs, but assisting people with their personal cleaning and their really intimate needs. And he wrote, "My aunt said that pain must be given away to God, freely given away, for when so given, grace could be fashioned, a healing grace to be showered upon others." So that teaching and the example of Aunt Mary and others in the group help this man find meaning when a bacterial infection struck him in his prime and made him a quadruple amputee.
12. So, I beg you, don't wait until extreme old age or illness or accident stops you in your tracks. Offer yourself early and often for this world of ours, because it's not you who live, it's Christ living in you. It's not you who toil or suffer or endure, it's Christ in you. So become who you are. Be that vibrant member of the Body of Christ, collaborating with millions of others, each one with a unique mystery of Christ to give our needy world. That's power made perfect in weakness. Now, St. Teresa of Avila said it best: "Christ has no body now but yours." So, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, your spiritual worship.