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Consecrated Life

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Sanyasa

Carmelaram Post

Bangalore – 560 035, Karnataka, India

Tel.: 080 – 28439259; 28439944

E-mail: sanyasac@gmail.com, sanyasa.in@gmail.com

Web: www.sanyasa.com

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EDITORIAL

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church), promulgated on 30 September, 2010, the Holy Father wrote: “With regard to the consecrated life, the Synod first recalled that *it is born from hearing the word of God and embracing the Gospel as its rule of life*. A life devoted to following Christ in his chastity, poverty and obedience thus becomes *a living ‘exegesis’ of God’s word*”. This phrase, often repeated by him and his predecessor reminds today’s religious of a very significant but often neglected principle that the Word of God is to be lived. We admit that we are still far from having achieved the target of making the Gospel our rule of life, though some serious efforts in this direction cannot be ignored. Therefore, in spite of the vows, our lives do not often become living exegeses.

Pope’s words remind us that the most effective exegesis is done through a life in conformity with the Word. Jesus’ words unequivocally repeats the same: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21-22). So, Bible is not primarily meant for reading, studying, analysing or memorising, but for practising. Nonetheless it is clear that reading, studying, analysing and memorising can help our practice of the Word. Unfortunately in many Christian circles, reading and learning the Word is often more stressed than its practice. This leads to a rift between the word and the deed, which undermines the very tenets of Christianity and religious life. No wonder why someone rightly commented that among priests and religious “we have more Biblical scholars, preachers, exegetes and quiz masters than practitioners of the Bible.”

The often repeated command of Jesus to proclaim/preach the good news (Mk 16:15), which the priests and religious have taken upon themselves, is unfortunately often narrowed down to preaching (practice excluded). In fact, the most receptive manner of preaching is practice. For example, the world, even the non-Christians, did not face any difficulty in understanding and accepting the way Mother Teresa preached the good news; and surprisingly not even religious fundamentalists would raise any objection to her preaching, which was done through her deeds. We cannot think of a better preaching of the good news (evangelization) than more and more Christians translating the love, compassion and forgiveness of Jesus into real acts. But the fact remains that living the gospel is far more difficult than preaching it. The priest and the Levite in Lk 10:30-37 could have easily preached ten sermons on the need to help one’s neighbour, but would hardly become a Good Samaritan, when

they chanced to see a wounded man on the road. Easier said than done! Hence many take the easier way and consequently we have reached this predicament, where religious life is said to be in a so-called crisis.

The crisis, if at all there is one, is what we have discussed above: many of us have failed to maintain the gospel as our rule of life and our lives do not become living exegeses of the Gospel. Other facts like dying Congregations, scandals and lack of vocations, which people perceive as a crisis, are in fact external symptoms of the said crisis. Any institution is said to be in a crisis when it substantially deviates from the founding principles. When religious run after money, power and comforts, and make them the rule of life in place of the gospel, it is a substantial deviation; hence the crisis. In this New Year, Sanyasa wishes all the Consecrated men and women to make a sincere effort in living the gospel and encourage the new generations to do the same; the crisis shall be overcome!

The present issue of Sanyasa carries six articles on relevant themes in consecrated life today: two biblical and one each on prayer, wholeness, charism and Apostolic Christ Experience. At the end you will also find a review of a book on vocation discernment and an extract (the paragraph on Consecrated Life) from the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini*.

Dr. Xavier E. Manavath's article, *Methods in Prayer: A Foundational Approach*, offers helpful hints about Christian methods of prayer and, thereby, helps Christians wisely integrate the wisdom of the 'other' ways and forms of prayer. The article also suggests certain basic attitudes and dispositions that may either block or facilitate prayer irrespective of the method one uses. The first part of the article deals with the importance of the Word of God and the Christ event in any form of prayer. The second part discusses the relevance of different methods in Prayer. The third and final section gives practical guidelines about possible obstacles and helpful conditions in prayer. Prayer is an attentive waiting for the Lord in silence and simplicity, shedding our ego.

From 'Ur of the Chaldeans': Anomalies and Reversals in the Vocation of Abraham by Fr. Johnson Thurackal is an effort to draw inspiration from the call of Abraham, especially for those who have responded to a religious vocation. First, the author situates the Abraham story by briefly analysing the preceding stories of the fall, flood and the tower. Then, narrating the anomalies and reversals in the family of Abraham and in his call, Fr. Johnson demonstrates how hopelessness is turned into blessing in Abraham's life and how he becomes the icon of obedience. He goes on to say that God employs the same strategy of anomalies and reversals in choosing people; this is applicable even in the case of Jesus. Finally he applies the revelations from the

Abraham story to religious vocation, life and ministry, inviting them to trust in God and be his prophets in the world.

Dr. Thomas Thakadipuram's article, "Quest for Wholeness: A Religio-spiritual Perspective" presents a phenomenological study of spiritual leaders' quest for wholeness from the perspective of different religious traditions and cultural contexts. The experience of economic, ethical and spiritual crises in the contemporary society, especially in religious leadership, calls for a deeper quest for meaning and wholeness. The author shares his insight into the lived experience of 10 top spiritual leaders from different spiritual traditions across the globe, who have a reputation for wholeness. Four essential themes of spiritual leaders' quest for wholeness emerged from his in-depth interviews with them: (1) experiencing existential crisis; (2) self acceptance (3) unfolding deeper dimension of being (4) fostering an ethic of co-responsibility. Finally he arrives at a *Leadership Wholeness Model* that portrays the intra-dynamics of spiritual leaders' ongoing quest for wholeness penetrating through their existential, learning, spiritual, and moral dimensions of being and five ethical dimensions of wholeness permeating through the personal, communitarian, social, global, and environmental spheres of life.

Is There a Charism of Saint Ann? by Fr. Paul Dominic studies the surprising role played by the grandmother of Jesus as the patroness of several religious congregations. How did this Jew, an unknown married woman become the model of Christian celibate religious? What charism do they claim to have received from her? The author finds the answer in the holiness experienced in the context of a family, where an atmosphere of mutual love and respect prevails, irrespective of the religion they profess; the same is often found in religious houses too, pointing to a connecting thread. Though we have no biblical foundation for Anne's family history, it is this life of holiness in her married state that has inspired the numerous religious Congregations who have chosen her as their patron. The author goes on to remind the religious of their call to holiness, which differs from the holiness, lived by married people; both have their own demands and challenges.

Fr. George Panthalany, in his article *Called to Walk in the Design of the Lord: Anointing Story in Luke as an Icon to Interpret Religious Life* studies the Lukan version of the anointing incident, in search of meaningful insights for religious life. Away from the conventional interpretation of the incident, which used to be focused on the sinfulness of the woman, he argues that Luke's attempt is to portray the self-righteousness of the Pharisee. Jesus differed from the Pharisees substantially in his approach to the so-called sinners. With the help of feminist hermeneutics, the author cautions us against uncharitably pointing fingers at the woman's morality. Analyzing the low status of women in Jesus' time, he argues that in Jesus' company, the woman

receives honour. What is most interesting is the argument that she carries the image of Christ. She is expected to witness to the grace she received, by continuing Christ's mission of liberating the underprivileged. Here comes the message for the religious: the attitude of the Pharisee is a possible danger among the religious, whereas the response of the woman is a model for them. She could be a standard bearer for the religious in bringing Christ's liberation to the world.

Dr. Noble Mannarath in his article *Apostolic Christ-experience for a More Meaningful Consecrated Life*, reiterates that Christ centeredness, primacy of the Word of God, insertion into the Mission of the Church and the Newness of the Spirit are the four pillars on which Consecrated life is built. In the context of disillusionment about the state of consecrated life and the confusions among the consecrated, a renewal of this institution is urgent, rediscovering the essentials of these four pillars. Consecrated life should be aimed at a greater conformity with Jesus of the gospels, necessitating a process of renewal, guided by the Spirit. The second part of the article proposes a new vision for the mission and ministries of the consecrated. The mission of the consecrated is to work towards the integral development of humans and all else in the world, which calls for dialogue and collaboration between peoples, cultures and religions.

Martin George CMF

METHODS IN PRAYER: A FOUNDATIONAL APPROACH

Xavier E. Manavath CMF

This is an age of proliferation in different methods of prayer. The spirit of ecumenism and dialogue fostered by the Second Vatican Council opened our eyes to various ways and forms of prayer practised in other religious and denominational traditions. In the efforts to listen and dialogue with these ways and forms of prayer, a Christian will be confronted genuinely with questions: how do I learn to assimilate and integrate the wisdom in various ‘other’ forms of prayer into my own practice of prayer? How far can I go in assimilating it? Will I be running into dangers of eclecticism or syncretism? What are some of the basic principles to be kept in mind in this process of integration?

The purpose of this article is two-fold: first of all, it offers a foundational

approach to Christian methods of prayer and, thereby, helps Christians wisely integrate the wisdom of the ‘other’ ways and forms of prayer. Secondly, it suggests certain basic attitudes and dispositions that may either block or facilitate prayer irrespective of the method one uses.

1. Word of God: The Ultimate Source and Reason for All Methods

1.1. Word God: The Source of All Reality

God spoke and everything came into being. God said: “Let there be . . . and there was” (Gen 1:1ff). “He commanded and things sprang into being” (Ps.33:9). We read in the prologue of John: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God

The author has a long experience of service in the Church as the Rector of major seminaries, Director of Sanyasa Institute, Provincial Superior of the Bangalore Province of the Claretians, and President of KRRCR. He has a doctorate from Van Kaam’s Institute of Formative Spirituality under Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA, USA. He lectures at a number of seminaries and religious institutes. He may be contacted at: xmanavath@gmail.com

and the word was God. Everything that came into being, came into being through the word. Nothing that exists, exists without him” (Jn 1:1ff). The Word accomplishes what it aims (Is 55:10; Heb 4:11).

Once this word has rung in the midst of the world, in eternity, in fullness of time, it is so powerful that it applies to everyone, addresses everyone, all with equal directness. Nobody is in a disadvantageous position either in space or in distance or in time (Mt 13:3f; Lk 11:28).

The Eternal Word of God, which is the source of all reality, is always mediated to us in particularities. The immediacy of the word is experienced through mediations. God speaks in the sanctuaries of the *universe, history* and *humanity*. These are all ‘words of God’ in their multiple and varied forms in their complexity and utter simplicity. There is God’s word in the *people, events and things* of our life. Yahweh manifests himself to Moses in the ‘burning bush’ (Ex 3:1ff) and through signs and wonders throughout the history of the people of Israel.

1.2. Humans: Called to be ‘Hearers’ of God’s Word

Thus for our sake, God who has spoken first invites us to enter into communion with him. For the moment, we can only be listeners. We have to begin first of all by listening. And we

There is God’s word in the people, events and things of our life.

are all called to be ‘hearers of the word’. God has created us in such a way that we have an existential ability to hear the word of God. Hans Urs Balthazar says: “God, in giving us faith, has also given us the ability to hear.”¹ To believe and hear him is one and the same thing. To believe is to recognize and accept our estrangement from God, and it is only in this recognition that we recognize our ability to listen to his word. It is only in this listening that God further enables us to respond, and in responding, he takes us to communion with himself. ‘My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and keep it’ (Lk 8:21). Thus any dialogue with God, any communion with him is possible only on the basis of his word, his speaking, his language. Hence all our prayer can only be a response to his speaking. This implies that we can never produce this language on our own initiative. We cannot capture this through any technique or method.

1.3. Christ-Event: The Classical Locus of God’s Word

Christ came as the fullness of God’s word. “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his son whom he

appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God... upholding the world by his word of power” (Heb 1:1-3). Central to all the privileged places of God’s speaking, therefore, stands the Christ-Event, which becomes for a Christian, the classical and normative locus of God’s word. All the ‘words of God’ uttered in cosmos and humanity stand in relation to the classical, normative and privileged locus of God’s speaking. The scriptures, being the recorded expressions of this Christ-event, become the normative sacrament for divine speaking in the life a Christian.

It is the Christ-event that provides us with the criteria of the Kingdom within which all our listening, perceptions, decisions, actions and relations are to be judged. This implies that any attempt to pray on their part has to begin, grow and develop through their living contact with the scriptures. Those who profess themselves as Christians cannot overlook this fact. Whatever may be the method one uses, it has to spring from a foundational experience of a lived contact with the written word of God. Methods of prayer, certainly, will differ according to the temperaments and abilities in the different stages and throughout our lives; but what is of utmost importance is persistent pondering over the deeper meaning and wisdom of the scriptures.

Only then can we rightly interpret every other form of revelation, every other form of ‘God’s word’ in their varied and multiple expressions. The conviction that De Mello shares in his introduction to one of his books is quite significant in this regard: “I have wandered freely in mystical traditions that are non-Christian, and even non-religious and I have been profoundly influenced and enriched by them. It is to my Church, however, that I keep returning, for she

What is of utmost importance is persistent pondering over the deeper meaning and wisdom of the scriptures.

is my spiritual home . . . It is she who has formed and moulded me and made me what I am today.”²

1.4. Prayer as the Primordial Listening to God’s Own Word

If the word of God is the source of all reality, it means, then that we can begin to pray only by listening to God’s word, speaking everywhere but more centrally in the scriptures. But the problem is when we try to listen, we hear ordinarily too many voices, all mixed up and confused, even voices that contradict the voices of God. When we listen, we hear not only the word of God but also the voices that come from too many other sources especially in the present world governed more by ‘information explosion’. All kinds of

human 'isms' also speak each with its own language and expertise and area of knowledge. Sometimes, God's word is subsumed under all these voices. His directives co-exist with many other directives. We are being bombarded with directives that are both consonant and dissonant. This is a peculiarly modern phenomenon, especially in a world governed more by media revolution and globalization, remote-controlled by systems of collective global power and vested interests. In the past, at least, distinctions between good and evil were finely demarcated and so it was easy to recognize good and evil. The modern situation, when it comes to this recognition, can be very confusing and alarming.

Hence it is no longer enough that we simply listen, but we listen first to God's own word and make all our other listenings subservient to this primordial listening. For this, we must tune ourselves properly, discern, and develop the art of refined listening, disciplined listening or attenuated attention. This refined listening or discerned listening to God's word and all its consequences become the heart of the movement of prayer.

1.5. Being in Continual Prayer

To pray, then, is to let ourselves be addressed by God's own word and for a Christian, it means to be addressed by the fullness of that word revealed in

Christ and the recorded expressions of the Christ event in the Scriptures. To pray means not only to be affirmed, cared, loved, accepted, but also to be challenged, confronted, and renewed personally by God's word. This is the

Listen first to God's own word and make all our other listenings subservient to this primordial listening.

meaning of **continual prayer**. In prayer, we raise the question, "How shall I be O, Lord?" Such a prayer is existential prayer that springs from the heart of our lives and can happen to us at any moment of our life. This is to live in the awareness of God's word and its implications for our lives. As our lived familiarity with the scriptures deepens, we learn to be more and more in continual prayer. Such a prayer can never be taught or explained; it can only be hinted at or suggested.

2. The Relevance of Methods

If the Word of God is the source of Christian prayer, it means, then, that we can begin to pray only by 'listening' to God's word speaking everywhere but, primarily, in the Scriptures. This brings us to two important implications which are very significant in this age of proliferation of methods and techniques of prayer. They are:

1. Only God can teach us to pray, and
2. All methods that we speak of in prayer are just to help us to facilitate this 'listening'.

2.1. Freedom is the Norm of Christian Prayer

Freedom has to be the definitive rule or the norm of Christian prayer. The child of God is free to speak to his Father in the way its heart dictates. The Spirit of God that prays in the human heart is a Spirit of freedom. One only needs to pray in the way the Spirit moves him or her in the heart. Hence, only God can teach us to pray. No externally imposed rule, technique, or method can reconstruct this dialogue

One only needs to pray in the way the Spirit moves him or her in the heart. Hence, only God can teach us to pray.

with God. One may seek advice, read many books on prayer, listen to the experiences of others, and may get exposed to various other ways of prayer; all these, however, must be subservient to the deepest inspirations coming from one's true self as a revelation by the Spirit. In other words, pray in the way that is congenial to the one who prays. If the recitation of the rosary, looking at the crucifix, or the practice of yoga helps you to pray, do it. One may,

however, do so, acknowledging that one's own congenial way of prayer can never be normative for others.

This must be kept in mind as there has been a rediscovery of various methods and techniques of prayer. There has been a fruitful and enriching dialogue between the East and the West in this aspect. Countless are its blessings. But there are also possible dangers. The meeting of these spiritualities, especially in this new age of Trans-personal Psychology and Spectrum theology, has also contributed to the development of various adulterated and syncretic methods that are more 'techniques' for transcendental experiences than genuine ways of prayer.

2.2. The 'Why' of Methods in Prayer

If one has to pray in the way that is congenial to the person, why should we speak of methods in prayer, or rather, why should there be a method at all?

The answer to this question is very simple, but important. We have already seen the meaning of 'being in continual prayer'. Besides 'being in continual prayer', however, there must be times when we 'sit down' to pray. This becomes necessary as there is 'Martha' in all of us. 'Sitting down' is part of our need for disciplined and refined listening. We need to withdraw ourselves periodically from all our active involvements, discipline our

Interior silence demands a certain disciplining of ourselves, of body, mind and spirit.

senses, body, mind and spirit and ‘sit down’ to pray. We can pray only if we listen. We can listen only if there is interior silence. But silence is not something that we already possess. We are not born as *Buddhas*. We know how fluctuating our minds are. Interior silence, therefore, is an attitude that needs to be cultivated regularly which, in turn, demands a certain disciplining of ourselves, of body, mind and spirit. This is to dispose ourselves to God’s activity. Prayer is the work of God in the soul. It requires our own co-operation in freedom. There can be no contemplation without this ascetical dimension.

From a human perspective, prayer is also an art. A person, however great his or her innate musical talents may be, can never become a great musician unless he or she learns the basic rudiments of music, practices regularly with a sense of devotion and dedication, and goes through the asceticism of a beginner. Those who want to learn music need to discipline themselves in a certain way, practice at a particular time, conform to certain basic rules and play frequently certain basic melodies or *ragas*. The same is with prayer. Real asceticism gives us a freedom in which

we listen and respond to God. As fragmented selves, we need a practice, a possible way of prayer through which we dispose ourselves to openness, receptivity and silence. As humans, therefore, we all need to have, at least initially, a personal method of prayer and a regular practice.

The same reasoning could be done in a different way. To pray is to discover and incarnate our true self. This true self, however, being simple like God, can be realized only in a mode of simple awareness that is proper to it. This mode of awareness is nothing other than a contemplative awareness. Hence, two elements, contemplative awareness and the search for the true self, are inseparably interwoven. One leads to the other. But these two can be attained only in deep silence which, for most of us, needs to be cultivated. This is the sole reason for methods in prayer as these facilitate us in attaining this silence where we remain attentive to God, and God alone.

2.3. The Meaning of Methods in Prayer

Whenever we speak of ‘method’ in Christian prayer, we need to clarify what it really means. A method is not a technique. Prayer is not something that we achieve by using a correct technique. It is not that we go to prayer as an ego, an ‘empirical self’ with all the good intentions in the soul, that sets out to

achieve its liberation, or determined to experience God or possess Him as an object.

A method in itself is not a prayer. Many of us confuse the two. Methods are not ends in themselves and, therefore, are not to be absolutized. A method, instead, is a pointer to the 'Beyond'. It is better to speak of 'ways of prayer' or 'disciplines of prayer' than 'methods of prayer'. Whatever may be the term, through all these ways of

Methods are not ends in themselves and, therefore, are not to be absolutized.

prayer, all that we can do is to facilitate within ourselves under grace something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart, which are required if the true self is to be awakened. For this, however, there is no 'the method'. Hence, whenever we speak of ways of prayer or methods of prayer, besides the regular practice, our concern should be more for cultivation of attitudes, a new outlook. True listening is possible only in the context of these basic dispositions of heart. Thomas Merton writes: "We should not look for a 'Method' or 'System', but cultivate an 'attitude', an outlook; faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy. All these finely permeate our being with

love in so far as our living faith tells us we are in the presence of God... and we see God without 'seeing'. We know Him in 'unknowing'."³

In our actual practice of prayer, all these imply a certain disciplining of body and mind. Certain appropriate postures, certain congenial efforts towards concentration, some preferred places and times for prayer, regularity in the reading of the Scriptures, prayerful reflection etc., can facilitate the awakening of such dispositions as mentioned above. It is at the level of these preparatory stages that we can rightly speak of the various methods of prayer. James Finley writes: "Prayer at its deepest nub is a perpetual surrender to God. All these have to be seen as preparation and purification to ready us for the never-ending surrender to God that we already listen in silence and are led by Him."⁴

2.4. Practice of Methods and the Role of Lectio Divina

Among the different religious traditions, there are different methods practiced as forms of prayer. Some of these forms are: slow reading of the Scriptures; meditations of awareness, fantasy and nature; awareness of sensations; Zen meditation; *vipasana*; breathing exercises; yogic postures; prayer of heart; discursive prayer; centring prayer; repetition of sacred words; and recitation and singing of

chants and *bhajans*.⁵ Some of these are mutually enriching and complementary. The most basic method that has been so foundational to Christian practice from the very beginning is called *Lectio*

**Preparation, reading,
meditation, prayer and
contemplation**

Divina. This literally means ‘Divine Reading’ which involves a slow meditative reading of the Scriptures, more exactly, listening to it. Traditionally we speak of five moments in this practice of *lectio*. They are: preparation, reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation. These five elements are neither five distinctive stages nor chronological steps, but rather the basic constitutive, inter-related dimensions of prayer. They are interwoven into one another. They all may take place during the same period of prayer or the person may remain just in one or two stages during the period of prayer. Spirit of the Lord can place the person in any stage of His choice. Basic to this practice is the understanding that contemplation is regarded as the normal outcome of listening to the word of God.

This method is foundational to Christian practice of prayer due to various reasons. First of all, it can become the springboard or the source from which so many other ways of

prayer can emerge or different methods of prayer can be built into. When we begin, we may focus only on one stage, but if the prayer is genuine, the Spirit of the Lord will lead the person into other stages. Secondly, this method fits very well with the understanding of prayer as something that we can begin only by listening; and attentive listening needs silence which is to be cultivated through stages of preparation. Thirdly, it is so universal that we find this practice in all major world religions. Fourthly, we find in its very structure itself, all the other necessary dimensions of prayer. Lastly, this method continues to remain as a form of prayer from the very beginning of the Church.

The purpose of the preparatory stage is to quieten the physical and mental operations and to open us to the transcendent. Here we can use various methods - awareness of body, sensations, breathing, sounds, practice of yogic postures, use of chants, etc. We may practice all this with an attitude of surrender to and trust in God. During the successive stages we come to read and reflect on the word of God, make aspirations inspired by these reflections and, then, rest in the presence of God. We read (reading) in order that we may listen. This listening leads us to a deeper listening (meditation). In this deep listening, we are enabled to respond (prayer) and then we are led into transcendent communion (contemp-

lation). In the first, God reveals Himself to us and we listen (revelation). By listening, we are enabled to respond (faith). The whole process, thus, is a participation in the Christ event as it is a movement from the Father carried by the Son in the Holy Spirit and back to the Father.

The practice of *Lectio Divina* is so rooted in the Christian tradition that the writers of other classical methods of prayer always allude to it. The author

We may feel that we have reached a higher stage of prayer than others.

of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' speaks of three habits - study, reflection, prayer - which the beginners are called upon to practice regularly.⁶ As a method of moving beyond, the author suggests the use of a sacred word. The practice of 'centring prayer' is a way of moving from the first three phases of *Lectio Divina* to the final one of resting in God.⁷

3. Obstacles and Facilitating Conditions

Whatever may be the method we use in prayer, there are some dispositions and attitudes which block us in our ways of prayer, and there are some others which facilitate our growth in union with God. We shall analyze a few of them.

3.1. Obstacles

3.1.1. Spiritual Pride and Complacency

Spiritual pride and complacency come as major obstacles to Christian prayer. St. John of the Cross speaks about spiritual pride in his 'Dark Night' as he writes about the seven capital vices.⁸ We may feel that we have reached a higher stage of prayer than others. This attitude could be seen in the Pharisee who despised the Publican while he elevated himself and praised God for the good deeds he has accomplished. Such people may also get stuck in the means, forgetting the real goal of prayer. They would like to remain stagnant at a particular stage and refuse to move beyond. It could be due to the fear of change. Prayer is a dangerous adventure. The nearer we come to God, the sharper the contrast between Him and us. It reveals to us new possibilities which we may not be ready to take up. In such a fixation, it is easy to develop a pretended insensibility to higher stages of prayer.

We may call this attitude, in modern language, a type of 'individualism' in prayer. This seems to be so characteristic in the prayer of people who are affluent and mediocre. Such people are content with the consolation of devotionism and pious sentimentality. Neither do they move beyond, nor do they allow others to do so, nor are they

The most dangerous aspect of this spiritual disease is in the legitimation that they want to make not only for them, but also for others.

ready to expose themselves to something new. It is also a type of fixation in the means and externals of prayer, which rejects a communal witness and collective human response to God. Spiritual pride makes prayer a private affair, something totally individualistic and intimate. Prayer becomes a 'luxury' that they enjoy in their own world with a pretended insensibility to the social responsibilities that genuine prayer may evoke. The most dangerous aspect of this spiritual disease is in the legitimation that they want to make not only for them, but also for others. Merton writes: "Whatever one internally desires, whatever one dreams, whatever one imagines; that is the beautiful, the Godly and the true; petty thoughts are enough. They substitute for everything else, including charity, including life itself."⁹ Van Kaam also talks about spiritual pride as an attachment to certain 'idolized' forms of prayer.¹⁰

3.1.2. Resistance to be a Beginner

This obstacle which comes from a certain spiritual 'ambitiousness,' is manifested in those who want to be

elevated to higher realms of prayer within a short period. It is wise to realize that there are no tricks or short-cuts in spiritual life. We need to persevere in prayer with patience and humility. We cannot begin to face the real difficulties in the life of prayer and meditation unless we are prepared to be beginners. This implies that we must really be ready to experience ourselves as those who know little or nothing and have a desperate need to learn from bare rudiments. God has His own time and pace to take us into higher realms. There cannot be real prayer without going through the asceticism of a beginner. It is possible and, sometimes, probable to remain as beginners throughout our lives.

It is not prayer that we seek in prayer, but God Himself. The false self within us, sometimes, may seek to assert itself in our spiritual journey. It may project itself as a potential subject for special and unique experiences or as a candidate for realization, attainment, and fulfilment. Such people may always seek for consolations and mystical visions. This is what Merton means when he writes: "Perhaps the best way to become a contemplative would be to desire with all our heart to be anything but a contemplative; who knows?"¹¹ All the efforts we make are to be determined by the indications of God's will and of His grace.

3.1.3. Reluctance to 'waiting for' in the 'Dark Night'

This spiritual obstacle may be characterized by inner confusion, coldness, and lack of confidence. What, at times, found so easy, consoling, and rewarding in our journey through prayer, suddenly turns out to be something utterly impossible. Lack of concentration, wandering of emotions, unconscious fantasies, or an upheaval of the unconscious - all these unpleasant developments may happen. One runs in panic and in despair. It may be a passing

Prayer has no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life.

phase; or it could be due to a wrong start where one separated one's inner life from the rest of existence. This split could have been caused by a false supernaturalism. Prayer has no reality unless it is firmly rooted in life. These crisis moments in prayer could also be due to certain dispositions of pride that God wants to purify and heal within us. Those who are reluctant to 'wait for', instead of correcting their attitudes and moving beyond, may turn around blaming others, the community or the system in which they live. Many of these obstacles could be easily lived through if they could simply open themselves to others in an atmosphere of love, acceptance, and understanding.

Submission to the mystery of God's will may call us to take risk and face dread. All attempts to build our own security can come as major obstacles in prayer life.

3.1.4. Quietism and Spiritual Activism

Quietism is a kind of passivity in which we sit and wait for God to possess us with some unforeseeable experience. This is an attitude that St. Paul describes in his letter to the Romans (Rom.8:11, 14-16). Spiritual activism is a state of mind in which we are determined to reach a goal, we ourselves have prescribed, so as to have something we do not already have. There is no point in trying too hard in prayer. James Finely writes: "A small apple cannot ripen in one night by tightening its muscles, squinting its eyes, and tightening its jaws in order to find itself the next morning, miraculously large, red and juicy beside its small, green counterparts."¹²

We must learn to wait for God. We must go on trusting in the inner wisdom that guides us in a way of desire beyond desire, of vision without illusion. We must learn to trust in His hidden action within us. The tragedy is that we very often look at prayer as a problem rather than a mystery. We are full of activities, projects and plans which place demands and deadlines on us. With our functional efficiency we look for the best solution

Such people cannot listen to the appeal of the spirit expressed in daily events, situations and people.

to the problem of prayer. To pray well, there has to be a clearing made for God; there has to be an emptiness, a nothingness of simple awareness and humble prayer made before God. We may be able to offer only little, but that 'little' is great in God's eyes; we must be ready to offer what we are and have.

3.1.5. Introspectionism

Introspectionism is a creation of the false self within us. It tends to isolate us from the divine presence in everydayness and leaves us competitive, excessively anxious, depressed and filled with self-depreciation. Much of the time of prayer and silence is spent dwelling on and around these dispositions. Those who are scrupulous, excessively worried and guilty suffer from this obstacle in their life of prayer. In their efforts to pray, they turn to themselves, looking anxiously in an aggressive attempt to figure everything out. They become alienated from their entire context and situatedness. They fail to experience the interwovenness and connectedness of the mystery of God permeating all the dimensions of their lives. Such people cannot listen to the appeal of the spirit expressed in daily events, situations and people. To pray

is to live in 'everydayness'. 'The Cloud of Unknowing' also speaks about this obstacle, as we read: "Attend more to the wholly otherness of God rather than to your own misery."¹³

There are also other obstacles to prayer such as: absolutization of methods, subjectivism, lack of self acceptance, hyperactivity, perfectionism, etc.

3.2. Facilitating Conditions

3.2.1. Desire for God and Decision to Pray

All prayer must begin from this ground of a longing for God and a decision to pray. To pray is not just an intention or a pious wish on a surface level. Until we go to pray, there can be no prayer. There has to be a daily fidelity to solitude and silence. "If we wait for time in which to wait for God, we will never wait for Him."¹⁴ We have to 'will this as one thing necessary'. As a deep awareness of the presence of God, prayer has to go on all the time. But there has to be a personal decision at the level of 'sitting down' to pray. We do not wait for schedules to make room for prayer. If there is any deliberation and determination, it has to be on this decision for and commitment to prayer. This requires a certain amount of personal discipline. One may have to choose a particular time, a convenient place and a suitable posture. It is essential that each person makes some

kind of a personal response to God in Christ. There is a risk to be taken and a journey to be made.

3.2.2. *Attentiveness, Openness and Receptivity*

These attitudes, as they form the qualities of simple faith, are very necessary for prayer. We believe and

There has to be perennial disposition to humility in the life of a person who wants to pray.

remain attentive, open and receptive. This presupposes a purity of heart, characterized by an unconditional surrender to God who calls us to renounce all the deluded images of ourselves. In prayer, we need to be docile, soft and malleable in the hands of a divine potter, being receptive to his will, his suggestions and his slightest movements. Prayer is not only a matter of 'being there' but also 'being thus'. This attitude is best described in 'The book of 'Privy Counselling'. "Lift up your sick self, just as you are, to the gracious God just as He is... That which I am and the way that I am with all my gifts of nature and grace, you have given to me, Oh Lord and you are all this. I offer it all to you principally to praise you and to help my fellow Christians and myself."¹⁵ It is only in such an openness and acceptance that prayer can really grow. Prayer does not blind us to

the world. It gives a 'rootedness' in reality as it transforms our vision of the world and makes us see everything around us in the light of God. It makes us enter into that infinite love which is at work behind the complexities and delicacies of human existence.

3.2.3. *Letting Myself Go*

This could be considered as the most important facilitating condition for prayer. Prayer and humility always go together. There has to be perennial disposition to humility in the life of a person who wants to pray. Not only that all prayer is grace, but even our capacity to recognize our condition before God is, itself, a grace. Merton writes: "We should let ourselves be brought naked and defenceless into the centre of that dread where we stand alone, before God in our nothingness, without explanations, without theories, completely dependent upon His providential care, in dire need of the gift of His grace, His mercy and the light of faith."¹⁶

Perhaps the coldness itself that we find in prayer life is a sign of our need and helplessness. If true prayer is to discover and incarnate who we really are, namely, our true selves in God, then our false selves will come as major obstacles in this process of discovery and incarnation. The false self can create havoc when it enters even into our spiritual realm of prayer. But we also need to be conscious that even humility

is not an end in itself in our life of prayer. When we make this an end, it becomes a disguised form of pride.

Hence a deep awareness of our innermost identity, our true self, implies the recognition and denial of the false self which is nothing but a mask and an illusion. Our true self is hidden in the obscurity and nothingness at the centre, and we will be able to discover it only when we die fully to ourselves and come into the direct dependence on God. Merton substantiates: “Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self-realization attained by apparent self-annihilation.”¹⁷

3.2.4. Waiting for the Lord and Persevering in Faith

In our journey through prayer, we must wait for the Lord and persevere in the path that He shows us. We cannot anticipate anything and should always be ready for the ‘unexpected’. There are no necessary sequences in prayer. God is in control over the person who prays and places him or her where He wants to place. He takes us in various strides and leaps. Nobody can predict anything. As Balthazar writes: “There is no intrinsic contradiction in a Christian being led along the paths of sublime union and blissful, nuptial experiences of God and finally dying in what to him, feels like God-forsakenness; this could, in fact, be one of the highest forms of union with the Lord, who ended His

earthly existence in a night of the senses and of the spirit.”¹⁸

We can only keep waiting in patience, openness, and receptivity. Misplaced effort in the spiritual life often results in stubbornly insisting upon compulsive routines with our short-sighted notions. This waiting,

We need to be purified by the ‘dark nights’ from attachment to our preferred ways of prayer, symbols and rituals.

therefore, has to be guided by openness. We need to be purified by the ‘dark nights’ from attachment to our preferred ways of prayer, symbols and rituals. St. John of the Cross writes: “The more spiritual a thing is, the more worrisome they find it, for as they seek to go about in spiritual matters with complete freedom and according to the inclination of His will, it causes them sorrow and repugnance to enter upon the narrow way, which says Christ, is the way of life.”¹⁹

We need, therefore, to move beyond in the ways of prayer under the guidance of grace and in the night of pure faith. God does not wish us to be found on any other path than that of His son’s dying and rising. Watching, waiting, persevering, and moving beyond are all, therefore, vital to Christian prayer. We, however, also need to recognize that we cannot move beyond what we have not

attained. The ability to move beyond comes only after going through a good use of imagination, sensations, symbols and rituals. Even when we move beyond certain forms, we do not throw away the old but are enabled to use it with better insights and a new perspective.

3.2.5. Cultivating Silence and Simplicity of Life

We cannot grow in prayer unless we learn to discover some moments of internal silence to make a deeper listening. Silence is great power. Every word that we utter emanates from

This simplicity of love gives us the ability to use or sacrifice all things and our talents in the interests of love.

silence and returns to it. Silence, in this sense, is total language. It is not just the absence of sound. External silence is the result of interior silence. The solitary place is important, but more important is the inner silence of solitude. This enables us to gather ourselves together and bring our fragmented selves before God after all the damaging and deadening distractions of the world's hyperactivity. St. Gregory of Nyssa writes: "If it (human mind) spreads itself out in all directions, constantly flowing out and dispersing to whatever pleases the senses, it will never have any notable force in its progress towards the true

Good. But now recall the mind from all sides, and make it collect itself, so that it may begin to operate in that function which is preferably connatural to it, without scattering and wasting itself; then the mind will find no obstacle in its rise to heaven and its grasp of the true meaning of reality."²⁰

To pray also requires a simplicity of life. Christian life is not a cult of suffering or emptiness for its own sake. Prayer, however, can grow in a way of life where there is self-denial, detachment and spiritual sacrifice. This simplicity of love gives us the ability to use or sacrifice all things and our talents in the interests of love. As St. Paul writes: "We have to be pure-minded, enlightened, forgiving and gracious to others. We have to rely on the Holy Spirit, on unaffected love, on the truth of our message and the power of God" (2 Cor 6:6-7).

There has to be an asceticism in prayer. This, however, should not be self-imposed, rather spring from an inner congeniality derived from personal meditation. It must come as a fruit of discernment and must be embraced in freedom. Otherwise, our attention will be fixed on such practices we have piously created, and they may be exaggerated or made unbearable. Asceticism has to be enlivened by the transforming power of Christian love. The ability to sacrifice ourselves in a mature and generous spirit will be one

of the touch-stones of our internal prayer. Not only do well-directed asceticism and God-experience go together, but they are also fused together in an inter-forming relationship. Merton writes: “Serious and humble prayer, united with mature love, will unconsciously and spontaneously manifest itself in a habitual spirit of sacrifice and concern for others that is unfailingly generous though perhaps we may not be aware of the fact.”²¹

Conclusion

We, thus, have come to a foundational approach to the question of methods in prayer and been made aware of certain attitudes and dispositions that may either block or facilitate our journey through prayer. Being cautioned against those attitudes that block and energized by those that facilitate, we can use a method of prayer that is congenial to us and grow into an intimate oneness at the very core of our being. It is precisely this intimacy that satisfies who we deeply and uniquely are and the individual whom God calls us to be. Our life in prayer is, then, simply a matter of our willing response to His will and our unconditional ability to follow His lead along the path toward our destiny in the Mystery called ‘God’.

Endnotes

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⁴ FINLEY, James, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, IN.: Ave Maria Press), 1978, p. 55.

⁵ cf. De MELLO, Anthony, *Sadhana: A Way to God*, (New York: Doubleday), 1984 and PAINADATH, Sebastian, *The Power of Silence* (Delhi: ISPCK), 2009.

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⁷ KEATING, Thomas, *Open Mind and Open Heart* (New York: Amity House), 1986, pp. 30-45.

⁸ John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, Book 1, Chapters 2-8, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Roderiguez (Washington DC: ICS Publications), 1973.

⁹ MERTON, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 108.

¹⁰ VAN KAAM, Adrian, *Fundamental Formation* (New York: Crossroad), 1983, p. 170.

¹¹ MERTON, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 64.

¹² FINLEY, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*, p. 116.

- ¹³ JOHNSTON (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Chapter 23.
- ¹⁴ FINLEY, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, p. 112.
- ¹⁵ *The Book of Privy Counselling*, Chapter 2, p. 153; Chapter 3, p. 156.
- ¹⁶ MERTON, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 69.
- ¹⁷ MERTON, Thomas, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions), 1961, p. 104.
- ¹⁸ BALTHAZAR, *Prayer*, p. 274
- ¹⁹ John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, Book 1, Chapter 7, Paragraph 4.
- ²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory To Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, edited by Jean Danielou (London: John Murray), 1962: *On Virginity*, p.102-103.
- ²¹ MERTON, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 74.

FROM 'UR OF THE CHALDEANS': ANOMALIES AND REVERSALS IN THE VOCATION OF ABRAHAM

Johnson Thurackal CMF

Introduction

With the appearance of Abraham¹, the theology of the Book of Genesis gets a new page. The Genealogy of Terah (Gen 11:27- 25:11), which comes after the tragedies of primeval history (Gen 1:1-11:26 - the first sin, flood, Tower of Babel), opens the story of Abraham, through whom God introduced a programme to bless and restore the world. For this reason, Gen 11:27-32, where the family of Abraham is presented, is a major turning point in Genesis, with distinct connections to what precedes it as well as to what follows it.² Hence, the narrations of the Creation, the Flood and the Tower of Babel that precede the Abraham cycle have their unique makeup. The mystical nature of the story of Abraham, with reference to the divine revelation, makes a historic turning point in the understanding of God, who can

intervene in the life of an individual and transform his predispositions into greater realms to serve the plan of God for His people. Even as a religious experience can be collective, the mystical experience remains essentially personal. The consequences of Abraham's experience have been limitless and enduring. All succeeding time has been influenced by him. From the mystic sense of the story or the testimony of the experience of Abraham, we can derive insights into the grand reversals that God causes in the lives of people. The biblical history has many instances of amazing reversals, by which God heals the inadequacies and brokenness of the people to use them to transform the world. I believe that it is one of the favourite actions of God to call anomalous persons and to turn around their insufficiencies into streams of power that can heal and save. This

The author has been a missionary in the North East of India for several years. He has a licentiate in Biblical Theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He is presently pursuing his doctoral studies in the same University. He may be contacted at: frjoncmf@yahoo.co.in

divine action is beyond the ordinary human perceptible. Thus, though the call of Abraham and the promises to him are incomprehensible in human terms, a close look at the narration will reveal the strategy of God in calling him, and for that matter, in every call.

1. The Antecedents of Abraham Story

In essence Gen 1-11 is the preamble to Abraham's story. It provides for the account of the world from creation up to Abraham. The story begins with humans dwelling in the presence of God and experiencing his blessing. The creation account tells us how God blesses the humanity with a rich life (Gen 1-2). However, it continues with the tragic story of the disruption of that blessing (Gen 3-11). I would underline three sad moments which amount to the refusal of God's blessing. These events also manifest the motive of God in calling Abraham.

a) *The Fall from Grace (Gen 3:1-24)*

When man assumed to be God and God was understood wrongly, the fall began. The turning point was the command of God to the first parents "not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:17). They transgressed the command. With a play on words Gen 3 begins a reversal of the end of Chapter 2: the chapter narrates the peace and harmony of God's creation and ends with the picture of

man and woman not feeling shame despite being naked. Whereas they were naked (Hebrew 'arom), the serpent (3:1) was astute (Hebrew 'arum). As B. Lawrence puts it, "The Yahwist creates a masterpiece of psychological insight here, with the serpent hinting that great things are possible and playing upon Eve's vanity."³

Man in his limitation couldn't realize that knowing everything profoundly was possible only for God and to understand and possess all the reality was not possible for him. When God commanded not to eat from a tree, man failed to read God's intention. It was not

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an arbitrary command. On the other hand, God was guiding him by hand into a journey of truth to understand that he was different from God. One has to be diverse from the other to be in communion. Communion is possible in I-thou diversity. An I-I situation leans more to competition than communion. This command, therefore, was an invitation and a gift, a gift of communion with God which he forfeited and found himself in nakedness and shame (Gen 3:7, 10). But God remains tenderly concerned to make them adequate clothes even as he

expels them from their hopes of immortality.

b) *The Great Flood (Gen 6-9)*

Another disaster struck the creation because “the Lord saw that wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). “And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen 6:6). Even as God decided to blot out human beings from the earth, he saw that Noah walked with him when all the inhabitants upon the earth corrupted their ways. Therefore, God decided to spare Noah by allowing him to ride out of flood on an ark. When the disaster is over God restores his covenant with the world through this man. In the climax (Gen 8:20-22) God’s forgiveness extends even to lifting the curse upon the earth for what humans have done in their hearts.⁴

c) *Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9)*

Babel is the Hebrew form of the name Babylon. Gen 11:1-9 tells us that after the flood the humankind came to the plain of Shinar. There, to set themselves a lasting monument and to have a common purpose to unite them and prevent their scattering all over the earth, they decided to build a city and a tower that would reach to heaven. God, however, mixed up their language so that they no longer understood one

another, and they had to disperse. The city and the tower were therefore - in a play on the Hebrew word *bäläl*, “to mix” - called Babel.⁵

Indeed Babel was a transgression and it was basically the same sort of sin committed in the Garden and so a kind of continuation of it – the sin of pride which always disrupted God’s blessings and the communion. Unfortunately we see the recurring of the same mistake, where man continues to refuse the sovereignty of God and his dependence on Him.

In fact all the three units of chapter 11 (vv. 1-11: The Tower of Babel; 10-26: descendents of Shem; 27-32: descendents of Terah) show that at the end, human effort and life is falling apart. Thus the chapter brings the primeval history to a doubly appropriate close, with man’s self effort issuing in confusion and disaster at Babel.⁶ On his own, man will get no further than this.

Man continues to refuse the sovereignty of God and his dependence on Him.

According to Sternberg, there is a suspense and partial resolution that connects the Tower of Babel episode in Gen 11:1-9 to the introduction of the genealogy (Terah-Abraham narrative – Gen 11:27-12:9) of Abraham. In this episode it is yet to be answered if

humans provoked Yahweh beyond a sustainable relationship.⁷ Gen 11:1-9 raises this question, but refrains from answering it. Looking at the two episodes together, we could say: if the flood story ends with hope for restoration (cf. Gen 8:15-9:17), the Tower of Babel episode delays or even subverts that restoration. Yet hope persists in God's relentless pursuit of renewed relationship with His creation. This is the key to understand the mystery of the call of Abraham because it is to this scene that the episode of Abraham is presented with his immediate ancestry and the events leading up to his call. The text, which has had the world as a stage, narrows down to a small town in Mesopotamia, to a single family, to the mind and heart of a single individual - Abraham. At the same time, the world stage remains very much in view. Abraham is both deeply rooted in that earlier history and continues to be in contact with the peoples of that larger world. As G.J. Wenham puts it so well, "the promises to Abraham renew the vision for humanity set out in Genesis 1 and 2."⁸

2. The Beginning of Abraham's Story

The call narrative of Abraham is preceded by the progeny accounts of the Sons of Noah (Gen 10:1-32) Sons of Shem (11:10-26), and Terah (11:27) who is the father of Abraham.⁹ The

situational context of the family of Terah and the land of Ur unfold the anomalies and graces in the call of Abraham which we would like to investigate. Terah had three sons: Abraham, Nahor and Haran. Haran, the brother of Abraham died leaving his son Lot to the care of Abraham. Abraham married Sarah who was barren. Nahor married Milcah. We will take up this situation later in this study.

**Yet hope persists in
God's relentless pursuit
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Ur was the city of Terah, the father of Abraham. It was called the Ur of the Chaldeans. This is the modern Tell el-Miqayyar in Lower Mesopotamia on the banks of Euphrates near the Persian Gulf. Chaldeans were a tribe living in this land. At the time of Abraham, Ur was the capital city, rich and the apex of civilization, and also the holy city of the Chaldeans.¹⁰ The city had temples for moon god and magnificent rituals to their deities.

3. The Predicament of Terah in Ur of the Chaldeans.

Terah apparently without any divine command has left the home of his fathers and left for Canaan. Bible does not give the reasons for this decision of Terah to leave the land of Ur. According

to scholars there could be different reasons. Possibly there was a religious reason, in which he had a desire to free himself from pagan and ungodly customs of Ur which he disapproved. The Hebrews in their writings narrates, "This people are descended from Chaldeans, and they sojourned heretofore in Mesopotamia because they would not follow the gods of their fathers which were in the land of Chaldea."¹¹ If this is a true account of the origin of movement northwards, it must have been stirred by religious motive, a desire to search for truth.

On the other hand there is also an assumption that a personal and family reason prompted this move. There was a premature death in the family. "Haran Son of Terah died in the presence of his father in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans" (11:28). There was a sense of lack of blessing in the parentage. "Sarah was barren and she had no child" (v. 30). In this situation and in this place it was no longer possible for Terah to continue to live. "Ur of Chaldea had become not only a place of death but also of sterility."¹² Thus he wanted to look for a better land to escape the curse. Yet another reason could be migration for food pastures which was a normal practice of the people of that time. In any case Terah took his family to move to Canaan and when they reached Haran¹³ instead of pressing on to Canaan, Terah and his

family settled there, at another centre of moon worship. And Terah died in Haran (Gen 11:32).

4. The Anomaly and Grace in the Call of Abraham

A close look at the call narrative proper of Abraham in Gen 12:1-9 would indicate certain anomalies in the call of Abraham. In fact here lies the strategy of God in calling people and in making them his chosen instruments.

a. Why Abraham?

After the death of Terah the Lord said to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1). "Why was Abraham chosen? Why not Nahor, his brother, (whose wife Milcah was not barren)? Or why not any other contemporaries?" These were the questions that one could raise and Abraham himself would have them asked. In the history of God's call there have been many who doubted, resisted and asked questions. Moses (Ex 3:11) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:6) were

It must have been stirred by religious motive, a desire to search for truth.

frontrunners in disagreeing with God when called. Prophet Jonah (Jon 1:3), who ran away from God, and Zachariah (Lk 1:18), who disbelieved God's intervention in his life, are also in the

Abraham's selection was an unconditional expression of divine free will.

line. Apparently Abraham would have been the last candidate for such a call, and the promise attached to it. The one from a pagan context and with a barren wife, the one who is unstable and on the move is highly unlikely to be called by God to be the father of a multitude and to restore his blessings on creation. This is the anomaly of the call.

From the Rabbinic point of view, Abraham was called because he merited the divine call. Abraham recognized that there was a God and thereupon God revealed himself to Abraham.¹⁴ However, we must admit that Abraham's selection was an unconditional expression of divine free will. He was in no way distinguished from his peers. From such perspective, the selection was pure felicity: God chose because it suited him. Abraham's call also revealed the pragmatic reasons for God's own choice of Abraham. Though the selection of Abraham remained an exceptional act of tolerance, he was chosen precisely for what he lacked. Abraham's election was a symbol of indistinction and weakness, not a foundation for exclusivist claims of distinction.¹⁵ God determined to fulfil his promises through Sarah who was barren and not through Milcah who was not barren. Those who struggle to

reconcile with the fact of God's calling (of one's own or of others) can resign to the truth that everything depends on the Sovereign initiative. We cannot know definitively why God chose Abraham rather than another person or family. But we do know that God chose him so that the human and nonhuman creation might be reclaimed and live harmoniously according to the original divine intention. God's choice of Abraham constitutes an initially exclusive move for the sake of a maximally inclusive end.¹⁶ Election serves mission. This is the grace of the call.

b. Call to 'leave' – The Inconsistency and Justification

“Go from your country....” (Gen 12:1) in itself is an anomaly. Abraham is no more in Ur, in his own native land, when God is asking him to leave his country. Rather he had begun his journey long back. He is already on the move. Therefore the call of Abraham to “go” is not from the scratch. God is picking up something that is already there to suit his plan. From God's point of view this is going to be Abraham's first departure and from Abraham's point of view it is the second departure but with radically changed dimensions. There are meaningful insights for a vocational journey here, especially in discerning and inspiring responses to God's call.

i) *The first departure:* Abraham set out from Ur where he was a natural citizen to Canaan where his status would be as of a foreigner. Thus, when he left Ur there was an insecure situation where he would be identified as a foreigner, without the right of land and with the risk of pain of rejection in the foreign land. At the same time, his sense of insecurity in the first departure is not absolute because his departure from Ur could be temporary. He had always the prospect to return to his own country to reclaim his rights and his land as a native. In this sense he was not risking anything definitively nor was absolutely absorbed in uncertainties.

ii) *The Second departure:* It is true that God called Abraham to a destination which he had already set for himself. Then, what is the relevance of the intervention of God and such a call? There was a radical change in the projects and motifs of Abraham after he had been called on the way to the same destination. At this departure for the second time (from Haran to Canaan), it was going to be an irreversible journey and he had no way to return to his own land. He had to leave behind definitively all his belongings and identity. He could no longer retrieve his land and would inhabit in a foreign land for the rest of his life. Now he had to face the fears of insecurity and rejection permanently. The fundamental difference in the call, even though to the

same destination, is that in this context, the project of Abraham gave way to God's.

The strategy of God's intervention in one's personal life is similar to what had occurred in the life of Abraham. God does not call anyone out of nothing. He takes up the course of one's life, projects and dreams and in short what one is up to, and changes it radically for his own purposes even if the target remains the same. In this sense, we can understand vocation as an action of God in which he purifies (changes) one's intentions, projects and inclinations at the same time allowing one to maintain one's own traits and the orientation of life. "God works in and with the forces and circumstances of human life."¹⁷ Ironically in this process one may not achieve one's own personal orientation, but will remain an instrument in God's hand for his projects. As we see in the

It was going to be an irreversible journey and he had no way to return to his own land.

story of Abraham, God promised the land to his descendents and not to him. In fact, he never possessed the land, which was the destination of his first departure. The fundamental sense of the 'vocation' is justified in the experience of Abraham: One does not say that one has a vocation to do something or to be

On the other hand Abraham, the one who is alive is like the dead, because he has no child.

something but it is a response to what God is asking one to do.

c. “I will bless you and make you a great nation” (Gen 12:1-2)

One of the most intriguing anomalies in the Abraham story is the blessings that were promised to Abraham. After the call to go to the land where God wants him to go, the speech of God abounds in blessings. There are five blessings promised to Abraham along with the call:

- I will make you a great nation
- I will bless you
- I will make your name great
- You will be a blessing
- By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves

The intensity of the anomaly is evident when Abraham and his family circumstances find themselves in an environment of curse and misfortune. For Abraham (and for the readers) it was unbelievable that a person who was carrying along a cursed family could become a source of blessing.

This is how the present situation of Abraham and his family looks like:

i) Terah, Abraham’s father, was steeped in pagan idolatry. Even though he was not happy with the religious practices of Ur, when he arrived in Haran, another land of pagan worship, he settled there. According to some Biblical authors the death of Terah and the other evils that had befallen on them were because the ancestors lived beyond the Euphrates and ‘served other gods’.¹⁸ Because Terah was dead his journey remained incomplete.

ii) One of his brothers, Haran died. “Haran died in the presence of his father in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans” (Gen 11:28). It is an anomaly because it is against natural order. The vice versa situation is normal where father dies in the presence of the son. The situation of Abraham is indeed precarious here. In the death of his brother, leaving a son, he continues to live because he generated a life (Lot). On the other hand Abraham, the one who is alive is like the dead, because he has no child. His life (lineage) will end with him.

iii) Sarah, Abraham’s wife is barren. Barrenness is considered as a curse. Sarah’s sterility is considered as irreversible. Talmud says Sarah in fact was deprived of uterus.¹⁹

iv) Finally, Lot (his brother’s son), the only hope for the family of Abraham, whom he brought with him was then separated (Gen 13: 8-12). On

him Abraham had placed his last hope to maintain the line of his descendents.

Thus the poverty of the situation and the hopelessness in which Abraham is placed do not guarantee any hope of the blessings pronounced on him. Abraham here stands in need of a formidable courage to believe in a reversal of all these curses and the fulfilment of the blessings.

And Abraham's response was not disappointing. He stood up to the test of faith and obedience. The Hebrew sense of the verbs is cohortative in 12:2, connoting purpose. W. Coats provides rationale for reading these verbs as expressing purpose when he describes this passage as a "theologically pregnant unit designed to emphasize Abraham's obedience as a virtue of edifying proportions," one that "gains final confirmation in 22:1-19" (the command to sacrifice Isaac).²⁰ This seems to be a reflection of Hermann Gunkel's view of this passage as the 'most difficult test of faith'.²¹ Grüneberg follows this line of reasoning, stating that "the syntax implies that the promises are linked to the command... that their fulfilment - at least in the preferred divine plan - will somehow follow from its execution. Divine grace seeks the co-operation of human obedience..... Abraham is thus a model of faithful obedience."²² The consequence of such an act of faith was overwhelming for him and for the entire humanity.

5. The Miracle of the Reversal

"So Abraham went as the Lord had told him" (Gen 12:4). It was a spontaneous response of Abraham to God's call. There is a fundamental departure in the behaviour of Abraham, from his ancestors, in the relation with God. In the Garden the first woman did not trust God (Gen 3:1-6) and so was Cain (cf. Gen 4:50) in his dealing with God. The difficulty to perceive God with a difference prompted them to equate themselves with God and even dared to consider God as evil, the cause of their unhappiness or inconveniences. On the other hand, Abraham did the opposite. To him God was good and kind and he was able to confess that over and over again.²³ He blessed God amid all the curses that he was carrying along and thus began to see the miracle of reversal in his life. The perennial

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wisdom of the Gospels is justified in the event of Abraham: repaying evil with evil is the path of destruction and the evil is destroyed by facing it with goodness (Mt 5:43; Lk 6:27-28). In the reversed state of affairs for Abraham, Canaan was changed into the Promised

Land, Sarah became the mother of a Son and Abraham became the father of the multitude.

Thus, “in keeping with the promise of God, Abraham became a remedy for the curses that befell upon the successive generations.”²⁴ The hope of revoking the ancient curse is also realized in the blessing of Abraham. We

The blessing of Abraham points to God’s course of action to overcome the curse of sin.

read in Genesis 5:28-29, the statement Lamech utters at the birth of Noah, which recalls the curse of Gen 3:17 (And Lamech lived 182 years and he fathered a son. And he called his name Noah, saying, “this one will give us rest from our work and from the pain of our hands from the ground which Yahweh cursed”).²⁵ These words depict a hope for an end of the curse and perhaps a return to Edenic conditions. The blessing of Abraham points to God’s course of action to overcome the curse of sin. Moreover, in this process of reversal, by ‘being a blessing’, Abraham gifted to the humanity the right notion of God which was not yet present in the theological domain of the time: “The call of Abraham helps to make clear that the God of biblical faith (in contrast to the notion that the deity is a God of mercy and judgment in equal

proportion) is clearly bent toward blessing and mercy toward the human creature.”²⁶

6. Jesus: The Type of Abraham

The incongruity in the vocation is part of the strategy of God which has a pedagogic and pragmatic motive. Abraham was the first person to go through this test of God’s call. To an extent this is the standard process that God employs in choosing people. In the later history of God’s people there had been scores who were called with the same standard applied in the call of Abraham.²⁷ I would like to say that even in the vocation of Jesus God applied the same norm (i.e., the strategy that uses anomalies and reversals). In this sense, there are similarities between Abraham and Jesus in the way they have realized their respective vocation.

a) There was an apparent curse in the family of Jesus, because his mother would have faced a cursed death for the illegitimacy of the state of affairs. (Abraham too faced a situation of curse in his family). Later Jesus took upon himself an appearance of a curse. “Christ purchased our freedom from the curse of the Law, by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree (Gal 2:13).²⁸ On the cross Jesus was the cursed one by all: “Those who passed by derided (blasphemed) him” (Mk 15:29).

b) The promise of a virgin birth sounded an implicit sterility. The 'son of a virgin' is an impossible concept and had an inkling of barrenness. Gen 11:30 says Sarah was sterile and had no child. An apparent situation of curse is present in the vocation of Jesus. The reversal of the anomalous situation akin to Abraham operates in Jesus' vocation as well.

c) Jesus was a stranger. His parents couldn't find a place for him to be born. He had to flee to a foreign land, was condemned at the behest of a foreigner (Roman Governor) and died outside the walls. He suffered the pain, rejection and the insecurity of a stranger in the same way Abraham underwent for being obedient to God's call.

d) In the final reversal, the curse has become blessing and the death has become life. Hence, if the humanity's first cultural symbol was "tomb", in Jesus, "empty tomb" has become the new cultural symbol. Jesus has become a blessing and in him all the generations are blessed. A Homily of St. Basil on "Annunciation" eulogizing the virgin birth as the cure for the ancient curse expresses the reversal of the anomaly in Jesus:

"Thou hast given to us boldness of access into paradise, and thou hast put to flight our ancient woe. For after thee the race of woman shall no more be made the subject of reproach. No more

do the successors of Eve fear the ancient curse, or the pangs of childbirth. For Christ, the Redeemer of our race, the Saviour of all nature, the spiritual Adam, who has healed the hurt of the creature of earth, cometh forth from thy holy womb."²⁹

The apparent sterility of the virgin has opened to absolute fecundity. When Mary was given John as her son at the foot of the Cross (Jn 20:29), she received the infinite possibility of motherhood. The ultimate state of this reversal can be seen in the Book of Revelation: "And there shall be no curse anymore and the throne of the Lamb shall be therein; and his servants shall serve him" (Rev 22:3).

An apparent situation of curse is present in the vocation of Jesus...

The apparent sterility of the virgin has opened to absolute fecundity.

In Jesus, the reversal becomes perfect. The absolute meaning of God's action is that God always takes the side of the victim and the weak. Jesus becoming the Primordial Victim, whose innocence is declared eventually, and through which every sacrificial victim of the world has his innocence declared, is the proof of God's readiness to reverse the order to offer solidarity with the weak.

7. The Paradigm for Religious Vocation

The details of the dynamics of the vocation of Abraham can shed light into the motives and strategy of God in calling people for his purpose. The event of the vocation of Jesus is a model for the resemblance noticeable in every religious vocation. This could be a help in discerning and appreciating one's vocation as religious at the service of God:

Every anomaly will turn into immense blessings.

a. Anomalies: Certain anomalies are present in every vocation. Suitability and merit could be the last among the requirements of God's call. The biblical narrations of vocational stories abound with examples for this. God has never abandoned people for their flaws and never ceased to call people for their unworthiness. The only criterion of God is the disposition of the heart which allows one to change his/her own way radically and give way to the project of God in the place of one's own. The journey is easy when there is a possibility to return and to acquire again whatever is left behind. But a decisive journey, leaving behind things irretrievably, calls for enormous courage. Abraham is the forerunner in this case. This is the juncture where the

actual reversal takes place. Every anomaly will turn into immense blessings.

b. Blessings: "You shall be a blessing" (Gen 12:2) was the promise of God to Abraham. The purpose and the motive of any vocation is "to become a blessing." Blessing is attached to the call. This is a blessing to be received (you are blessed) and conveyed (you are blessing). This promise is realized in proportion to the faith and obedience. In the faith-response to God even the promise becomes secondary. It is said about Abraham that he believed in God than in the promise itself and he clung to God who had promised rather than to what had been promised.³⁰ Abraham's faith was more personal than propositional³¹ and the dynamic of the personal faith is the grace to believe even when the subject is unintelligible or invisible. This also refers to the unconditional surrender to the sovereignty of God and then one becomes a true blessing.

c. Reversal: Anomalies are not only the condition of hopeless humanity, but also the arena of God's life giving action.³² Learning from God's dealing with Abraham one can credibly believe in an ultimate reversal of anomalies and the incompatibilities present in the call. The Word of God (Gen 12:1-3) entered in a moment of great uncertainty and disillusionment about the future of

Abraham's family. But he moved on at the promptings of God. In the final reversal, the blessing went beyond the empirical fact of acquiring the land by his descendents; he became a symbol of the divine gifts in which all humans would share. The genuine trust in this action of God - the reversal- would decisively shape the vocational journey, relation with God and the meaning of one's own vocation.

“Just as the Risen Lord entrusted himself into the hands of pathetic, broken people in the beginning, he does the same to us. The full significance of the Ascension of the Lord reminds us that Christ accepts our lack of self-confidence in ourselves. He accepts the shadowy and dark areas of our humanity. He accepts our capacity for deceit, betrayal, abuse, greed and power. And having accepted us, he calls us, gives us the eternal commission to be his people, and sends us to serve him and love him.”³³ The personal deficiencies and the absence of apparent signs of God's call are not necessarily pointers of insufficiency rather they could become the springboard of blessing in the reverse order of God that he establishes in his infinite wisdom and power.

St. Paul experienced this reversal in his life and he had no hesitation to write: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were

**In the final reversal,
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powerful, not many were noble by birth. God chose what is foolish to shame the wise, God chose the weak to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, so that no one might boast before God” (I Cor 1:26-28). The reversals invite us to reverse human style of thinking and acting and to conform to God's ways of thinking and acting.

d. Count on God's Action: To trust in reversals and to pave way for God's intervention that remedies the deficiencies, one has to be disposed to give in to God and to believe that he will take control at the appointed time and turn over the situation. It is worthwhile to recall here the homily of Pope Benedict XVI during the Mass marking the Inauguration of his Petrine Ministry on April 24, 2005. In that very moving, programmatic address, Benedict XVI said: “Dear friends, at this moment there is no need for me to present a programme of governance... My real programme of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas, but to listen, together with the whole Church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by Him, so that He himself will lead the

Church at this hour of our history.” One of the great theologians of the Church, Pope Benedict XVI admitted that he has nothing to do on his own other than to allow the Word and Will of the Lord to guide the Church. The programme of action announced by the Pope for his pontificate is a model for religious vocation. It is a programme that allows the will of God to call, to guide and to govern. In this programme, the personal projects, ambitions and one’s own drawbacks take the back seat. The will of God is first of all the comprehensive plan of God for the universe and history. It is the marvellous plan through which

In this programme, the personal projects, ambitions and one’s own drawbacks take the back seat.

the Father “destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will” (Eph 1:5). The ‘will of God’ surpasses our wildest imagination and dreams, and reveals God’s immense providential, merciful care for the world. Learning to count on God’s action opens one to the will of God that turns everything for good because we love him and are called according to his purpose (cf. Rom 8:28).

e. Prophetic Task: Finally, the reversal that God brings in one’s life has its take. There is a risk, challenge and a

discomfort. Every vocation is prophetic. As a consequence of the transformation of the unwelcome situation, the prophetic dimension of the call comes to the fore. The promise is about healing. Healing is a preparation. The prophetic task is to be a messenger of healing and reconciliation to one’s brothers and sisters. Thus, the prophetic nature of God’s call is to become a blessing to others, especially to those who are less fortunate. This mission involves sacrifice, denying oneself and carrying the cross (Mk 8:34). Abraham was able to live up to the demands of the reversal of the curses, he experienced in his life. The intention of God, in dealing with anomalies by reversing it, is to lead one to the essence of vocation, i.e., to be prophetic. Forgiven of the human fragilities and restored of the dearth of the human condition, one embraces the prophetic role with radical resolve and courage to represent the living image of God who continues to love and save the world.

Conclusion

Judeo-Christian faith is the story of a Grand Reversal. Nevertheless, these grand reversals in the lives of the people are not only a thing of the past. It is the continued action God all along, up to this day, to uplift the chosen ones. The example of Abraham might encourage us to believe in God’s call and to live it gladly and gratefully in spite of the

incompatibilities that dampen the spirit. Abraham's journey in obedience to God could be a theological programme. He learns to recognize God journeying towards his destination, because he did not comprehend everything at the time of the call. The religious life is also a journey of search and a continued walking forward in faith, forgiven, healed and restored, till one arrives at the Promised Land, where one possesses God and realizes fully the quintessence of one's call. The spectacle of one, who believes that there is something higher than what he is given in life and that there are great laws to govern his life, and who journeys calmly and hopefully forward into the unknown because he knows that God is with him, will continue to remind the figure of the Patriarch Abraham to the world. The words of John Henry Cardinal Newman summarize well all that is said in this paper:

*"He calls us again and again,
In order to justify us again and
again, and more and more,
To Sanctify and glorify us.
It were well if we understood this;
But we are slow to master the
great truth,
That Christ is, as it were,
Walking among us, and by his
hand, or eye, or voice,
Bidding us to follow him."*

Endnotes

- ¹ At the beginning of the story he was called Abram and not Abraham. Throughout the narrative under our consideration the name Abram has not yet been changed. 'Abram' comes from the Hebrew word *abiram* which is the combination of two words, meaning '(my) father is exalted'. The change occurred in Gen 17:4. When God established the covenant with Abram, his name is changed into Abraham as a witness to the divine promises and this name signifies 'father of multitudes.' Throughout this paper, in order not to enter into an etymological discourse, only the name Abraham is used.
- ² G. V. Campbell, "Refusing God's Blessings: An Exposition of Genesis 11:27-32", in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (2008), p.270.
- ³ B. Lawrence, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press), 1984, p.119.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p.124.
- ⁵ A. B. George, "Genesis" in: *New International Biblical Commentary Vol 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1992, p.13. We can get an idea of this project of building massive tower from the tower temples of Mesopotamia, the ziggurats, on whose high terraces the Babylonians thought they could gain access to the Godhead and thus dominate God. Thus the pun used is relevant: the

- tower is *babel* (the Babylon of History) and the divine punishment is *balal* (confusion of language).
- ⁶ T. L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2001, p.205. Cf. also D. Kinder, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IL: 1967, pp.111-112.
- ⁷ M. Steinberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: ISBL), 1985, quoted in: A.W. Mark, "Babel, Suspense, and the Introduction to the Terah-Abraham Narrative" in *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 51.1 (2010), p.6.
- ⁸ G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word Books), 1987, p.54.
- ⁹ It is interesting to note that Abraham belongs to the tenth generation of the lineage of Shem Son of Noah and Noah is of the tenth generation after Adam, the first human.
- ¹⁰ M. Dods, "The Book of Genesis" in *Expositors Bible*, 1978, p.84.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.85.
- ¹² L. Tiziano, "The Vocation of Abraham", in *Parola di vita* 6 (2007), p.28.
- ¹³ Not to be confused with the personal name (Son of Terah), Haran here is a place located on the bank of the Balikh River, 885 k.m. northwest of Ur and close to the present day Syrian Turkish Border. Like Ur, it was an important centre of moon worship.
- ¹⁴ *Genesis Rabbah* (Theodore Edition), XXXIX, 1. Cf. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, V, pp. 217-218. It further says, "Abraham was already a vial of fragrant perfume, lying unnoticed in obscurity, when the divine command to leave home came to him."
- ¹⁵ L. Eslinger, "Prehistory in the call of Abraham" in *Biblical Interpretation* 14.3 (2006), pp.194-195.
- ¹⁶ A. B. George, "Genesis" in: *New International Biblical Commentary Vol 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1992, p.610.
- ¹⁷ E. Terrence, *Abraham: Trails of Family and Faith* (S.Carolina: Fretheim), 2007, p.32.
- ¹⁸ According to Josh 24:2 death and even sterility is caused by the pagan worship of the ancestors: cf. L. Tiziano, "The Vocation of Abraham" in *Parola di vita* 6 (2007), p.28.
- ¹⁹ L. Tiziano, "The Vocation of Abraham", in *Parola di vita*, 6 (2007) p.28.
- ²⁰ J. S. Baden, "The Morpho-Syntax of Genesis 12:1-3: Interpretation and Explanation" in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72 (2010), pp.227-228.
- ²¹ H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Macon Library of Biblical Studies), 1997, p.163.
- ²² K. N. Grüneberg, *Abraham: Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of*

- Genesis 12:3 in its Narrative Context*, (New York), 2003, 160-161.
- ²³ During the journey Abraham built altars three times in different places - Schechem, Bethel and Mamre - to thank God and to offer him sacrifice.
- ²⁴ The Purpose of God's action (Gen 12:2) is to make Abraham a 'Blessing'. Umberto Cassuto astutely pointed to the only other biblical use of the phrase, Zech 8:13: "As you were a curse among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, just so when I deliver you, you will be a blessing." There the meaning is relatively clear: Israel has been held up as an example of a cursed people, but they will in the future be held up as an example of a blessed people (cf. U. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 2:314).
- ²⁵ J. Hamilton, "The Seed of Woman and the Blessing of Abraham" in *Tyndale Bulletin*, 58.2 (2007), p.258.
- ²⁶ P. D. Miller, "Syntax and Theology of Genesis 12:3a" in *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (1984), p.475.
- ²⁷ We can recall to mind Moses, David, Peter, Paul, St. Augustine, St. John Maria Vianney, John Paul II, etc. (and not to mention the scores of our contemporaries).
- ²⁸ This scripture saying about the curse of every one who hangs on a tree (crucified) is from Deut 21:23.
- ²⁹ Epistles of Basil, 260 (317).
- ³⁰ R. Holst, "The Meaning of 'Abraham believed' in Romans 4:3" in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 59 (1997), p.319.
- ³¹ By propositional faith what is meant is the content of faith.
- ³² W. Bruggemann, "Genesis", in *Interpretation* (New York), 1973, p. 116. After Sarah, Rebecca (Gen 25:21), Rachel (Gen 29:31), and Hannah (I Sam 1:2) were barren. But God's action reversed their anomalies and restored their families.
- ³³ This quote is taken from the keynote address of Fr. Thomas Rosica, the C.E.O. of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation, delivered on Sept. 14, 2010 at the 47th Convention of the National Conference of the Diocesan Vocation Directors, the Midwest Association of Theological Schools, and the Seminary Division of the National Catholic Education Association. The address was titled 'Reflections on Pastoral Leadership and Ministry in the Church of 2010 and Beyond'.

QUEST FOR WHOLENESS: A RELIGIO-SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

Thomas Thakadipuram CMF

In a world of turbulent changes, escalating ethical crises, and moral dilemma, spiritual leadership is recognized as a critical competency across the globe. This paper presents the key findings from my research, in which spiritual leaders from different religious traditions shared their growth and transformation following crises on a journey toward wholeness. In this study 10 top spiritual leaders shared their transformational journeys from brokenness to wholeness in a variety of cultural settings across the globe, including an abbot, abbess, archbishop, a Zulu Chief, founders and presidents of international organizations and members of the World Council of Religious Leaders. It is one of the few empirical studies on spiritual leaders' quest for wholeness and offers the Leadership Wholeness Model from a religio-spiritual perspective. The findings provide an understanding of personal and community leadership

within the crucial constructs of ethical, spiritual and religious dimensions of life.

The growing discontent in religio-cultural sphere of life is manifested in many polarizations, conflicts, and greedy assaults, both internal and external, which threaten to disconnect us and pull us away from the deep sources and meanings of our personal and collective life.¹ The spiritual crisis comes from the tendency to hold scientific understandings, which are divorced from any religious and spiritual teachings, that will eventually lead to materialistic nihilism, because science alone cannot generate values, morality and reasons for living. Consequently society is advancing materially and technologically but is adrift morally and spiritually.²

On the spiritual level, all of us, in our different ways, are personally engaged in a journey that grants an

The author is Principal of St. Clare Degree College at Jalahalli, Bangalore, India. He has several years of experience in religious formation and teaching philosophy. He has a doctorate in Organization Development from St. Thomas University, Minnesota in USA. He may be contacted at: tomsclf@gmail.com

answer to the most important question of all – the question concerning the ultimate meaning of our human existence. The quest for the sacred is the search for the one thing necessary, which alone satisfies the longings of the human heart. In the fifth century, Saint Augustine described that search in these terms: “Lord, you have created us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”.³ As we embark on this adventure we come to realize more and more that the initiative lies not with us, but with the Lord: it is not so much we who are seeking him, but rather he who is seeking us, indeed it was he who placed that longing for him deep within our hearts.⁴

Pope Benedict complimented consecrated men and women engaged in the daunting task of quest for wholeness, when the humanity in these post modern times ignores such a pursuit: He conveyed in a recent statement during his tour of England, “Catholic Church’s appreciation for the important witness that all of you bear as spiritual men and women living at a time when religious convictions are not always understood or appreciated.” Today, “the presence of committed believers in various fields of social and economic life speaks eloquently of the fact that the spiritual dimension of our lives is fundamental to our identity as human beings, that man, in other words, does not live by bread alone” (cf. Deut

8:3). We engage with the world wholeheartedly and enthusiastically, but always with a view to serving that higher good, lest we disfigure the beauty of creation by exploiting it for selfish purposes and ends.

While modernity shuns the quest for sacred and praises the secular fields of scientific inquiry and technological enhancement, it is not free from internal crisis and chaos. “The quest for the sacred does not devalue other fields of human enquiry. On the contrary, it places them in a context which magnifies their importance, as ways of responsibly exercising our stewardship over creation.” Pope Benedict clearly underlined the need for a fundamental quest for meaning and happiness without which life is not worth living:

The quest for the sacred is the search for the one thing necessary, which alone satisfies the longings of the human heart.

“within their own spheres of competence, the human and natural sciences provide us with an invaluable understanding of aspects of our existence and they deepen our grasp of the workings of the physical universe, which can then be harnessed in order to bring great benefit to the human family.”⁵ Yet these disciplines do not and cannot answer the fundamental

question, because they operate on another level altogether. They cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart, they cannot fully explain to us our origin and our destiny, why and for what purpose we exist, nor indeed can they provide us with an exhaustive answer to the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

This fragmentation, chaos, and internal crisis call for a deeper quest for wholeness and meaning. There is a growing gap between multi-cultural richness and religious homelessness, religious affiliation and spiritual brokenness. Western societies have turned into aging societies; social scientists noted that the aging Europe and the greying America is inevitable

This fragmentation, chaos, and internal crisis call for a deeper quest for wholeness and meaning.

and the experience of spiritual alienation and distancing from religious practices are fast spreading across the Northern Hemisphere. The religious life in the East is also going through a period of decline. In the East the spiritual sources of religions are undermined by the onslaught of religious fundamentalism and fanaticism with the politicization and criminalization of religious forces.

With changing world markets, the globalization of organizations, escalating crises in business environments, global recession, and the growing stresses of religious life, new ways of leading and guiding are required.⁶ Rosabeth Kanter captures this need for change succinctly when she states, “Faced with extraordinary levels of complexity and interdependency, traditional sources of power have eroded and the old motivational tools lose their magic.”⁷ As such, the previous generation of command and control leadership needs to give way to a new way of leading and guiding communities, a new way that is based on authentic engagement, dialogue, sustainable living and a genuine quest for wholeness both at the personal and community levels.

1. Definition of Key Terms

A working definition of the key terms of wholeness, spirituality, and spiritual leader are given below. These definitions are elicited from the classic and contemporary literature.

a) Wholeness

Etymologically, the word ‘wholeness’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon root word, ‘hal’ which means, healthy, whole or holy;⁸ and the Sanskrit root word, *sampoorna* means totality, completeness and wholeness.⁹ The concept of wholeness is defined in manifold ways. Palmer defined

wholeness as “living an undivided life.”¹⁰ Living an undivided life does not necessarily mean living face-to-face with others; rather, it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other in the entire cosmos, and that we live for the universe through our choices and actions. To be whole means to envision the reality of individuals, organizations, society and nature as interconnected phenomena designed for the purpose of common well being, progress, and maximum happiness. Griffith emphasized this inter-

“Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing the brokenness as an integral part of life.”

connectedness with the individual and cosmos when he noted, “The root and ground of consciousness of being, is one with the root and ground of the whole creation.”¹¹ To be whole is a process of being and becoming.¹² Palmer clarified that, “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing the brokenness as an integral part of life.”¹³ As such, wholeness is a journey through the process of praise and criticism, success and failure, solitude and community, leading towards greater integration of life. I consider the quest for wholeness as an ongoing aspiration for harmony in life. The journey towards wholeness is a process of cultivating

inner and outer harmony despite the chaos and complexities of life. This quest for wholeness is described in different ways: seeking truth, quest for sacred, journey towards fullness, search for fulfilment and coherence between the inner values and the outer behaviour.

b) Spirituality

The word ‘spirituality’ originated from the Latin word *spiritus* which means breath or conscious being, and the Greek word, *enthousiasmos*, which means enthusiasm or ‘the divinity within’.¹⁴ The phrase ‘the breath of divine within’, which captured the process of divine inspiration, can be interpreted as either a sense of the sacred or a sense of higher consciousness beyond the four dimensions of the material world.¹⁵ Indian spiritual traditions define spirituality as *adhyatma*, meaning that which pertains to the inner self or consciousness.

c) Spiritual Leader

Spiritual leaders in this study are known for their deep rootedness in their own religious and spiritual traditions and have a global or national influence through their ideas and praxis manifesting a sense of wholeness. A prominent spiritual leader manifests high levels of integrity, spiritual resilience, and interconnectedness. A spiritual leader inspires authenticity, universal vision, intuition, and

joyfulness.¹⁶ In this study, the prominent spiritual leader is defined as a person renowned for his or her sense of wholeness and universal outlook on life. While being a person who is deeply rooted in his or her own spiritual

The prominent spiritual leader is defined as a person renowned for his or her sense of wholeness and universal outlook on life.

practices, a top spiritual leader is well respected across cultures and traditions for his or her openness and charisma. A prominent spiritual leader is different from a religious leader in the sense that his or her positive influence goes beyond the confines of a particular religion or tradition and reaches across cultures.

2. Literature Review

Scanning through the sacred writings from different religious and spiritual literature and the contemporary wholeness literature, it is evident that little research has been done focusing on contemporary quest for wholeness from the leaders' perspective. The research literature on wholeness in the last decade has mainly focused on personal and ethical dimensions without exploring the deeper spiritual and social dimensions of wholeness and our global responsibility for all beings on the planet

in the wake of global crises.¹⁷ Bryman reports no studies on wholeness in his review of 66 qualitative articles on leadership research that dated back to 1991.¹⁸ The research on different aspects of wholeness, such as personal wholeness, spiritual wholeness, and educational wholeness, both quantitative, and in a limited number of qualitative studies, focuses mainly on values and virtues but does not address the deeper quest for wholeness.¹⁹ Although these above cited empirical studies articulate leaders' need to journey towards wholeness, there are few accounts of leaders' quest for wholeness in the body of contemporary scholarship.²⁰ This paper explores the need for quest for wholeness from a religio-spiritual perspective and presents the findings with a model for leadership wholeness.

Although there is very little empirical research on leaders' quest for wholeness, there has been an ardent search for wholeness in the classic literature. Reviewing the classic spirituality literature, I identified the salient contributions on the topic of wholeness from Taoism, Ken Wilber, Aurobindo Ghosh, Jalaludin Rumi, and Thomas Merton. Merton was an ardent advocate for balancing material pursuits and human dignity. Achievement of peace and prosperity goes hand in hand; peace is gained by enacting justice and prosperity is sought by promoting

continuous growth. His core principles of solitude and solidarity become relevant in cultivating inner peace and evoking universal responsibility in the hearts of leaders. Merton's views on social responsibility and social justice pave the way for greater human solidarity in dealing with issues of the disparity of wealth, human rights in the workplace, and environmental responsibilities. Harrison noted, "The business leaders who articulated philosophies of benevolence toward their employees were moved by deep caring and a sense of personal responsibility."²¹ The spiritual insights and the perspective of human solidarity of Merton help create a holistic approach assuring humane working conditions in a globalized world while promoting sustainable development.

Leadership based on self-transcendent values helps leaders to be true to themselves, their community and organization.

A brief review of the current literature in reference to leaders' quest for wholeness revealed different perspectives of leadership practice such as: learning from crucibles,²² holistic leadership²³ and ethical leadership.²⁴ Quest for wholeness is also explored from the perspectives of authentic leadership²⁵ and spiritual leadership.²⁶

The above cited literature discusses leadership wholeness that is based on leaders' authenticity, holistic approach, ethical grounding, inner development, emotional and spiritual intelligence, and growth through crucible experiences. In addition, leadership based on self-transcendent values helps leaders to be true to themselves, their community and organization, embracing the challenges of life.

3. Methodology of Research

This study used phenomenological research methodology. Kvale explains that, in phenomenological research, interviewing relevant participants is the primary data gathering method.²⁷ The interview, supported by direct observation, is employed to deeply and fully mine the lived experience of the phenomenon. The research question, which I formulated in this study, is: What is the lived experience of spiritual leaders' quest for wholeness? Based on this focus question, I established the participant selection criteria and located relevant participants for the study.

a) Criteria for Participation

In order to gain deep insight into the phenomenon of the quest for wholeness of spiritual leaders, I sought information-rich participants. I sought eight to ten participants who are considered to be top spiritual leaders of our time from different cultural and geopolitical contexts. The top spiritual

leaders can be described as having the following characteristics:

The participants were from Catholicism, Buddhism, Quakerism, Hinduism and Indigenous religions.

- Leaders who are known nationally or internationally for their spiritual leadership
- Leaders who are rooted in a particular religious or spiritual tradition but are respected across traditions, cultures and organizations
- Leaders who are known for their ethical-spiritual well-being and social responsibility
- Leaders who are known for their personal integrity, and humanitarian outreach and ecological concern
- Leaders who are known for their quest for wholeness for at least the last five years

By interviewing ten participants based on the above-mentioned selection criteria, I felt that sufficient saturation was achieved to allow me to explicate themes from the data.

b) Locating Participants

After obtaining the necessary approval from the Institutional Review

Board (IRB) of the University of St. Thomas for the use of the human subjects in this study, I sought referrals from both international and national spiritual organizations and networks for potential participants who fit the criteria of selection. In searching for recommendations, I asked for possible candidates without suggesting names. This helped me to build the potential participant pool²⁸ of 55 top spiritual and religious leaders.

c) Participant Profiles

The prominent spiritual leader participant group included members of World Council of Religious Leaders, founders, and presidents of international spiritual organizations, an abbot, an abbess, a Zulu chief shaman, and an archbishop. The group included spiritual leaders from India, France, Spain, South Africa, Ireland, and the United States. The participants ranged in age from 38 to the mid 80s. Many of them are accomplished authors who are known across the globe. The participants were from various religious and spiritual traditions such as, Catholicism, Buddhism, Quakerism, Hinduism and Indigenous religions. Although gender was not a criterion for participation, there were 6 male and 4 female spiritual leaders. With the exception of one recently retired participant, all are still actively working in the field. The participants' experience

ranged from 8 to 50 years. Finally, pseudonym is used for one participant who did not wish to be identified in this study. All others gave written consent to be identified in this study and are identified by their actual names. Participant demographic information is summarized in the table below:

Name	Title	Age	Organization	Edu- cation	Experience (years)	Country, City
Sri Sri Ravishankar	Founder President	55	Art of Living	PhD	25	India, Bangalore
Swami Veda Bharati	Founder Chancellor, HIHT Univ., Dehradun.	75	Himalayan Meditation Centre	PhD	40	India, Delhi
Parker J. Palmer	Founder President	68	Centre for Courage and Renewal	PhD	35	USA, Milwaukee
Leslie Temple Thurston	Founder President	62	Core Light	MA	30	South Africa, Johannes- burg
Credo Mutwa	Chief Zulu Shaman	84	African Renaissance Centre	PhD	30	South Africa, Kimberly
Archbishop Harry J. Flynn	Archbishop	75	Archdiocese of St. Paul Minneapolis	DD	45	USA, Minneapolis
Abbot Phap Son	Abbot	45	Plum Village Buddhist Monastery	MA	10	Spain, Madrid
*Abbess Pema Kuang	Abbess	61	Buddhist Monastery	MA	25	Ireland, Dublin
Sister Rosalind Gefre	Founder President	78	Rosalind Healing Massage Centre	MA	25	USA, St. Paul
Immaculee Illibagiza	Founder President	36	Illibagiza Foundation	PhD	8	Rwanda

*Pseudonym is used to ensure anonymity of participant who did not wish to be identified.

d) Participant Interviews

Using a phenomenological interview approach, I conducted ten interviews in a conversational style lasting approximately ninety minutes each. I used an interview protocol to guide the interview process. I gave the consent form to the participant before the interview began and provided necessary clarification if they had any questions before signing the consent. The interviews were focused on the spiritual leaders' experience of the quest for wholeness. All the interviews were both video recorded and audio recorded to

The interviews were focused on the spiritual leaders' experience of the quest for wholeness.

ensure the safety of the data. I listened to and watched the recordings repeatedly to help decipher previously un-noticed patterns of the interviews. I transcribed the audio track soon after each interview, which helped me to get closer to the data.

Understanding that in phenomenology "the interviewer leads the subject towards certain themes, but not to certain opinions about these themes"²⁹ helped me to keep research rigor. My professional experience in counselling and in conducting in-depth interviews for spiritual direction, focused on the human situation and the

lived experiences, helped me conduct the interviews with great resilience. In my interview process, I maintained an awareness of the above mentioned guidelines to stay focused on the phenomenological perspective and help the participant to move towards a "pre-reflective level of lived meaning, to make the invisible visible."³⁰

While conducting this research on spiritual leaders' quest for wholeness, I used inquiring questions to explore the ways a leader lived, told, retold, and relived stories and experiences that manifested in their journey towards wholeness. When people tell their stories, which are essentially a meaning-making process, they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness. Every whole story has a beginning, middle, and an end. The stories they told captured the wholeness and relationship among the past, present, and the future elements of one's life. As Vygotsky notes, "Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness."³¹ I explored stories that impacted the leader, provided understanding, portrayed reality, and allowed the leader to naturally explain the lived experience of the quest for wholeness.

e) Data Analysis

In this phenomenological study, I used a descriptive approach for selecting and highlighting statements

that seemed important to the phenomenon.³² I looked into the transcribed data in order to understand the essential themes of the quest for wholeness as they revealed themselves for an identified group of spiritual leaders. The 10 interviews produced approximately 24,000 lines of data. I selected and highlighted sentences or phrases that stood out and revealed the experience of the quest for wholeness to support the developing categories of meaning.³³

The essential themes reflected their experience of the quest for wholeness.

Although there is no attempt to generalize the themes to a larger audience, the essence of the themes may strike a chord with other spiritual leaders, religious followers, and anyone who pursues wholeness in life. As noted above, I submitted the essential themes to the participants to see if what I discovered accurately reflected their experience of the quest for wholeness. The communications with them confirmed that the essential themes reflected their experience of the quest for wholeness. Moreover, most of the prominent leaders expressed that it was a very worthwhile study to help support other leaders in their journey and realize their potential. Cohen identifies this method of engaging the participant in

the thematizing process as a means to ensure validity of the research findings.³⁴

4. Key Findings

The experience of the quest for wholeness demonstrated the pivotal life journey of these top spiritual leaders. Engaging in a deep quest for wholeness was described as the lifeblood of their spiritual leadership. Although these leaders' experiences crossed cultural contexts and religious traditions around the globe, four essential themes emerged as common threads in their journeys. The first theme, *experiencing existential crisis*, reflects how the eminent spiritual leaders faced intensely difficult crisis moments or near death experiences in their journeys. The crises ranged from emotional, ethical, to spiritual levels, and each was a way to explore deeper meaning and purpose in their lives. The word for crisis in the Chinese language, *Mandarin* means danger and opportunity. Negative response to crisis situations can make people end up being victims of boredom, frustration, sadness and depression, whereas positive response to crisis can lead one on the path of deeper transformation and growth.

The second theme, *self acceptance*, illuminates the attitudes and approaches of these leaders in dealing with the existential crises as a learning experience to grow in authenticity,

integrity, and enlightenment. The religious leaders have realized that crises are necessary milestones in one's life to become whole persons by journeying through the moments of brokenness. The third theme, *awakening*, explores the ways in which the leaders cultivated pertinent spiritual practices such as self-reflection, contemplation, and critical thinking, to transform their inner selves to touch the ultimate dimension of their being. The experience of awakening makes them gain deeper insights about life and its meaning. Lastly, the fourth theme, *fostering an ethic of co-responsibility*, recognizes the ways these leaders

Crises and transformative learning moved their hearts to an experience of awakening, leading to an ethic of collective responsibility.

sought community to find solutions to help build a just and peaceful world with broader spiritual vision, values, and collective responsibility.

These four themes reflect the essential nature and meaning of these spiritual leaders' quest for wholeness. The quest for wholeness was marked by crises and transformative learning that moved their hearts to an experience of awakening, leading to an ethic of collective responsibility. The quest was

a messy journey with trial and error, successes and failures, but not without learning key lessons for life.

a) Existential Crisis

Experiencing existential crises such as identity crisis, emotional crisis, value crisis, and meaning crisis, these leaders sought deeper meaning, purpose and direction in life. They confronted the crisis situations of clinical depression, genocide, apartheid, loss of families and war situations. Immaculee Ilibagiza, a Rwandan girl who was locked up in a bath room for 90 days during the days of genocide underwent deep trauma but experienced great awakening to see things in a whole new light. The pattern of these leaders' journey towards wholeness was quite non-linear with ups and downs but not without gaining great insights on the way.

Sister Rosalind Gefre who started her religious life working in the convent kitchen became a massage therapist in US for the first time, but not without undergoing the agony of rejection, public scandal, and opposition. She became a leading religious who found the net work of massage therapy clinics in four different states in US. She became a nightingale of healing and wholeness for many depressed patients. Rosalind journeyed through the vicissitudes of darkness, insecurity and multiple faith crises. In her utter helplessness she relied on the divine

source for consolation and spiritual support. They realized that the quest for wholeness is a lifelong aspiration and process of seeking deeper meaning of life. These leaders considered crisis as a springboard for broadening their base and deepening their understanding of life. Palmer went through clinical depression due to his hectic life style and met with many failures. He says, "I learned more from my failures than from the many spectacular successes I had." The crisis moments helped leaders to look at life squarely and penetrate through the illusions, gaining profound insights. Leslie Thurston from South

When people learn to embrace the crises positively the break-through happens beyond their imagination.

Africa learned through family crisis how to be a mother of not just a few, but the mother of many, championing the cause of the less privileged African children. Similarly, Credo Mutwa walked through the dark valleys of apartheid and fought against the unjust regime with vigour and valour. Instead of becoming a bitter person with gross resentment about the past, he was transformed to become a non-violent freedom fighter after the model of Gandhi. The crisis was a turning point in their lives, unlocking their hidden spiritual genius with new vision, values,

and opportunities, while relinquishing the past perspectives in their journey towards wholeness. The religious and spiritual life today is marked by these necessary crises, both personally and collectively, showing a decline in religious persuasion even in the East. When people learn to embrace the crises positively the break-through happens beyond their imagination; new insights and energies are discovered to live a wholesome life. They learn to become wholesome persons with integral vision and values.

b) Self Acceptance

The experiences of existential crisis urged leaders into a transformative process of *self acceptance*. Acceptance of strengths and shadows enabled these leaders to broaden their understanding and deepen their roots of life's purpose. For these leaders, wholeness is about a fundamental sense of self-acceptance and they embraced the fact that brokenness and crises are part and parcel of life. Both the successes and failures intrinsically belonged to the trajectory of their journey towards wholeness. It is not that the failures and crises crippled their lives, but they were gifts and catalysts for new learning and exploration. A sense of trial and error experimentation with life added to the messiness of the journey, revealing the inner emptiness and restlessness. Penetrating through the illusions of life,

the spiritual leaders were able to speak honestly and experience growth in personal authenticity. A fundamental level of self-acceptance and persistent inner work enables these top spiritual leaders to rejoin who they are with what they do.

c) Awakening

The top spiritual leaders experienced an *Unfolding of the ultimate dimension of being* in their journey towards wholeness. These leaders understood that the path towards wholeness requires personal reflection, interiority, and solitude. Their experience of expanded spiritual awareness was

These leaders manifested deep peace, tranquillity, and joy in the midst of turbulent chaos and confusion.

attributed to their capacity to cultivate internal awareness and solitude. Spiritual leaders' return to reflective awareness helped them to make sense of their journey and experience deep inner transformation. A gradual awakening of their spiritual consciousness helped them to realize the hidden wholeness of life in the midst of crises and brokenness. Being awakened, they are able to see the reality in a whole new light and respond creatively and positively. The experience of weakness and fragility make them look towards the source beyond the visible reality and

get reconnected to the ground of grace and blessings. These leaders manifested deep peace, tranquillity, and joy in the midst of turbulent chaos and confusion. They were deeply aware that they were led by a higher power or consciousness towards greater purpose and fulfilment of life. A sense of spiritual calling and response was an underlying thread in their journey towards wholeness. Through various vicissitudes of life, these leaders experienced an evolution of their consciousness, resulting in an unfolding of the inner spiritual being.

d) Ethic of Co-responsibility

These top spiritual leaders sought community in their quest for wholeness. They were deeply engaged in *fostering an ethic of co-responsibility* in their own organizations and across the globe. Developing a deep conviction of the interconnectedness of the web of life, these leaders engaged in fostering an ethic of co-responsibility to enhance the quality of life. The leaders realized the need for moving from an ethic of "I and mine" to an ethic of "we and ours" to create a better world. Cultivating circles of relational trust helped them to engage in authentic dialogue and self-discovery. They demonstrated responsibility for the welfare of others by establishing unique organizations and formed teams of followers to carry their mission across the globe. As highly evolved spiritual beings, top leaders expanded their circle of compassion to the

suffering humanity beyond the boundaries of race, culture and nationality. These leaders were keenly aware of the massive injustice and disparity prevalent in the current world beset with violence, exploitation, and environmental degradation. Their awareness of inequality and disparity evoked a sense of deep solidarity. Their conviction of the oneness of the humanity in the midst of diversities, urged them to take unique initiatives through their organizations to promote an ethic of co-responsibility, alleviating suffering and cultivating goodwill for common welfare. Top spiritual leaders' quest for wholeness led them to an ethic of co-responsibility that was rooted in trust, respect, responsibility, compassion and universal solidarity.

To summarise, integral to the experience of spiritual leader's quest for wholeness was their experience of existential crisis, a deeper self-awareness, and a willingness to embrace

Ethic of co-responsibility was rooted in trust, respect, responsibility, compassion and universal solidarity.

both the light and shadow as part and parcel of the whole life. Spiritual leader's unfolding of the ultimate dimension of being through spiritual awakening and the realization of their interconnectedness with the whole

creation urged them to cultivate and promote a universal ethic of co-responsibility, enhancing the wholeness in life. These leaders' lived experience demonstrates that wholeness is not about perfection but an enduring realization of greater harmony in life.

5. Leadership Wholeness Model

Based on the salient themes that emerged from the data analysis, I formulated a leadership wholeness model from a religio-spiritual perspective. In the study, the top leaders' quest for wholeness demonstrated both interior and exterior dynamics as an integrated whole, as explained in the leadership wholeness model below.

a) Interior Dynamics

As we have seen, the journey toward wholeness involved four common experiences: crisis, acceptance, awakening, and co-responsibility. The quest for wholeness that springs from the very being deeply influenced how they interacted with followers, community, and the larger world and characterized their journey: the experience of existential crises led all the participants to question previously-held views, values, and perspectives of life. For example, one questioned the practice of apartheid and advocated an ethic of tolerance; another challenged the cult of Rwandan genocide and became a caretaker of orphan children of genocide; and yet another's

experience of major failures and clinical depression helped him become an authentic agent of courageous renewal. The crucibles of crises urged them to look at life with a new lens as the old meanings and patterns were shattered. Crises also led them to a process of self-acceptance and learning from past failures and weaknesses in spite of their tendency to resist and deny. They dealt with their crises constructively to break through the darkness and meaninglessness of life, experiencing an awakening to a higher perspective.

The trajectory of the leaders' journey was non-linear, as the four factors of crisis, acceptance, awakening, and co-responsibility interplayed together in a pattern of an 'infinity loop' (similar to continuous breathing in and breathing out process) and transformational process of learning and growth. By engaging in an authentic search with integrity and honesty, the top spiritual leaders set new directions for their quest for wholeness. Consequently, they began to enhance their sense of deeper self and discovered their interrelationship with the community and the larger world, thus experiencing greater harmony. Awakening to a new purpose and meaning, the leaders exercised responsibility for their life and also for the lives of others. A sense of responsibility and co-responsibility demonstrated the relationship between leaders and followers and also between

the community and the larger world as an integrated whole. Moreover, the four factors of crisis, acceptance, awakening and co-responsibility interplay with one another in an 'infinity loop' and are rooted in consciousness at the centre of the leader's being. This represents the leaders' quest for wholeness as an ongoing natural process in a non-linear fashion, discovering new meaning and harmonious relationship with the

The crucibles of crises urged them to look at life with a new lens as the old meanings and patterns were shattered.

community and larger world through crises and chaos. From a Eucharistic perspective, the process of transformative experience of crisis, acceptance, awakening and co-responsibility could be seen as: experience of suffering, acceptance of gradual death, rising to a new level of being and the ethic of loving service to humanity.

b) Exterior Dynamics

The exterior dynamics contained five dimensions of co-responsibility for the leader, followers, community, and the larger world:

- i) *The circle of relational trust* operates at the personal and intimate level between the leader and the inner circle of his or her

team, where each one had the courage, willingness, and mutually-assured confidentiality to be who they were without any mask or pretensions.

ii) *The circle of responsibility* is exercised at the organizational level, where the leader assumes certain roles, duties, and authority. A sense of values and ethics guides the leaders to exercise the responsibility with utmost care.

iii) *The circle of influence* indicates the impact the leaders are able to make on society by their presence, creative activities and persuasion. Similarly, Covey identified the

They nurtured the notion of the family of humanity and the earth as one common roof.

‘circle of influence’, where the leader impacts the lives of others by the witness of their own life and activities, and ‘circle of concern’, where leaders show sympathy about issues, but without having the ability to do anything about it.³⁵

iv) *The circle of compassion* indicates the leader’s concern and involvement in global issues,

especially for the most vulnerable and deprived sentient beings (including humans, animals and other beings). These leaders expanded their circle of compassion globally, having helpful service activities to uplift the weak.

v) *The circle of solidarity* points out the interest and involvement of the leaders in environmental and sustainability issues of development and progress. Leaders expressed solidarity, mostly for issues of peace and justice, establishing organizations and networks for wider cooperation. As we live in an interdependent and interconnected world, these leaders understood the need for global cooperation in a spirit of solidarity, eliminating unbridled greed and unhealthy competition to tackle global issues and advance world benefit, reducing world misery.³⁶

The quest for wholeness was expressed in these practical ways of co-responsibility and global initiatives from many of the top leaders. They nurtured the notion of the family of humanity and the earth as one common roof under which everyone belongs, and where everything is connected to everything else. Moving through the processes of crisis, acceptance, and

awakening, the quest flow culminated in the realization of an ethic of co-responsibility toward community and the larger world, flowing from their sense of values and obligation to the whole universe, as they became aware of the deep connection between the individual self and the universal or cosmic self. This enlightened awareness was the platform, from which their sense of collective responsibility and solidarity emerged.

6. Implications

A brief review of the classic and contemporary wholeness literature revealed that the notion of the quest for

The themes of this study can be used for facilitating self-reflection among religious leaders and spiritual aspirants.

wholeness could be approached from different perspectives. The personal, organization, and leadership dimensions of wholeness are presented from spiritual, psychological, and sociological perspectives. These studies unveil the deeper dimensions of one's self and his or her interrelationship with community, ministry, and the natural environment. Exploring the key implications of this study, I recommend the application of this model in religious and spiritual life.

The key implications of this study are presented as follows:

- | The concepts of the quest for wholeness and spiritual leadership explored in this study could serve as a basis for designing meaningful leadership development programs in religious and secular organizations and can help leaders engage in self-reflection and personal growth practices.
- | Using the *leadership wholeness model* based on such studies can be helpful for mentoring and coaching, to develop ethical and spiritual leaders with a holistic approach in religious communities and organizational settings.
- | The theme, *leadership wholeness and organizational wholeness* can be used for the education and development of ethical leadership in organizations from the perspective of social and environmental responsibility.
- | The themes of this study can be used for facilitating self-reflection among religious leaders and spiritual aspirants, especially for using self as an instrument of change. This can be accomplished through leadership retreats and reflective practitioner workshops.
- | From a research methodology standpoint, inter-disciplinary

approach can be used to obtain new knowledge and perspectives about religious and spiritual leadership in the contemporary world.

The current review also supports the use of language around spirituality and wholeness in leadership conversations. The findings indicate an expanded understanding of leadership that provides support for emerging leadership theories of holistic and spiritual leadership and for the use of the term 'wholeness' with greater fluency in leadership theory and development. In the light of the emerging interest in spirituality in business and not-for-profit organizations, and in the wake of climate crisis, moral crisis, and global responsibility, the insights from this study can be used to facilitate productive conversations around 'spirituality, development and wholeness' across cultures in various geographical contexts.

7. Recommendations for Future Research

Further research should continue to focus on leaders in religious organizations, as there is great need for understanding, explaining and applying quest for wholeness in today's religious contexts. Undoubtedly, the organizations are highly influenced by the leaders' sense of wholeness, vision, and values

as the leader sets the direction and tone of the community and organization.³⁷ Given the high relevance of ethics, spirituality, and wholeness in organizations, and the limited number of research studies available in this area, it should be beneficial to conduct in-depth inquiries to the essence of the phenomena of wholeness for leaders at different organizational and hierarchy levels. Understanding the nature, meaning, and influence of leaders' wholeness at different levels of organization will provide support for research on implications of faith and practice of spirituality in today's mission contexts.

There is great need for understanding, explaining and applying quest for wholeness in today's religious contexts.

Further research could focus on leaders' quest for wholeness from the perspective of different genders and people with different orientations, to discover valuable similarities and differences in the themes. In addition, connecting both spiritual leadership and wholeness with ethical leadership from a broader perspective of social and environmental responsibility could strengthen the emerging picture about leadership and organizational wholeness in the context of rising religious and ethical scandals, and

escalating environmental crisis.³⁸ It is evident from this review of the classic and contemporary wholeness literature and pertinent research that quest for wholeness needs to be holistically explored from psychological, spiritual, sociological, and ecological perspectives, balancing personal, leadership and organizational dimensions of life. There is no doubt that such a deeper pursuit of wholeness in religious leadership in the current environment is an indispensable process of exploration, learning and praxis.

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IS THERE A CHARISM OF SAINT ANN?

Paul Dominic SJ

The classical distinctive charisms in religious life have been mostly named, rightly or wrongly, after holy men and women who founded the religious orders. Later founders and foundresses of religious Congregations have not been so recognized, generally. The reason is that they themselves sought and chose to be under the umbrella of the hallowed charisms, either explicitly or implicitly. It is not that they did not offer a distinctive inspiration for their followers; but whatever was original, even charismatic, in them was an apostolic orientation rather than a new charism, meaning a new kind of religious life.

In some cases the founders or foundresses of Congregations did not espouse any charism but proposed to

answer the apostolic need of the hour. In so doing they chose a saint for their inspiration, e.g., Francis Xavier or Clare of Assisi. Some, indeed many, have chosen St. Ann. Her choice is, to say the least, not a little surprising as she lived long before the dawn of religious life and, indeed, of Christianity itself. But her name, like Elijah's Carmel, is associated with several religious Congregations. In this context it is not irrelevant to ask if and how her person can be an inspiration for religious life, at least for those who are interested in her.

One of the most certain aspects of the mostly uncertain picture of St. Ann is that she was a married woman. Though a married woman, she is perhaps the most favored patroness of

The author, after a stint of lecturing in Mathematics in Jesuit colleges in Andhra Pradesh, has been engaged since 1980 in directing retreats, based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, and writing. He has written a number of books like *Who has believed Our Report*, *Unsuspecting Sources of Religious Life*, *God of Charisms*, *God of Justice*, *God of Mission*, *God of the Gospel*, *Beyond the Song of the Bird* and *The Beginning of Reality*. His articles are published in many leading pastoral and theological journals. He is presently stationed at St. Ignatius Mission, Lethem, Rupununi, GUYANA, South America. He may be contacted at: pauldominicsj@yahoo.com

religious women (and so, indirectly of religious life itself), as she has more congregations expressly named after her, at least in India, than any other saint! On the face of it, can anything else be more self-contradictory? Or is it only a paradoxical fact hiding a precious truth to surprise the seekers? If so, it could reveal an interesting lesson for those religious who enthusiastically celebrate the memory of St. Ann liturgically every year! Whatever could it be, so inspired by her?

A Judaic Patron or Patroness of Religious Life?

Before developing the paradoxical picture of St. Ann in the minds of those religious women for whom she is a *de facto* patroness, I would broach a related claim. Relating briefly the story of young Jacob working to gain his bride only to be given first the unpreferred Leah and then the longed-for Rachel, Joan Chittister concludes, “Jacob, clearly, is the patron saint of contemporary religious life.” I was far from inspired by that designation and interpretation even as I wondered about the feminists’ - I mean, moderate feminists’ - reaction! Anyway, to be fair to Chittister, this is how she argues:

“In each case Jacob works just as hard, with just as much fervor, with just as much care... In each case, Jacob never stints, never quits, never

withdraws his heart though each case is different....

Jacob teaches us continuance of spirit in a time of change. Jacob teaches us that reversals of our life-plans are not nearly the obstacles to life we think they are.... In Jacob we realize that reversals simply attune the heart to higher things again and make us listen for the original voice, for the first sound that moved our souls... If anything, Jacob teaches us most of all that it is not change that threatens religious life; it is stinting that

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desiccates the soul; it is stinting that wrings life out of life; it is stinting that turns us to hollow and shrivels us to dust.”¹

From such an argument I would readily conclude that the story of Jacob serves as a parable of contemporary life, maneuvering a difficult period of transition and tension and turmoil between a definite past and indefinite future. That is to say, the situation of Jacob is similar to that in which we, religious, find ourselves today having to work out for the future of our religious life as hard as we did earlier in the calm assurance of our pet convictions. But that situational

comparison does not make him a patron saint of religious life. Whatever he may be, the patron saint of religious life Jacob is not, especially if patron saint means one who guards, protects and countenances the devout protege. St. Ann certainly qualifies for that title especially for women religious, and more especially for those of them whose Congregations bear her name.

An Inspiring Family Encounter

Part of the inspiration of St. Ann for her spiritual progeny is, strangely enough, what I experienced during a short visit to a Hindu home. It was a few days after a wedding had been celebrated there. A teacher of good standing in our school had celebrated the wedding of her daughter. Earlier,

There was a sort of serene atmosphere there in that house.

he had left for me, in my absence, his invitation to the wedding, though I was not on the staff of the school but only a member of the religious community attached to it. Touched by his consideration, which was obviously in tune with his general image as a good person, I felt compelled, on my return, to honor his invitation and call on him. When I did - I had not visited him anytime before - I exchanged ordinary

courtesies with him, while his wife danced attendance on us and saw to the Indian-wifely duties of silent hospitality, and provided us with a smile, something to snack on and to drink. As he talked appreciatively of the whole marriage celebration I had a chance to go through the thick wedding album with the photos of the marriage rites, arranged in an order blending happily both the Hindu religion and cine-culture. Even as I enjoyed all the courtesy and hospitality extended to me I sensed, above it all, what I could only call holiness! I could not name it otherwise, much less explain it.

I knew I was surprised at my own experience. I could not deny, though, the sacredness of my experience. There was a sort of serene atmosphere there in that house. The hosts lived happily with their own belief in God and in God's blessing of marriage for themselves and, now, for their newly wedded daughter (who suddenly made her discreet appearance to the quiet pleasure of all). They all knew to live so in a divine environment of peace and satisfaction; or so it seemed to me!

I had had a pleasant experience earlier, to be sure, of the divine presence in certain Christian homes, both rich and poor. And, of course, I had witnessed too an unusual, palpable divine atmosphere in certain unusually authentic religious houses like those of

the little known Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus. I had experienced something similar occasionally in the ordinary Jesuit houses, too, of which I was a member or visitor, and also in certain communities of my friends, one of which incidentally belongs to an indigenous Congregation called Catechist Sisters of St. Ann.

Married life as such could be surprisingly holy and, therefore, strongly inspiring.

Though these latter experiences in Christian communities of married or celibate people were not without their element of surprise, the former one in the Hindu family took me altogether by surprise and sprang a good news that was a far greater surprise! And the good news was precisely that married life as such could be surprisingly holy and, therefore, strongly inspiring and inviting even for the unmarried with its unrecognized, if not cerebrally unsuspected, call to holiness.

The Inspiration of St. Ann

The surprise discovery from a chance meeting with a Hindu family celebrating a wedding led me, on reflection, to another surprise. If a good Hindu family could evince certain holiness that could spiritually stir me, a Christian, I began to wonder how much more inspiration I could derive from a committed

Christian family founded on the joyousness and sacredness of marriage, as intended by God right from the beginning. Jesus expressed himself in this vein, tapping the biblical source. An example of an inspiring family in the pages of the Bible is that of the young Tobias and Sarah, whose wedding story is told in the Book of Tobit.

Another such family whose story, however, is not told anywhere in the Bible is that of Ann and Joachim, the putative parents of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Yet, the mere fact that their family story is revered and cherished in Christian tradition and liturgy points to their fundamental holy life in wedlock, though its details are hardly known except, of course, apocryphally! Further, the singular fact that Ann, a Jewish woman of the pre-Christian dispensation, could be invoked by religious women nurtured in twenty centuries of Christian tradition (just as Elijah is venerated particularly by the Carmelites of both sexes) is worth pondering.

While mulling over the religious influence of St. Ann, what comes to the fore necessarily is her holiness in marriage (in the absence of anything else that could be said of her with certainty). What sense can her admirers and devotees in religious life make of that in relation to themselves? Only this,

it seems to me: that precisely in her married state the figure of St. Ann stands as a sign of religious life, though of course paradoxically! She may do so in three ways. First, she could be reminding religious (women) of the call to holiness in their own life. Secondly, she could be inspiring them to sound the depths of their possible holiness. And thirdly, at times of trial, she could be challenging them to answer the difficult demands of their holy call that had sounded simply glad in the beginning.

A Reminder of the Call to Holiness

All religious know or should know, with or without the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, that, in marked contrast to the older lop-sided emphasis on religious life as a state of perfection, there is the reality of the universal, if long unsuspected, call to holiness addressed to all Christians without any distinction of rank of any kind. Such theoretical knowledge of theirs, however much taught and learnt, may not necessarily be realistic enough in the usual course of their life nor convincing enough in their common discourse. The sort of notional knowledge which may be familiar to almost all is likely to become real, refreshing knowledge owing to an unexpected, unsought exposure to holiness outside their customary living sphere. Thus, even if they only chance to see the sort of

holiness that family life may at times present strikingly to casual and unsuspecting onlookers, it will surely jolt them out of their unwarranted, if unsuspected, complacency about their own state of life as religious and open their eyes to the holiness actually obtained outside their familiar religious structure. If they are pleased with what their eyes see and, further, choose to dwell upon the new revelation - such as what shows itself in the unheralded, simple, holy life of St. Ann - they will surely come to realize what the universal call to holiness means concretely and contextually in life!

Precisely in her married state the figure of St. Ann stands as a sign of religious life.

It will mean, for one thing, that the very fact of holiness in the simple human experience of some people guarantees that holiness can be equally a fact in some others too and, indeed, in all those who want it, without our least suspecting it! There is no denying the gift of holiness made available to people; so the question is whether there are takers. If so, what matters, next, is who ever and how many want holiness and, further, how much they do! No one can avoid such simple, basic questions on holy living, least of all the religious! However they live, whether routinely or spiritedly, they cannot turn

their back on such personal, pointed questions when they find themselves face to face with the holiness of the married.

One aspect of that holy living touches on a lively awareness of Providence! An ancient homely expression of it in the Jewish tradition of St. Ann is hidden in Ps 127, dealing with God's blessings in a home. In the present world of feverish hurry and endless anxiety, which perhaps is not a peculiar malady only of our times, there is much to be learnt from the quiet assurance of the psalmist (who could not but have been married):

One aspect of that holy living touches on a lively awareness of Providence!

It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved (Ps 127:2).

It reflects the universal, if biblical, God who gave humankind not only the law of work but of rest! So it is by striking a balance of work and rest that we can experience the benevolence of God who alone makes our work truly fruitful. Imbibing such a spirit, Jesus draws attention to the same truth in his own way in the parable of the seed growing by itself (Mk 4:26-29). To go back to the psalm, God provides more than food, and sees further to the needed

safety of the people; and so anyone with a little knowledge of God prays:

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain (Ps 127:1).

In this way the psalmist, accustomed to the ways of God in human families, recalls the old blessing given to patriarch Benjamin:

The beloved of the Lord rests in safety— The High God surrounds him all day long— The beloved rests between his shoulders (Deut 33:12).

Thus the psalmist dares invite his praying people to repose their faith in God, and claim and enjoy God's care and concern.

If only the realization dawned on more and more people that, as we keep working daily in an appropriate and trusting manner, the bounty of God will not fail us! They will then learn to be free from fear of damage caused by vicissitudes of nature or human wickedness. No one would then spend days and years in impatient, unwise search for accumulation of things and comforts in a competitive, destructive manner. On the contrary, every one will have a reason to be happy and contented, with the assurance, as another psalmist says, that it shall go well with us (Ps 128:2).

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The married who live in such a spirit of happiness can thus be a powerful reminder to the unmarried,

reminder to the unmarried, a reminder of an all too rudimentary and yet real understanding of holiness of life, namely, that it is God who gives life, contentment, enjoyment, and even prosperity to people. Such a sort of holiness is surely part of the blessedness of what has been called religious poverty, inspired directly by the life and deportment and teaching of Jesus. He breathes forth the charm of such holiness in simple, straightforward, spontaneous counsel (reflecting, of course, the experience of his home and homely ancestors like St. Ann who knew to be at home with God):

“I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear... Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them... Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these... And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For... your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is

your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom... Make... an unfailing treasure in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Lk 12:22-34).

A Call to Sound the Depths of Holiness

If the simple, trustful living that is part of holiness in marriage can give a fresh fillip to holiness of religious life, there are certain other aspects of holiness, which are restricted or specific to the married as such and therefore not pertinent or relevant to the religious as such. So the call to holiness of those united by marital pledge is not, in every respect, coextensive with that of those in religious promises or vows. In other words, the universal call to holiness is not universally the same. That is to say, while the call to holiness holds good for all, whether married or not, the type of holiness people are called to is not the same for all; and surely the exercise and expression of their holiness will not take the same outward form. *Thus there appears to be a riddle of holiness in the kind of happiness that the married discreetly, if shyly, reveal in their life; and the religious may find an inspirational source in their life if they can solve the shy riddle!*

The blessing of happiness enjoyed by the married, for example, includes the house in which they live and the city in which they dwell (Ps 127:1). The

house is obviously a matter of their inheritance; and the city is a scene of their ancestral roots. The unmarried religious men and women, too, have their own house and city, but certainly not quite in the same way. Personally, unlike the married, they do not possess any right over their house and do not entertain any claim of roots in their city! They use them for their need and service as long as they are available to them but do not own them individually. In this

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they are like the priests and Levites of old. When the Israelites entered their land of promise, all the tribes had their own allotted land, except the Levites.

The Levites were not entitled to any landed portion; they were indeed separated from the rest of the people for something greater, and blessed with God's affairs. God was their exclusive share or possession; and in turn they belonged to God in a unique manner as no others did! Thus dedicated, it was their joyous duty and proud privilege to render their ministry to God in the name of their people, wherever God chose to dwell historically (Lev 8:5-22; 18:6, 20-24).

Like the Levites the religious find happiness, not in any house or land or

city, but in the Lord who in the first place owns all the land (Ps 24:1) and guards all that is on it! There is another quality to such happiness. The Levites were usually grouped with the aliens, orphans and widows, who too received their surprise help from none but God (Deut 26:12). It was the happiness of the poor who belong to God and look to God for help and are accordingly provided for by God and so enjoy God's patronage! The happiness of the religious is that sort of blessedness of normal, if at times pinching, poverty and correspondingly comforting providence.

To this experience of happiness of the poor which the religious enjoy, still another facet could be added, referring to the future of God which is not within immediate grasp. It is not unlike what filled the hearts of Abraham and Sarah as they set on their unusual search for the land that God would slowly show them. The religious, without house or city, are likewise privileged to inherit that happiness of hope, originally given by God to the restless patriarchs and matriarchs. They share the latter's sense of being strangers and foreigners on the earth all their life as they kept wandering and pushing for the promised homeland, which was neither what they had left long ago nor what they were passing through but what was being prepared in a city beyond, indeed, in the far country that is heaven (Heb 11:13-16)!

And so of the religious too, it could be said: “God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them” (Heb 11:16).

A Pursuing Call to Awake to the Demands of Holiness

There is *another thread in the teasing riddle of married life*. It is linked with the word house, occurring in Ps 127 that has been the point of departure in the just concluded discussion. The English word “house” has, besides the meaning of building made for a family to live in, another: namely, the people of the family living in the house! So it should be not really surprising that after thinking of the house as domestic shelter in verse 1, the psalmist speaks glowingly of sons (and daughters) in verse 3. (In the Hebrew original, the word for “house” puns with the word for “sons”² and thus attractively suggests that the two thoughts are interconnected). Those who have sons have a reason to feel happy about them, as they will not be without support in situations of external conflict with enemies (verse 4-5). However, the real biblical reason for their happiness is not that; rather, it is that as “the fruit of the womb” the sons are “a heritage from the Lord” (verse 3). Just as safety and rest are finally guaranteed only by God, so too, the progeny of the married are not the mere product of fertility and virility with or

without biotechnology but pure gift of the Lord! In a way it is a double gift; for without this gift of children even the gift of the land would be lost for the parents in the old Jewish dispensation (Num 27:8-11).³ So, in the common fact of a family of children there is the surprise that the parents do not, on their own, produce and possess their children but they receive them from God who makes a loving gift of them in procreation! Whereas the celebrated (though unhappily unnamed) mother of seven brothers in 2 Maccabees 7:20-29 knew this truth spontaneously, lesser mothers would have to learn it as a result, perhaps, of a trial, either of infant mortality or delayed offspring. Anyway, here is an aspect of the married life

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where the partners can recognize their life with God, that is to say, realize the holiness of their life and so come to rejoice in their life.

What does that witness of joy and holiness offer to the religious? It offers them a cause for selfless joy in God and a challenge for faithfulness to God. Ideally when life is smooth for them, they will know to rejoice in their own

life as well as in that of their loved ones happily married. However, even as they join the latter in their joyous appreciation of the fruitfulness of spousal love that comes as a blessing from God, they sense the divine attraction in their own life as religious and value it no less a blessing. At the same time, realistically speaking, when life comes amiss for whatever reason they are likely to be shaken in the total experience of celibacy that may have been till then a matter of joyous holiness. In particular, they may be disturbed emotionally in their earlier choice of foregoing generative joy. They may then begin to miss what they had not missed till then! But long before any such challenge they have an opportunity to train themselves and become prepared for that eventuality. During their own honeymoon with God, when they see the married around them being happy and fruitful and recognize God as the ultimate cause of it all, they can well foresee future questions likely to upset their happiness or holiness and can guard themselves from the danger of living lonely as bachelors or spinsters or quitting as religious. Sure enough, sooner or later, as they come to face the sad spectacle of some of the married being without issue the religious may learn to view their own possible problem in the proper perspective without engrossing self-pity. They may even stumble upon a certain strange cue

to their new-sprung problem as they watch the hard misfortune of the married unable to procreate. They will be forced to ask, for example, if they are worse off than the married who are condemned to be like the fruitless celibate! They may well learn another surprise lesson too. If even the married can be without the prospect of happiness of bearing children (as was the case with Ann and Joachim till their old age, according to the apocryphal Gospel of

When life comes amiss for whatever reason they are likely to be shaken in the total experience of celibacy that may have been till then a matter of joyous holiness.

James), they have to find another way of happiness, independent of children, as shown them by God alone! Learning this, the good religious who had not earlier grudged the pleasure of happiness of the happily married would now be quick to observe the heroism of happiness of holy childless couples and follow suit.

More they can do, indeed, and go on better from their own past experience. They had, after all, at the start of their religious life, gladly relinquished their right to have their own offspring because of an initial charm of God. They need to awaken to that divine attraction and discover its depths of

happiness more and more, and stay happily loving God while remaining happily celibate and childless! Even here the married can be of great help. If a man like Elkanah could tell his wife Hannah grieving over her barrenness, “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” (1 Sam 1:8), how much more could not God whisper so to couples of barren marriage and also to religious in their possible lonely moments of languishing and longing for children? If the religious really experience God in this manner they will not allow themselves to be crushed by pain and struggle in their once-for-all commitment. Rather, they will find encouragement from the

It is God, then, who gives and entrusts children to the religious in the engagement of their apostolate.

kind of joy only God can give the barren in marriage and, in return, with them they will share their own victorious joy in God.

Further they will, at times, realize with surprise that they have their own children, born in their likeness, though not of flesh but of spirit! That happens so prolifically in the personal - not professional - apostolate that has so much to do with nurturing others in loco parentis! Do not the married themselves send, and almost hand over, their children to the religious for their

keeping and training and grooming? And, indeed, more truly is it not God who makes this happen? Perhaps it is part of the hundredfold promised by Jesus to his followers (Mt 19:29). It is God, then, who gives and entrusts children to the religious in the engagement of their apostolate, which is ultimately nothing less than an engagement with God!

Further, God ought to give them a secret of their own unique happiness, just as they should expect from their life-long consecration, if at all it means anything! It would be matching their own variety of yearning, evocative of how God once comforted the eunuchs in their very despair of being no more than a dried-up tree. God assured them:

I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off
(Is 56:5, emphasis added).⁴

God indeed will not be found wanting to do even more for the religious as they are not eunuchs who cannot help themselves to be so, but deliberately self-made eunuchs, precisely for God!

Perhaps it is better not to say for God and leave it at that without any further qualification; for it would seem that God gains nothing from sexual “mutilation” as such of even optional eunuchs. When Jesus happened once to

speaking of celibacy he pictured the voluntary celibates as self-made eunuchs who choose to become so for God's kingdom, and not simply for God. So it is for the sake of such a kingdom of numerous people who clamor for God's succor that the religious become unmarriageable and live so, foregoing the joy of seeing in the kingdom the offspring they could bring forth from their own bodies. Here is solved *another piece of the riddle concerning married life and happiness.*

The married climbing up toward the Temple in Jerusalem wish one another and pray:

May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

May you see your children's children.

Peace upon Israel! (Ps 128:5-6).

How can the joy of living long and so of seeing one's many descendants go together with the joy of the city of

Such dedicated souls are the religious who dare think big, and in the process do not think so much of themselves as others.

Jerusalem and, what is more, the welfare of the whole people of Israel? They can only if there are enough people who not only take pride over both Jerusalem, the city, and Israel, the country, but care seriously enough for what makes for their real, common good

envisioned by God. However many such people there could be today in each city and country, the result would be nothing compared to what could happen when there are some divinely inspired people who can think beyond their family circle, and yearn for the preservation of holiness of all God's cities on earth, and further work towards the reign of real peace among all people. Such dedicated souls are the religious who dare think big, and in the process do not think so much of themselves as others. They lose themselves in a way to make others gain; but at the same time they gain themselves too, along with all!

Endnotes

- ¹ *The Fire in These Ashes* (Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 2002), p. 39.
- ² See note on Ps 127:1 in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1985), p. 925. The same twin ideas come into play in the story of God bidding David not to build a house for him but assuring him of building one for him.
- ³ See note on Ps 127:3 in *ibid.*, loc. cit.
- ⁴ The expression "that will not be cut off" is an idiom that refers to the prolongation of a person through one's descendants.

CALLED TO WALK IN THE DESIGN OF THE LORD: ANOINTING STORY IN LUKE AS AN ICON TO INTERPRET RELIGIOUS LIFE

George Panthalany CMF

Pope John Paul II, in his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, chose Mary, anointing Jesus at Bethany (Jn 12:3), as an icon to interpret the element of consecration in religious life. The anointing story is narrated by all the four evangelists (Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14: 3-9; Lk 7:36-48; Jn 12:1-8) with some differences, which we cannot discuss in this article. Here we are looking at the Lukan version.

In fact, the anointing in Luke is an icon which can incorporate various elements of religious life in a comprehensive way. However, one of the reasons for hesitation to read this story as an icon for religious life is the characterization and image of the woman in the story as a sinner, or even as a prostitute. The attention of the readers and interpreters swings from an image of a common prostitute to an

image of Christ. The gossips of the ecclesiastical tradition have ignored Luke's discreet sensitivity and wisdom in burying the woman's identity and the nature of her sinfulness. Probably, it is not the great sins and not even the great conversion of the sinful woman, rather the self-righteousness of the Pharisee, that is showcased in this story. This story, like many other stories in the gospels, leaves sufficient gaps and ambiguities to be read and interpreted in a variety of ways. In this article I intend to analyze the important characters and their roles in the story. I will conclude by telling how this anointing in Luke could be an icon to interpret consecrated life, incorporating various elements of religious life.

1. A Brief History of Pharisees

To analyze the character of Simon the Pharisee in this story we need to

The author has a licentiate in Biblical Theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas in Rome and another in the Theology of Consecrated Life from Claretianum, Rome. Presently he is pursuing his doctoral studies in Biblical Theology at St. Peter's Pontifical Institute in Bangalore. He may be contacted at: gpanthalany@gmail.com

have a brief sketch of the history of Pharisees, the largest and the most influential Jewish sect in New Testament times. Their name derived from the verb *parash*, with the meaning “to distinguish,” or “to separate.” They were the separatists, or puritans of Judaism, who withdrew from all evil associations and sought to give complete obedience to every precept of the oral and written law. The Pharisaic communities in Jerusalem had strict rules of admission with a probation period. They originated as a separate group shortly after the first victory in the Maccabean Revolt (164 B.C.E.), and by 135 B.C.E., they were well

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established in Judaism. In the course of two centuries Pharisees or their scribes, developed from being a rebellious opposition which had involved the country in a bloody civil war as early as the time of Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.E.) to becoming the only representatives of Judaism after 70 C.E. In achieving this, they excluded not only their opponents, the Sadducean aristocracy, but also all rival renewal movements. The great hour for Pharisaism struck after the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem and the

temple in 70 C.E. In Jamnia, the Hillelites, their moderate wing, formed a new Sanhedrin, reconstituted Judaism and excluded all competing renewal movements including Christians.

Pharisees believed in the existence of angels and spirits, in the immortality of the soul, and in the resurrection of the body. They practised ritual prayers and fasting, and tithed their property meticulously (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42). They kept the Sabbath very strictly, allowing not even healing the sick or the casual plucking of grain for eating (Mt 12:1-2). They fulfilled an important role in the Jewish society as teachers of law; so they were well accepted by the people. Among the sects, the Pharisees are frequently mentioned in the Gospels and the only reason for this frequency is that they were actually quite present in Jesus’ ministry. In contrast to the traditional Christian antagonism against the Pharisees, many scholars say that it was mostly in relation to and in contrast with them that Jesus articulated his teachings. The life of the Pharisees was that of ordinary lay people sharing in the various vocations and concrete problems of the common folk. But it was also a life inspired by a fierce attachment to God and to the demands of the covenant. The roots of Christian antagonism towards the Pharisees, reflected in the gospel, could be the result of the historical context after 70 C.E., where Pharisees remained as the

only representatives of Judaism, who expelled Christians and other rival movements from its umbrella.

1.1. Characterization of Simon the Pharisee in the Narrative

In the gospel of Luke there is a reasonably consistent picture of Pharisees as antagonists to Jesus in his ministry, covering the Galilean ministry and the travel phase. This is not to deny some positive pictures of Pharisees in Luke-Acts. Doctrinally Jesus and Pharisees agree with each other on many aspects and it is mentioned both in the gospel and Acts. As an individual character with a name Simon, we meet him first time in this story (7:36-50). But the characterization of Simon the Pharisee in this narrative is developed, mirroring the Pharisees and their opposition to Jesus in the gospel on accounts of Jesus' relation with the sinners, his table fellowship with them, his interpretation of Jewish customs and laws and his claims regarding identity. The three meals of Jesus with Pharisees in the gospel of Luke showcased Pharisees with three attitudes, namely, self-righteousness (Lk 7:36-50), hypocrisy (11:37-54) and pride (14:1-24). As puritans they divided the society into the righteous and the sinners and kept themselves away from the sinful world.

In contrast to the purity laws of contamination, believed and strictly

practised by Pharisees through segregation, Jesus believed in the new principle of association, with which his holiness and purity can transmit to the sinful world. In contrast to the Pharisaic division of society as righteous and sinners, Jesus perceived people as self-righteous and sinners. He proclaimed sinners (poor) as the beneficiaries of his mission of liberation (Lk 4:16-30). For Jesus the sinners/poor were people who look to God for help. In a consistent pattern found in God's creation, He creates always from nothingness. For Jesus too his mission of recreation was possible only from a stage and attitude

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of nothingness. An attitude of self-sufficiency always hindered Jesus' mission (Pharisees with their self-righteous attitude rejected God's purpose for themselves: Lk 7:30) of redemption/recreation. No man can attribute righteousness to oneself and if he does, he/she becomes in the eyes of God self-righteous. The parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14) is an accurate representation of these two groups of people in the gospel of Luke.

1.2. The Concept of Pharisaic Mind

Many scholars argue that Luke had no interest in the actual identity of Pharisees in Jesus' time. Rather they represented the wealthy, esteemed classes of society within Luke's audience. Scholars believe that the numerous references in Luke to these groups indicate a particular concern and modification by the author for his purposes. Texts that reflect the contrast between tax collectors/sinners and Pharisees/Scribes in Luke have been edited by Luke to fit the needs of his late first century Hellenistic audience.

Luke probably intends the Pharisees in his gospel to represent an internal threat because they exemplify a style of religion and life, by which he believes

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Christians are in danger of being influenced. The faults which the Pharisees exemplify are not necessarily all attributable to an identifiable Jewish group, whether in the time of Jesus or of Luke; rather Luke has fashioned the Pharisees, who already had a negative image in Christian tradition, in such a way that they embody those faults to which he believes his Christian readers are prone. Pharisees in the gospel of Luke exemplify a particular attitude, but the attitude is not confined to them. By

depicting people who are not identified as Pharisees displaying Pharisaic attitudes Luke shows that the 'Pharisaic mind' is a more general danger. The crucial clue from the text is in Lk 18:9. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is not addressed to Pharisees but to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others."

2. The Sinful Woman

Arlandson applies the yardstick of Sermon on the Plain to the cultural status of women in the first century and tries to draw a status map of women in the various narratives, involving the role of women in the gospel of Luke, and arrive at the caption "the fall of men and the rise of women." He says that Luke reserves honour for women who are slaves, unclean, degraded, and expendable when they are paired with men who are wealthy, powerful, and privileged.¹ The unclean, degraded and expendable women, paired with men from the upper classes, shall rise and the men shall fall as they both confront the kingdom of God. As a 'type' character, the Sinful Woman represents the recipients of Jesus' ministry and whose fate is reversed in the kingdom of God. She represents the poor who are blessed and whose status is reversed at the cost of the rich and powerful, the theme of Magnificat and Sermon on the Plain.

The narrator's description that she was a woman, a sinner in the city, has led to various speculations as regards the public morality of the woman in question. She could have been considered sinner because of her trade or because of her behaviour. Her loosened hair to wipe Jesus' feet and even the alabaster flask of ointment suggest to some her possible trade and the means with which she has procured the ointment. However, it may not be fair to label the woman as a prostitute since the text does not say so explicitly.

In the woman's repentance, love and gratitude are manifested not through words but through her deeds. Justly the scene is sometimes entitled as "The Wordless Worship of an Unnamed Woman". She is a paradigm of a positive response to the person and mission of Jesus. The woman's body language, her position and actions, while expressing sentiments of love towards Jesus, cause scandal to Simon and his fellow guests. Simon, with Pharisaic standards, questions the quality and nature of life of the woman who approached Jesus. He says to himself "if this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." Jesus interrupts Simon's talk in his heart through a parable which symbolizes God's eschatological wisdom "revealing the inner thoughts of many" (Lk 2:34) and turns the tables on Simon himself. The

fact that Jesus knows what Simon is thinking shows that Jesus is indeed a prophet; and what Jesus says implicates the Pharisee rather than the woman as the sinner. Jesus does indeed recognize a sinner (in God's perspective) in his presence, but it is not the woman as thought (in cultural and human perspective) by Simon.

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Jesus accepts her physical contact and her bodily language as unrestricted corporeal expressions of the genuineness of her love and gratitude towards him. Kissing is a sign of gentleness, a special indication of love. She wets his feet with tears, her tears expressing her most intimate sentiments of love, gratitude and conversion. She wipes her tears away with her hair. She anoints his feet with ointment, which the Pharisee failed to do.

In the society of Jesus' time, political domination, patriarchy and the family system forced women to have subordinate roles in the society. Woman was considered to be a sort of inferior human being. She was considered a constant source of defilement. Morally, woman was devalued and her witness was void and null in official

proceedings. In religious matters she was equated with slaves and children. Against this condition of women, Jesus protected and defended her with his word and deed. This scene bears some similarity with the scene of anointing at Bethany in other gospels, where Jesus is defending the woman who anoints him from the uncharitable comments of his own disciples. Jesus saw men and women as equal partners in search for fuller humanity. This sinful woman is the only woman who is reported in the gospel of Luke as directly receiving

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pardon from Jesus. The woman in this passage is an example of love, devotion and faith. In response to her actions of repentance, faith and love, the woman is granted forgiveness and peace. Arlandson graphically presents the rise of status of the sinful woman in the story:

“The degraded or sinful woman who “crashes the party” should be placed on the negative side of the kingdom or at the bottom according to religious, political, and cultural standard and the same literary strategy. But in vv. 40-43, when the kingdom of God breaks in as Jesus explains it, Simon is poised to fall

off the precipice and does so in vv. 44-48 when Jesus compares Simon’s neglect with the woman’s extraordinary show of gratitude; in vv. 44-48 the sinful woman begins to rise rapidly toward the positive side of the kingdom. For those who embrace it, the kingdom of God elevates the status of women of unclean and degraded class. Only inside the kingdom are all past defects, sins, and status deficiencies wiped clean. In the new group that Jesus is forming, the unclean woman must receive honour.”²²

Contrary to the many speculations of exegetical traditions, she remains in the narrative as an anonymous woman who found forgiveness and peace through encountering Jesus. She is a woman of great confidence and personal faith in Jesus. In the wisdom of the evangelist, the questions regarding the nature of her sins appeared better to be left unanswered. And the readers are called upon to behave as the woman did whatever might be their condition or status.

2.1. Caution against Misinterpreting the Signs and Images of the Story

Barbara Reid deviates significantly from the traditional interpretation of the signs and images in the story and finds many reasons why readers and interpreters should not jump into conclusions about them.

First of all, regarding this woman in this story there is a position widely

agreed upon that she appears before Jesus and in the story as a forgiven woman. From this stand point Barbara attacks the position of many of the scholars who see and interpret signs and images of prostitution such as loosened hair, costly perfume etc. If the position of interpreters that she is already forgiven sinner is correct, one does not understand the logic of the story to present the woman with these negative symbols to embarrass Jesus and others.

Secondly, there is no mention in the text that she was a prostitute. The passage states that she had a sinful past but does not say what sort of sins she had committed. So, much attention is given to speculations on the nature of her sinful past. In a very interesting contrast, commentators seldom discuss what might be the type of sins Simon Peter committed or intended when he said “I am a sinful man” in the story of the call of Peter (Lk. 5:7). Among interpreters and readers her mere presence at the banquet does open her up to the accusation of being a prostitute. In fact, in the first century context, a woman could be considered a sinner by all in the city, if she was ill or disabled, or had contact with gentiles or was found in any other similar circumstances, which have no bearing on the moral conduct of the person.³ So speculations could easily go wrong.

Thirdly, if the gestures of the woman are so explicit, then the reasoning of the

Pharisee that if Jesus was a prophet he would have known that she is a sinner makes no sense. In this way Barbara Reid claims that the logic within the

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narration prevents us from any immediate interpretation of these signs as images and symbols of prostitution.

2.2. Woman in this Story: An Image of Christ?

We have seen that some ambiguities in the story open the ground for interpreting the woman in this story as a prostitute; we have discussed the problems involved in such an interpretation. What could be other possible images open for this woman? In a significant contrast to the normal image of a prostitute woman, Barbara E. Reid sees an image of Christ in this woman of the story. She argues that if one is predisposed to see in a female figure a potential disciple, or one who could prefigure Christ in such a person, it is possible to envision the symbolic actions in the story in another direction. Barbara E. Reid prefigures Jesus in the woman, pouring out the expensive ointment out of love; the image is of Jesus pouring out his precious life-blood on behalf of those whom he loves

(22:20)⁴. Barbara enumerates a number of thematic connections, this story appears to have been carrying, to the death of Jesus. She says:

“This woman is assured salvation in 7:50 just as is the repentant criminal in 23:41-42; her tears stand in contrast to those of Peter, who weeps bitterly after denying Jesus (22:62); her kisses contrast to the betraying kiss of Judas (22:47); and her position at Jesus’ feet is the stance of servant. At the last supper Jesus instructs the disciples to

She has translated her knowledge about God/Jesus into the language of her personal experience.

‘let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant,’ (22:26), underscoring for them, ‘I am among you as the one, who serves’ (22:27).”⁵

According to Barbara, the woman in 7:36-50 exemplifies one who responds properly to Jesus, and whose actions mirror his own. This position makes her argue that this woman in the story is an image of Christ.

2.3. A Call to Witness

Like the raising of the prophets to the mission of liberation in the Old Testament, Jesus too raised a group of

people for witnessing the Good News of liberation. The credentials for this group were faith in Jesus, personal experience of Good News in life as manifested in Jesus and a commissioning from Jesus. The woman in our story has already gone through the stages of faith and personal experience and at the end of the story, Jesus commissions the woman, “go in peace” (Lk 7:50). The nuances of this expression in the gospel of Luke demonstrate that this formula contains a much deeper meaning. ‘Go’ is a thematic word for Luke. It is used for Jesus’ “going on his way” as chalked out for him by God. In Lk 7:50 the verb ‘go’, which is used in the present imperative, gets such a nuance. The pericope of 8:1-3 (women disciples of Jesus) gives a reason for the reader of the gospel to imagine the possible scope of this woman in the future. She has translated her knowledge about God/Jesus into the language of her personal experience. All the women narrated in Lk 8:1-3 belong to such a group and it is specifically mentioned that they are beneficiaries of the ministry of Jesus by experiencing various types of healing. This means that they are persons who literally translated their knowledge about Jesus (Good News) into the language of personal experiences and are moved by love and gratitude to respond to that experience of Good News.

Our narrative presents the actions of the sinful woman towards Jesus as actions of love and gratitude. In the gospel tradition, the witnessing role for such persons is inherent in their personal experience of Jesus. The story of Gerasene Demoniac in Lk 8:39 is an apt example for this: “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him (Lk 8:39). Analysis has made it clear that the dismissal formula (Lk 7:50) to the woman with its particular nuance carries this meaning in the gospel tradition. It is also to be noted that the call to witnessing Christ does not always follow the single pattern. Some are uprooted from their families and villages against their desire while some others are sent back to their own family and village against their desire, as it has happened in the case of Gerasene Demoniac. But both of them are meant to witness the experience of what the Lord has done for them. This is the vocation of the woman as well.

3. Jesus as Saviour/God

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus’ activity is healing and saving. Jesus in the gospel of Luke in general and in this story particular, is a great healer and his ministry is ‘saving the lost’. A feminist theologian, McFague describes the “ethic” of God as “healing;” healing the

wounds of division and separation. In the gospel of Luke this is the ministry of Jesus, healing and reconciling people with God and fellow beings. This text of our consideration offers the same message of healing and reconciliation.

The conflict stories in the gospels contrast the ethics of Jesus with that of the Pharisees. Principally it is the attitude towards the failed that is in conflict in these stories. In conflict stories, we come across the Pharisees with an attitude of ‘spiritual apartheid’. They believed that the uncleanness of the failed was contagious and true to the literal meaning of the term ‘*Pharisee*’ (the separated one), they kept themselves away from those who had failed, in order to protect themselves from being contaminated. But Jesus believed that just as the impurity was contagious, his purity was also contagious; hence he was in search of the failed to let his purity and love transform them.

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Pharisaic ethics is centred on separation from the failed, while the ethics of Jesus is centred on the opposite concept, the search for the failed. He wants to bind himself to everyone and especially to the failed. Here in this story

as well as in all other stories of Luke, in which Jesus' relation with the failed is depicted, there is joy and celebration on the return of the sinner, and there is

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always a warm welcome to the sinner, as the sinner is sought out of love. It is because she/he belongs to God, as the sheep belongs to the shepherd and the coin to the woman (owner), that it is sought in such a manner. The thought of each as lost did not cause either the shepherd or the woman to give up ownership. It did not cause them to become resigned to the circumstances and say, "The sheep is no more mine. The coins are no more mine. Go and get lost!" Instead it prompted them to assert their claim of ownership all the more strongly by engaging in a most persistent search. It only deepened their awareness of the preciousness of the property that was lost. In other words the "looser" did not nullify the basic "belongingness" that binds him to God. It does not nullify the faithfulness of God as represented in the maintenance of a covenant relationship with him. Though the sinner lets go of God, God does not let go of him. "Where sin increases, grace abounds all the more" (Rom 5:20).⁶

Stanley Glen says that to understand the meaning of the parable of the lost coin and lost sheep, we may have to read it in the context of the poverty of Palestine and the value of material things. He proposes a modern parallel to what it was like when Jesus uttered this parable. He says that, in the modern context, to understand the depth of the meaning we may have to imagine that a child who has gone to school fails to return in the evening: the agony of the mother and the father in the event of a missing child! Similarly, the parable within our passage is an attempt to teach the way of God to the Pharisee, in contrast to his concept about God's way of acting. The forgiveness, the affection and intimacy of Jesus towards the failed woman should be read in the context of the ethics of God, shown in the parables of Jesus, very specially the conflict parables in Luke. The God image in these stories is a motherly image of God with motherly emotions of attachment and affection.

3.1. The Image of God and the Concept of Salvation

It is interesting to ask the question whether the image of God presented in this story is a traditional male image or it shows principally a feminine image with feminine emotions. In this story, God in Jesus shows typically feminine characters of sensitivity, creativity, and intuition against the rational,

hierarchical, exploitative qualities of Simon the Pharisee. In this story forgiveness is granted to the woman and the response of the woman is her love. “Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.” In this story Jesus also responds to her love in terms of love. Forgiveness, reconciliation and salvation are explained in terms of love. In Luke 7:36-50, according to many scholars, the woman was forgiven by God before she came to Jesus; he assures her of her salvation and teaches Simon the Pharisee about God’s way of dealing with the failed and God’s way of offering salvation in response to her love.

3.2. Jesus’ Prophetic Mission of Liberation

In this story Jesus takes a prophetic critical position to defend an unfortunate woman. Jesus maintains an attitude of criticizing the traditional attitude of segregation and apartheid against a failed person. This liberating paradigm is the core of the story. Fiorenza says the following:

“The prophetic-messianic tradition is the crucial perspective and process through which the biblical tradition constantly re-evaluates, in new contexts, what is truly the liberating Word of God, over against both the sinful deformations of contemporary society and also the limitations of past

biblical traditions, which saw in part and understood in part, and whose partiality may have even become a source of sinful injustice and idolatry.”⁷

Taking a prophetic approach, Jesus questions the concept of Simon regarding God’s ways of dealing with the failed. God’s way is not of leaving and distancing from the failed but one of continued attachment and seeking after the lost.

4. Lessons for Consecrated Life

On two occasions in Luke, Jesus is depicted as reading/interpreting the Scripture (Lk 4:16-19; 24:27) and on both occasions, he read it as prophecy and interpretation about his own life. Scripture is the spiritual and prophetic resource to which Jesus appeals to make sense of his story. In this sense, the story of the Pharisee and the Sinful Woman

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is a possible scriptural resource, by which we can make sense of consecrated life in the past, present and future with its elements of consecration, communion and mission. Luke himself might have made use of the story of the Pharisaic sect, one of the religious renewal movements of Judaism, to

interpret the various elements in his church as a new religious movement. As it is already pointed out, the faults which the Pharisees exemplify in the gospel accounts are not necessarily all attributable to an identifiable Jewish group; rather Luke thinks that these are dangers to which his church is prone.

In the character of the Pharisee in the story, religious life has material for soul search both at the individual and institutional level.

In this sense, in the character of the Pharisee in the story, religious life has material for soul search both at the individual and institutional level. The Pharisaic movement in Judaism began as a voluntary renewal movement characterised by an ardent attachment to God and to the demands of the covenant. But where they ended up is presented in the gospels. Any movement in the human history, religious or social, has the temptation to replace the authentic with the spurious, the essential with the accidental, and the perennially valid with the temporary. Time and again this has happened in the case of various religious or secular movements in the history. The vices of self-righteousness, hypocrisy and pride, which could become traits of individuals or movements, can block

them from the source of grace, as it is being depicted in the gospel stories. The faults which the Pharisees exemplify are those, to which, the evangelists believed, the Christian individuals and movements are prone. In this sense this story should be read not just as past history but as prophecy and interpretation of what could be present, past and future realities of individuals and movements, including consecrated life.

If the Sinful Woman can be an image of Christ, she is a perfectly suiting icon to interpret consecrated life. She exemplifies one who responds properly to Jesus, and whose actions mirror the self sacrifice of Jesus. In the character of the sinful woman there is an ideal model for conversion, which places her along with the 'poor' of the biblical concept, in contrast to the attitude of self-righteousness, pride and hypocrisy, where God is virtually absent or has no place. This also was the response of prophets and apostles to the call they received. The sinful woman's attitude of lowliness, demonstrated in the story, brings her close to the tradition of Mary who was God's lowly servant. In this attitude of lowliness she is a fertile soil, where God's grace can work and produce a good harvest. She also represents the one who has translated the knowledge of God into the language of personal experience, from where witnessing of the Good News of

salvation naturally springs up. In the creation, God worked through His Spirit and created everything from nothingness. It is the lowliness or emptiness, which Jesus reached in his death, that became the ground for his victory of resurrection. In the annunciation it is the lowliness of Mary that became an ideal ground for the Holy Spirit to work and initiate the recreation or salvation of mankind. There virginity was the emptiness or nothingness in Mary, with which the Holy Spirit worked. Fr. Legrand says:

“Yet, great things were to happen to her. It was not due to her virginity, but to the work of the Lord’s Power (Lk 1:49). Virginity was plain weakness but the Spirit chose precisely that weakness to exercise his action. Like the nothingness of the origins (Gen 1:2), that weakness became the field of action of the Spirit.”⁸

It is this ‘plain weakness’ that consecrated people have adopted as the sign of their nothingness; and it becomes the ideal field of action for the Spirit. The Spirit can work wonders through this nothingness of the celibate life: the sinful woman in the story with her expressed lowliness is a symbol of this fact. This woman does have a Magnificat to proclaim at the end of the story: “for He has looked with favour on the lowliness of His servant ... He has brought down the powerful from

their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Lk 1:48-52).

Finally it is Jesus’ model of prophetic liberation that is the blueprint of action for consecrated people. In the biblical tradition, God’s call comes to his agents in response to the cry of the poor and oppressed for liberation. God calls prophets and they execute the liberation of the oppressed on his behalf. Another significant element in this consistent and continuing design of God for the salvation of mankind is that the work

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of liberation always encounters opposition and rejection. The Nazareth Sermon which is considered as the blueprint of Jesus’ life and his prophetic ministry had this same pattern exhibited. The stories of Elijah and Elisha became a prophetic inspiration for Jesus; Jesus and John were prophetic models for Stephen, Peter and Paul; and stories of all of them are prophecies that make sense to our stories, when we encounter rejection, opposition and persecution in our mission.

Luke has a special understanding of the single, continuing design of God for the salvation of mankind and each pericope that he has put into writing is a reflection of that single design of God.

Thus the ultimate prophecy in this passage comes as an invitation to walk in the design, God has chalked out for me, to continue the work of liberation of the poor and oppressed.

Endnotes

- ¹ James Malcolm Arlandson, *Women, Class and Society in Early Christianity - Models from Luke-Acts* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers), 1997, p.151.
- ² Ibid., pp.154-55.
- ³ Barbara E Reid, "Do You See This Woman? Lk 7:36-50 as a Paradigm for Feminist Hermeneutics," in *Biblical Research* 40 (1995), p.43.
- ⁴ Ibid., p.48.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ J Stanley Glen, *Parables of Conflict in Luke* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), pp.21-22.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread, Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press), 1984, 13.
- ⁸ Lucien Legrand, "Missionary Dimensions of Virginity," in *The Word Is near You (Rom 10:8)*, Collected Papers of Lucien Legrand MEP, edited by A. Aloysius Xavier and P. Joseph Titus, (Bangalore: St. Peter's Pontifical Institute), 2004, p.444.

APOSTOLIC CHRIST-EXPERIENCE FOR A MORE MEANINGFUL CONSECRATED LIFE

Noble Mannarath CMF

Introduction

Consecrated life, according to a few, is going through a crossroad with diverse challenges, concerns and secularist trends today. Whatever be the opinions of experts and theologians who search for its cause, there seems to be a consensus about the need for a greater effort to make consecrated life more significant for today's world. To make the consecrated life more consequential and relevant today, one of the inevitable options is to base the life of consecration on a genuine apostolic spirituality and Christ-centeredness. By Apostolic Christ-experience, we mean an experience of Christ as the apostles had. Here in this search for ways and means to make consecrated life more meaningful and relevant, I shall refer to the apostolic Christ-experience and the apostolic spirituality of a modern saint and the

founder of *the Claretian Congregation*, St. Anthony Mary Claret.¹

The thrust of this article is to understand the need of a profound apostolic Christ-experience for a meaningful and pertinent consecrated life in this post-modern society. In order to bring out the significance and relevance of the apostolic Christ-experience for a consequential consecrated life, I propose to underline the age-old paradigm of a consecrated life based on the centrality of Jesus and the primacy of the Word, which is duly inserted in the mission of the Church and searched with a newness of the Spirit. We shall also discuss how the mission and ministries need to motivate the consecrated to invigorate an apostolic mission that is Christ-centred and Spirit guided, focussed on the up-building of the Church and for the welfare of the humanity through diverse apostolic ministries.

The author has a Licentiate in Hermeneutical Theology from JDV Pune, India, and Doctorate in Theology from the Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain. Presently stationed at Claretian Alayam, Kottarakara, Kerala, he may be contacted at: noblecmf@yahoo.com

1. A New Way Of Being Consecrated

To be more effective and relevant in today's complex society, the consecrated need to search for a new and distinct way of existence and expression. For the first time in her history, the Church, in publishing the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, promulgated solemnly her teaching on consecrated life (Chapter 6), viewing the religious consecration "in a new and special way" and called it a special following, or a closer following of Jesus Christ (LG, 44). The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* calls it "a new and special consecration" (VC, 31). This 'new way of consecrated life' implies a fuller conforming to and a closer following of Jesus Christ through the profession of the evangelical counsels. Such a way of life, which is the *raison d'être* for consecrated life, needs to have the following characteristics.

1.1. The Centrality of Jesus

The following of Jesus Christ as proposed by the Gospel is considered as the supreme rule as well as the indissoluble nature of consecrated life. Stating that consecrated life is a special following of Christ, the Church invites the consecrated to a life of *starting afresh from Christ* (SAC, 22). Consecrated life becomes consequential and

The ardent imitation and following of Christ happens when one centres his or her life on the person of Jesus Christ.

witnessing only when the whole life and activity is centred on the person of Christ as the very core of consecrated living. After all, the consecrated vocation is an intense following of the footsteps of Christ, a life of *Sequela Christi* (RD, 5).

1.1.1. Christ-centeredness as the Core of Consecrated Life

The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* explains the Christological and ecclesial dimensions of consecrated life and brings into new light the genuine theology of the following of Christ and of the apostolic mission of the religious. The originality and uniqueness of consecrated life is certainly the evangelical following of Jesus Christ. The ardent imitation and following of Christ happens when one centres his or her life on the person of Jesus Christ. Such a profound Christological foundation of the consecrated life is the very essence of the theology of consecrated life. Church looks at Consecrated life as a '*walking in the footsteps of Christ*' (SAC, 2) and wishes that consecrated men and women

continue to be the “images of Christ the Lord, fostering through prayer a profound communion of mind with him (cf. Phil 2: 5-11)” (VC, 9).

The imitation and union with Christ is made possible only with a constant reflection on Jesus, who has to be encountered in the pages of the Bible. Such a Christological dimension, the fruit of a personal contemplation of Christ in the Gospel, is the thrust for the revitalization of consecrated life. The need to base the Christological spirituality on the Biblical foundation is a definite requisite for a sound evangelical spirituality of the consecrated today. The life of consecration and the way of the evangelical counsels springs forth from the interior encounter between the personal call and love of Christ. According to Severino Maria Alonso, a renowned writer on consecrated life, ‘the evangelical following of Christ’ is consisted of:

- | the vocation, which is the personal call of Jesus,
- | the communion, which is the decision to live with Him and with His other followers,
- | the consecration, which is the living of the vital attitudes like Him and
- | the mission, which is the sharing and prolongation of His mission.²

1.1.2. *Caritas Christi and the Life of Love*

The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* states that *Caritas Christi* should impel all the consecrated people, like Saint Paul, to work in every part of the world and expand the Kingdom of God, bringing the proclamation of the Gospel even to the most far-off regions (no. 78). The document calls consecrated life a *life of self-giving love*, where one has to live a life of love with the heart of Christ (VC, 75). So *Caritas Christi* needs to be the inner force that moves and spurs the consecrated people today. Only ‘the love of Christ’ can eliminate the human and secular motives from consecrated life and rejuvenate it with genuine apostolic vigour. The *Caritas Christi* and the consecrated life are inherently united to each other, in such a way that there cannot be a genuine consecrated life, without a genuine experience of *Caritas Christi*.

***Caritas Christi* needs to be the inner force that moves and spurs the consecrated people today.**

The whole life of consecration and the evangelical counsels make sense in as much as they facilitate the fostering of love for the Lord in full openness to His will and docility to His Spirit, and thereby help living ‘a life of love.’ Only

the awareness of being infinitely loved by God can help the consecrated to overcome every sort of personal and institutional obstacle, to renew their life, and brave all the hardships of life and mission. Consecrated life must become ‘the presence of the love of Christ in the midst of humanity’ and the consecrated are called to love humanity ‘with the heart of Christ.’

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In consecrated life, *Caritas Christi* and community life are inseparably related to each other and they mutually enhance each other. Genuine and friendly community living helps a religious to grow in self-confidence, self-esteem, self-love and thereby to grow in love of God. Such a consecrated person would be in a better position to radiate at a deeper level the love of God to others through selfless charitable works. Love for Jesus Christ, no doubt, would intensify one’s zeal for the glory of God and for the apostolic mission. Just as ‘fire creates fire,’ love stimulates love and greater apostolic love. This ‘Passion for Christ and passion for humanity’³ is the unambiguous mission of all the consecrated and they are called to live today this ‘passion’ with compassion, similar to what Christ has showed in his life. Certainly, it is a call and a challenge.

1.1.3. Apostolic Christ-experience as the Stimulus for Consecrated Life

An important challenge for the consecrated is to *start afresh from Christ* in adherence to the Gospel and to live their consecrated spirituality in a unique and meaningful way for the Church and for society. “*Starting afresh from Christ* means proclaiming that the consecrated life is a special following of Christ, a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word, in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren” (SAC, 22). Experiencing Christ, as the apostles did, is the very core of and stimulus for consecrated life. Anthony Claret’s whole life was centred upon this apostolic Christ-experience and moved around the central figure of Jesus Christ like ‘a compass.’

Consecrated life by its very nature is dynamic and those who respond to the call of God are moved by the Spirit to follow Jesus Christ as closely as possible, and to strive to form their lives in the perfect image of Christ. The more one has a personal and profound experience of Jesus Christ, like Paul or the other apostles, the greater will be the apostolic fruitfulness and efficacy. Church teaches that for a consecrated person the centre of one’s consecration and the focus of all apostolic activities should be the person and presence of

Christ. Hence, it is necessary to adhere ever more closely to Jesus Christ as the very core of one's consecrated life by discovering the Christ of the Gospel, and encountering the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and Holy Eucharist. Church exhorts that "consecrated persons can and must start afresh from Christ because He himself first came to them and accompanied them on the path (cf. Lk. 24: 13-22)" and that they should firmly believe that "without Christ they can do nothing (cf. Jn 15: 5)" and "in Him who gives strength they can do all (cf. Phil 4: 13)" (SAC, 21).

1.1.4. The Imitation of the Life and Virtues of Christ

The imitation of Jesus Christ is an indispensable concept in the history of consecrated life and in the evangelical following of Jesus Christ. If following of Jesus is the objective of consecrated life, then imitation of his virtues is the yardstick to measure the radicality and validity of it. The theology of the imitation of Christ has its foundation in the pages of the Gospel and in the writings of Paul.

The evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience are a typical imitation of the virtues of the poverty, chastity and obedience that Jesus lived in His earthly life. Since consecrated life "constitutes a closer imitation" (VC, 22) of Jesus, 'the supreme Consecrated One,' and "a fuller, more explicit and

authentic configuration to Him" (VC, 30), it is fundamental that the consecrated faithfully imitate the chastity, poverty and obedience of Jesus. Surely, the secular influences of society, personal problems of the consecrated, tensions arising from community living and certain biased attitudes create hurdles for living a life in imitation of Christ and His Virtues. However, it is the presence and 'gift of the Holy Spirit' that enables the consecrated to live a life of "special conformity to Christ, chaste, poor and obedient" (VC, 31).

These virtues must be visibly practised in everyday life: in their clothing, food, houses, travels and other daily activities.

Besides the imitation of the aforesaid virtues of Jesus, the virtues the consecrated need to imitate most in their life are humility, meekness and love for God, which were characteristic of Jesus' life and conduct. These virtues must be visibly practised in everyday life: in their clothing, food, houses, travels and other daily activities, because they have a greater witnessing value for the consecrated in the Indian context. An imitation of these exterior aspects of Jesus' life could facilitate a progressive interior change and thereby a deeper conformity with Jesus Christ, which is the basic intent of the consecrated life.

*1.1.5. Imitation of Christ in Prayer,
Work and Suffering*

The zealous imitation of Jesus Christ, which is the essential consequence of religious consecration, has to be lived along the ‘narrow and hard way’, and has three inseparable but direct facets of the imitation of Christ in prayer, work and suffering.

(a) The Imitation of Christ in Prayer: Identifying prayer as the very stimulus and source of energy for his life and apostolic mission, Anthony Claret indubitably believed that “prayer is for the soul what water is for plants.”⁴ Prayer life/Spirituality and consecrated life mutually support. Consecrated life gains greater relevance and effectiveness in the context of a well-lived spirituality. It is in prayer that the

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primacy of the presence of God is acknowledged and a person is orientated to the transcendence of God. Genuine prayer epitomizes the mind and heart of Jesus and receives the outpouring of His joy in the Holy Spirit, and the apostolic life is meant to be a manifestation of the same experience. That is the reason, why it is said that prayer life should be utilized as the vital anchor for the effectiveness of the

apostolic mission of consecrated life. The Church well reminds the consecrated that “prayer is the indispensable breath of every contemplative dimension” (*CDRL*, 5). The Church admonishes that “both in contemplative and active religious life it has always been men and women of prayer, those who truly interpret and put into practice the will of God, who do great works” (*VC*, 94). In the exercise of numerous works, the consecrated have to overcome the growing temptation to sideline prayer and contemplation for mere activism and careerism.

(b) The Imitation of Christ in Work: For the apostolic institutes, work is an imperative aspect of their being in the Church and in the world. All the apostolic and charitable works the consecrated people exercise today, in a way, are a participation in Christ’s work for the establishment of God’s Kingdom. If so, we can say that work is a Christian obligation and divine mission than a mere corporal activity. In all the activities of the consecrated today, whether it is religious or secular, apostolic or institutional, social or economic, the ultimate objectives are the greater glory of God, the good of humanity and the salvation of souls. With an effective reading of the signs of this post-modern time and aided by the apostolic virtues, such as, hard work, unreserved commitment and constancy

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in pursuing the objective, the consecrated can effectively contribute to the establishment of peace, justice, truth, harmony and the integral development of the people.

(c) Imitation of Christ in Suffering: Cross and renunciation belong to the very essence of Christian life, and in particular, of the vocation to consecrated life. Self-emptying is the consequence of responding to the invitation of Jesus 'to follow Him,' and it indicates a following in the way of His cross, which in itself is the condition for following in His footsteps. To be 'the salt of the earth' and 'light to the world' involves a lot of suffering and hazards for the consecrated in the present context. In all such situations the consecrated are called to reflect the splendour of God's love by their fidelity to the mystery of the Cross, and to confess that they believe in and live by the love of God. In Anthony Mary Claret's case, 'doing and suffering were the greatest proofs of love' for God and Jesus;⁵ the consecrated today need the same apostolic attitude. Moreover, suffering contributes positively to one's inner purification and the refinement of desires and passion.

1.2. The Primacy of the Word of God

The Word of God is 'the first source of all Christian spirituality' and it is all the more true with regard to the state of consecrated life. There is a greater need today to read the Word in the pertinent context of the world and to discern the guidance of the Spirit 'in the signs of the time'. Consecrated life is intrinsically linked to the primacy of the Word of God and the Sacred Scripture is the first spiritual source of any apostolic life. The Word of God is the Word made flesh, God's vivacious presence and blessing.

1.2.1. Word of God as the Spiritual Source of Apostolic Life

Church teaches that the Sacred Scripture is "the pure and perennial source of spiritual life" (*DV*, 21 and 25; *PC*, 2a, 3 and 6) and the writings of the New Testament, especially the Gospels, are "the heart of all the Scriptures" (*VC*, 94). The advice of the Pope for consecrated persons is worth mentioning here: "meditation on God's Word and on the mysteries of Christ in particular, gives rise to fervour in contemplation and the ardour of apostolic activity" (*VC*, 94). John Paul II, reminding the consecrated, says that "living spirituality means first of all starting afresh from the person of Christ, true God and true man, present in his Word, 'the first source of all spirituality.' Holiness is inconceivable without a

renewed listening to the Word of God” (SAC, 24). Indeed, the life of consecration and love for the Bible are inseparable.

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A faithful reading and contemplation of God’s Word, especially the Gospels, and knowing better the life Christ lived in poverty, chastity and obedience can arouse greater commitment in the religious to live more devotedly the evangelical counsels. The vital lessons of the evangelical counsels are unfurled in the life of Jesus Christ and the learning of these lessons is made possible in the pages of the Gospel. It is the Spirit of the Lord who inspires the consecrated to encounter the Divine Word and makes them realize that the promise of Jesus - “blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it” (Lk 11: 28) - is fulfilled in their life. The Church always invites consecrated men and women to contemplate the Scriptures, especially the lives of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and the apostles, to find the necessary inspiration for their apostolic life and mission in the Church.

1.2.2. Consecrated Life: a Ministry of Service to the ‘Word Made Flesh’

The call of every consecrated person is to be committed to the ‘Word made

flesh’ (Jn 1:15) and to be ‘a minister of the Word.’ Hence the preaching of the Word needs to be an apostolic ministry of paramount importance to every consecrated person and to religious priests in a special way. The prophetic aspect of consecrated life emerges from the encounter with the God’s Word and the personal relationship with Jesus, the Word Incarnate. The personal encounter with God’s Word is attained through an attentive listening to His Word in the diverse circumstances of history (VC, 84). The great challenges of the world can be faced only with the power of the revealed Word, as we see in the lives of the prophets and great saints of the Church.

It would be erroneous for consecrated persons to be so obsessed with other missionary activities and charitable works that they neglect their necessary study of the Bible and the spirit of renewal that flows from it.⁶ The consecrated can be faithful to their mission in the Church and the world only to the extent that they renew themselves in the light of the Word of God. The document on ‘consecrated life and its mission in the world’ clearly states: “If the great challenges which modern history poses to the new evangelization are to be faced successfully, what is needed above all is a consecrated life which is continually open to challenge by the revealed word and the signs of the times” (VC, 81). A

reasonable analysis of the consecrated life all over the world would reveal that the steady decline in the quality and quantity of the consecrated life is, to a great extent, due to the abandoning of the Word of Life from their daily life. From this perspective, we can say that every evangelizing action and apostolic mission will be sterile unless there is an effort to share with others the daily bread of God's Word.

1.2.3. The Sensible Reading of the Word and 'the Signs of the Times'

The role of the consecrated in the Church and in the world today is to be a prophetic presence, giving a radiant apostolic witness. Like the prophets, the consecrated are called to discern the signs of the time and to interpret them in a prophetic way, while making decisions for the future, with hope for the coming of the Kingdom and for the wellbeing of the people.

(a) In the Social and Cultural Milieu: In the present socio-cultural milieu, most people would appreciate the humble, self-sacrificing and compassionate consecrated persons, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who approached the blatant problems of the people with the eye of a prophet, missionary and visionary, irrespective of caste, creed and class considerations. It is not sufficient that they analyze the socio-politico-religious situations of the

people from a critical and academic point of view, but they must also do it from the pastoral and soteriological point of view. By their apostolic, social, humanitarian and charitable services they are called to love, serve and empower the last, least and the marginalized of society, thus promoting the spread of God's Kingdom.

(b) In the Changing Context of the Church: In the present context of the Church, where there exist several *Sui Iuris* Catholic Churches and innumerable Protestant and Pentecostal churches, priests and religious are called to be the true guiding light for the people. They have to focus more on inculturating and contextualizing the message of the Gospel in their respective locale. The institutionalized

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apostolate need to be made use for the building-up of the Church and for the promotion of the ideals of the Kingdom. Moreover, the consecrated, together with the priests, have to make extra efforts to form and to empower the laity, to ensure that the lay people are formed as evangelizers and are enabled to take up greater responsibilities in the pastoral and apostolic activities of the Church.

The consecrated people should play a leading role in helping to empower the women, wherever necessary, for the benefit of the Church and of society. Furthermore, where there are many Christian denominations and churches, ecumenical initiatives are an important task and challenge, in giving a collective Christian witness to the world.

1.3. *Inserted in the Mission of the Church*

The Second Vatican Council has well emphasized the reality of ecclesial communion that all the distinctive forms of Christian life – priesthood, laity and consecrated life – are willed by the Lord for the building up of the Body of Christ and for the Church’s mission in the world. Among these forms of life, the Church considers consecrated life as one *at the very heart of the Church, as a gift to the Church* and as a decisive element for her mission (VC, 3, 29).

1.3.1. *Sentire cum Ecclesia* (Feel with the Church)

Counting upon the complete and generous collaboration of the consecrated people, Church reminds them that, as faithful stewards of this precious gift, they have to “think with the Church and always act in union with her, in conformity with the teachings and directives of the *Magisterium* of Peter and of the pastors in communion with him, fostering at the personal and

community level a renewed ecclesial awareness” (RD, 14). The ‘*sentire cum Ecclesia*’ is a profound sense of ecclesial communion and faithfulness, an immense mission as well as vocation for the consecrated. In other words, the ‘*sentire cum Ecclesia*’ invites the consecrated to think with the Church, act with the Church, live with the Church, pray with the Church and

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dream with the Church. This ecclesial communion and fidelity has to be lived at three levels: with the members of the same institute, with other religious institutes in apostolic activities and collaboration, and with the local and universal Church. Moreover, such an attitude considerably contributes to being a great ‘sign’ for the whole world and becomes a ‘compelling force’ to lead the people to faith in Christ Jesus (VC, 46).

1.3.2. *A Renewed Ecclesial Mission*

The ecclesial participation of consecrated people, both of active and contemplative institutes, is an imperative dimension of the state of consecrated life. The consecration of the

religious is made and lived always within the Church. The Church exhorts the consecrated to give an effective and willing witness to the Church by being available for the needs of the local Church, according to the charism of their institute and, even more by sharing their spiritual experience with the priests and the faithful (CDRL, 22), using 'all possible means'. The ecclesial dimension of consecrated life is that it is a life and consecration 'in the Church and for the Church,' not outside the Church or on one side of the Church, and thus it occupies a central place in 'the mystery of the Church.' The consecrated persons have an ecclesial mission to fulfil. No matter what work is undertaken, the needs and demands of the Church should take precedence over the priorities of the institute and its own affairs, but without sidelining or leaving out the particular charism and directives of their proper institute.

1.3.3. A Sign and Witness to the Church and Her Mission

To bear witness to Christ in this highly secular and technologically advanced society is indeed, a daunting challenge for any follower of Christ, and in particular, for consecrated people. In the midst of the growing set of worldly values, the consecrated have to pay more attention to give a greater witness to love, truth, justice and selfless service to others while exercising institutional

services, social work and charitable activities. The mission of the consecrated in the Church is to 'be the salt of the earth', that is, to keep the world from corruption and to be 'the light of the world', that is, to dispel the darkness of sin and division, and thereby to show the right path to a world that has lost sight of it. To be filled and guided by the Holy Spirit is indispensable for an effective witnessing mission and becoming a sign of God's love for the people. From this

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perspective, the consecrated life could be understood as a charismatic gift of the Spirit to function as the sign and parable of the Reign of God, as well as to manifest the ideals of the Kingdom of God.⁷ To be the sign and witness to the Church and her salvific and liberative mission, the consecrated have to derive energy from the Eucharistic Lord and the Divine Word.⁸

1.4. The Newness of the Spirit

Consecrated life is a life of the Spirit in the following of Christ. The newness of the spirit has to be vitalized by a spiritual renewal initiated by God's Spirit, as well as the rediscovery of the spiritual heritages of one's Congregation and culture.

1.4.1. *A New Spirit for Spiritual Renewal*

The call to return and to rediscover one's own roots and heritage in spirituality opens paths to the future. First of all, it requires living the fullness of the Trinitarian theology of the evangelical counsels, since the evangelical counsels are above all *a gift of the Holy Trinity* (VC, 20-21; SAC, 20). A new spirit for renewal will necessarily aim at a spirituality that is Trinitarian and Christological, ecclesial and communitarian, pastoral and apostolic. A spiritual renewal of the consecrated is to start afresh from Christ, to live their consecration as their founders and the holy ones of their institutes lived, firmly based on the Word of God, "the first source of all

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Christian spirituality" (VC, 94) and Holy Eucharist" the heart of the Church's life and also of the consecrated life (VC, 95).

A revitalized spirituality 'by fostering the true interiority' and a holiness that is recommended by genuine Indian spirituality could be more appropriate in line with the directives of consecrated life and the Oriental vision of spirituality. The

consecrated may become the torchbearers in the spiritual renewal movement of the Indian Church with a greater focus on the theology of the Holy Spirit, as well as on the spirituality of true interiority. The mystical dynamism of the Indian sages is an element which the consecrated of India, even if their institutes have originated in the West, have to re-discover in their religious and apostolic spirituality, in order to make their life and work more pertinent for our country. The consecrated institutes of India need to integrate the contemplation of India and the mysticism of the Orient in their plan of life. As the highest and fullest activity of the Spirit, contemplation must be the secret renewal for religious life.

1.4.2. *Rediscovery of the Spiritual Heritage*

The revival and revitalization of the consecrated life is made possible through the 'return to the origin,' which the Second Vatican Council gave an ecclesial thrust for the 'renewal – return – rediscovery' of the spiritual heritage (PC, 2).

(a) Spiritual Values of the Land:

To make the life and mission of the consecrated more relevant for their cultural background and acceptable to the non-Christian population, it is essential to rediscover as well as return to the sources of their spiritual heritage. If we take the case of India, it is worth

noting that for the first sixteen centuries, the Indian Christians had a living tradition of inculturating their ecclesial life and the Gospel message was transmitted in a way adapted to the culture of the land.⁹ Moreover, the values which are generally more stressed in the East, such as the spirit of renunciation and asceticism, of self-sacrifice and mortification, contemplation and recollected prayer life, joy of resurrection and constant search for God experience etc. were well emphasized in their spiritual life. So too values from the Indian cultural heritage, such as inner silence, solitude, detachment, simplicity, respect for life and elders, search for truth, hospitality and human kindness found their proper place in their spirituality. Such values have to be re-focused and re-generated in the life and spirituality of the consecrated in India today, in order to be more resonant with and relevant to the Indian ethos. This is also true of other lands and cultures, where traditional values have eroded with the flow of time and with changing economic and social status.

(b) A Relevant Return to the Founding Charism and Mission: The Church exhorts institutes of consecrated life to focus especially on their founder's spirit and on the sound traditions and patrimony of each institute. The increasing slackness in

The increasing slackness in assimilating the life and message of the founders of the respective institutes is certainly a concern today.

assimilating the life and message of the founders of the respective institutes is certainly a concern today. What is more important in this 'return to the founding spirit' is, to be faithful to the spirit of the founders, rather than to the historical person of the founder or the foundress. A return to the founding charism and mission would be also an occasion to deepen one's religious consecration, to centre it on the person of Jesus Christ and to develop a relational experience with Christ through Biblical stimulation. By such a rediscovery of the charism and the founding spirit of the institute, the members would be invited to discern the Christological, Biblical, Eucharistic, Evangelical, Trinitarian and Pneumatological dimensions of the spirituality of their congregation, and to identify relevant ways to accomplish the apostolic mission proper to them.¹⁰

2. The Mission and Ministries of the Consecrated

The new understanding of the theology of consecrated life, developed by the Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, the Decree, *Perfectae*

**Consecration is for mission
and consecration is destined
to become a mission.**

Caritatis and other subsequent teachings of the Church, opened up new discussions and diverse views about the state and goal of consecrated life. There was a time when the focus was on the evangelical vows, community life, internal life and other realities of the congregations themselves. But today one of the pertinent approaches is to look at consecrated life within the context of mission in the Church and in the world. It has to be remembered that “the Church’s mission is by its very nature nothing else than the mission of Christ continued in the history of the world” (*CDRL*, 6). According to a renowned theologian of consecrated life, José Cristo Rey, ‘mission’ is the very key to understand consecrated life, and a convincing and relevant theology of consecrated life for today can be developed only from the perspective of mission. Only when mission is at the heart of consecrated life, does everything – communion, community life, spirituality, theology, common structures and formation – bloom.¹¹ In our modern theological context, consecration is for mission and consecration is destined to become a mission.

2.1. New Vision for the Mission and Ministries

Religious consecration initiates the consecrated into the common mission of the Church. Every consecrated person has an obligation as well as responsibility to work zealously and assiduously for the building up of the Church and for the growth of the whole mystical Body of Christ. The Church affirms that ‘the sense of mission is at the very heart of every form of consecrated life’ (*VC*, 25). Those persons who are ‘consecrated’ to God in Jesus Christ are His exclusive possession and this consecration introduces them into the ‘universal mission’ of the People of God; that is, in the Messianic mission of Christ Himself – as Prophet, Priest and King – in a manner of being rooted in Christ (*RD*, 7). From the Christological perspectives, consecrated life is presented as “the continuation of the mission of Jesus in the discontinuity of the times.”¹²

2.1.1. Apostolic Mission for the Building up of the Church

Among the diverse apostolic missions of the consecrated, the proclamation of the Word and the evangelization ministry are of paramount importance. Just as the Church is under the obligation of the explicit and direct proclamation of the

Gospel, the consecrated too have it inherent in their religious consecration. Among all the apostolic ministries, the proclamation of the Word and direct evangelization works by preaching retreats and mission, catechetical ministry, imparting of Gospel messages through classes and courses, etc. are of great significance. Another vital missionary task of consecrated life is to make Christ present to the world through their personal witness to human development and conformity to Jesus. Pope Paul VI considered an authentic Christian life witness as the first means of evangelization and says; “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”¹³ *Vita Consecrata* acknowledges the sign value in consecrated life, which is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy of God and Gospel truths in Christian life (VC, 84).

The consecrated persons need to be a leaven of communion, salt of charity and light of solidarity at the service of the mission of the Church, using the manifold charisms for the building up of the entire Mystical Body, especially using ‘the more excellent way’ (1 Cor 12:31), namely, the way of charity and charitable services, which brings all diversity into one and strengthens everyone in apostolic zeal. As Pope Benedict says, ‘charity is at the heart of

Make Christ present to the world through personal witness to human development and conformity to Jesus.

the Church’s social doctrine and every commitment she has is derived from charity,’ which is the synthesis of Jesus’ teaching (CV, 2; cf. Mt 22:36- 40). To radiate the love of God through their lives and works of charity is an inseparable obligation and responsibility of the consecrated persons.

2.1.2. Ministries and Activities for Human Welfare

Every Christian, and specially those consecrated to Christ, has the fundamental obligation as well as responsibility to share the Good News ‘in action’ for human welfare. It is said that the apostolic consecrated life has its origin in the Church precisely *for the sake of carrying out different forms of apostolic service to the People of God* (VC, 9). However, while devoted to the various apostolic missionary activities and to the different benevolent works inspired by Christian charity, it should always proceed from an intimate union with God (CIC, 675). The observation of Pope Benedict XVI is worth recalling: he calls “the Church’s charitable activity as a manifestation of Trinitarian love” (DCE, 19). Only with a profound love of Christ and fidelity

to the Gospel, they will be able to respond adequately to the various needs and problems of the society with effective apostolic activities, such as education and evangelization programs, health care ministries, family apostolate and youth formation, books and publications, organization of Christian associations and social movements, charitable and developmental programs etc. The vision for all apostolic ministries and charitable actions should be the creation of a just human society based on the values of the Kingdom, but urged by the love of Christ.

2.1.3. Consecrated Life and Modern Mass Media

The Church reminds us that “the first *Areopagus* of the modern age is the world of communications which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a ‘global village’” (AN, 1). The modern mass media has opened up new and highly effective avenues for communicating information, ideas and values. Acknowledging well the effect of it, Pope Benedict XVI says: “today the means of mass communication have made our planet smaller, rapidly narrowing the distance between different peoples and cultures” (DCE, 30). First of all, the Church in general, and the priests and religious in particular, need to be ever more responsibly conscious of these technologies that make possible a

The vision for all apostolic ministries and charitable actions should be the creation of a just human society.

speedy and penetrating communication, with a capacity to share ideas, news, information and opinions in a personal way accessible to all. Then, we must make creative and innovative use of it for the benefit of the Kingdom and for the good of the people.

The consecrated should look at it as their missionary duty to learn the language of the media that has reached every corner of the earth, in order to speak effectively of Christ to their contemporaries and thus contributing to the building up of society (VC, 99). They can make use of it proficiently for spreading the Gospel message and the values of the Kingdom in a way that appeals to the people of this ‘new culture.’ This is considered as the most urgent and most effective means of evangelization in the present ‘World-Wide Web’ (www). Today the Church’s presence on the internet ‘is a necessity more than an opportunity.’ Without this presence, it might be very difficult for her to succeed in entering into dialogue with millions of young people, who are the primary actors in this ‘cultural reality’. Therefore, we should make a concerted effort to commence an

effective web evangelization ministry. Along with traditional media communication, the consecrated should maximize the modern opportunities offered by the World-Wide Web, for the evangelization and pastoral ministry, for apostolic work and human development. Moreover, each institute might prepare experts in this field of social communication.

2.2. Christ-centred and Spirit Guided Mission

A ‘mission’ that is spiritual and ecclesial in its true sense also needs to be profoundly Christ-centred and Spirit prompted. The mission of the Church should be understood today as a vivid manifestation of the mission of the Holy Spirit. The mission of the consecrated, to have an apt and holistic vision has to be perceived equally from the Christological and Pneumatological perspectives. As an example, it may be

Centripetal model of mission, that is, a mission impelled by the joy of the experience of Christ, and not merely a centrifugal model of mission that flows from the mission command of Jesus

noted that the Indian Church followed for its first sixteen centuries the dynamics of the Fourth Gospel and the mission model of Peter in the Acts of

the Apostles, which was a centripetal model of mission, that is, a mission impelled by the joy of the experience of Christ, and not merely a centrifugal model of mission that flows from the mission command of Jesus.

2.2.1. A Mission Moved by the Spirit

We shall not forget that we are living in an epoch of the mission of the Spirit.¹⁴ Placing the whole mission of evangelization under the aegis of the Holy Spirit, the Pope says that, “the Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the Church’s mission” (RM, 21). The lack of Pneumatological vision and experience of the Spirit would make the exercise of various missionary activities ineffective and hollow. In fact, Pneumatology “cannot be an arid intellectual exercise, but the fruit of an experimental spirituality of life lived according to the Spirit.”¹⁵ Such a Spirit guided mission, initiated by the consecrated, could be a more acceptable common ground to share with the people of the different religious traditions of the land, above all, in the field of shared projects with non-Christians.

2.2.2. Witnessing and Evangelizing Mission

The mission of evangelization, first of all, is to be exercised and proclaimed by witnessing: “to evangelize is first of all to bear witness that, in His Son, God

The witnessing and evangelizing mission of the consecrated is not a privilege, but an obligation.

has loved the World.” The witnessing and evangelizing mission of the consecrated is not a privilege, but an obligation. This obligation springs from the radical following of Jesus Christ and their ‘special consecration’ through the evangelical counsels. *Vita Consecrata* states that the primary task of consecrated life is making Christ present to the world through personal witness, more than in external works (VC, 72). The witnessing mission of the consecrated could be understood as Christological, since Jesus Christ is the point of departure for them.

Life witness as a method of mission is very important since direct proclamation and other manifest forms of evangelization are often not possible today for various reasons. Anthony Mary Claret and Mother Theresa of Calcutta, for example, were so much loved and esteemed by the general public, mainly because of their intense life witness. Moreover, the witnessing mission of the consecrated is of great importance for two reasons: first, the people in general look for living examples rather than preachers; secondly, there is an urgent need for a deep faith experience in our Church.

The witnessing mission and activity, together with the evangelizing mission, which the consecrated render today, can probably become a vital ecclesial mission, helping to build up the Body of Christ.

2.2.3. Prophetic and Liberating Mission

Consecrated life is essentially prophetic, charismatic and liberative in origin and mode of operation; so the liberative dimension is something inherent to the very religious consecration. The reason for consecrated life is not one’s own survival; it is prophecy and liberation. It was after the Second Vatican Council that the consecrated everywhere started to rediscover the prophetic and liberative elements of their calling. The prophetic mission of the Church and the world is realized distinctively through an evangelical life of celibacy, poverty and obedience. The prophetic witness of the consecrated has a great advantage and impact for the evangelizing ministry and missions of the Church.

In the present-day utilitarian and consumerist society, which is perturbed by so many social, moral and personal problems, a prophetic and liberative life has substantial importance and value. José Cristo Rey describes the mission of the consecrated life “to be the parable narrated by the Spirit in the discourse of the time, demonstrating superbly its

representative and symbolic function for today.”¹⁶ Such a prophetic and liberative mission, which is a sign and parable, calls for a radical discipleship. In other words, the consecrated of India have to be the conscience of the Church and of her radical, prophetic-liberative mission. They must manifest the prophetic life and mission of Jesus through various in-depth and liberative activities. They have to be a sign and sacrament of God’s love, incarnate among his people, by transforming every possible situation by the power of the Gospel and the values of the Kingdom.

2.3. Mission in Context

Mission in context, an emergent trend that originated from the theological, pastoral and ecclesial insights of the Second Vatican Council, was set in motion by the influence of liberation theology and further developed under the aegis of the inculturated and incarnated theological process. Inculturated mission implies the adaptation of mission works to the specific context of the religious, cultural and social heritage of a country, but without losing the content of the message.

2.3.1. Inter-Religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue as a Relevant Mission

To be effective and relevant, every effort at evangelization and mission

work has to take into account the rich religious and cultural heritage, as well as the socio-economic condition of the

They must manifest the prophetic life and mission of Jesus through various in-depth and liberative activities.

people. In evangelization and mission work, a real interaction between the Gospel and the religious, cultural and socio-economic condition of the people has to take place. The over-arching programme of dialogue with the cultures (i.e. inculturation) and with the religions and religious traditions (i.e. inter-religious dialogue) can be an important mission for the Church and the consecrated today. Religious institutes have to re-capture their original fervour for simplicity of life and adaptation to the local culture; then there will be the evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of the message of faith. The reminder of John Paul II, that the “evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other” (EA, 21) is very significant today.

Dialogue is an integral part of the mission of the Church as well as an obligation of the consecrated. Emphasizing the importance of dialogue and religious harmony, R. Panikkar, one of the modern proponents

of dialogue, says that “inter-religious dialogue is today unavoidable; it is a religious imperative and a historical duty for which we must suitably prepare.”¹⁷ The consecrated should keep in mind that dialogue does not consist merely in the exchange of ideas and views, but must be a specific mode of being and a way of life for the followers

Inter-religious dialogue is a religious imperative and a historical duty for which we must suitably prepare.

of Christ. In our pluralistic world, the consecrated have to emphasize more the ‘dialogue of action and praxis,’ which includes the ‘dialogue of life’ and the ‘dialogue of discourse.’ Such a dialogical relationship initiated by the consecrated is crucial for solving many problems of religious tension and human suffering, and for building a new society, the Kingdom of God, the *Dharma Bharathi*.

2.3.2 *An Inculturated and Incarnated Form of Mission*

Vatican II convincingly reaffirmed the legitimacy and urgency of Church’s incarnational approach to all the people, especially where the Christians are a minority group, to allow the Gospel of Christ to come into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves (*GS*, 58). In the present day,

culture is not seen merely as a medium in which the Good News can be ‘coded’ that the people may understand the proclamation and the message, but on the contrary, “culture is seen as the living reality of the people, in which the Good News becomes incarnate, transforming it in the process, and in this way constituting a local Church.”¹⁸ Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* calls for the necessity of incarnating the Gospel with all its Kingdom values in the various cultures (no. 20). The values of the Gospel have to be suitably contextualized and incarnated according to the requirements of the society and the attitudes of the people.

We shall not forget that inculturation is the immediate consequence of Christ’s Incarnation in this world. Jesus has to be incarnated into the cultures and lives of the people through every follower of Christ, and in particular, through His consecrated. Inculturation is something that happens naturally when the Gospel meaningfully encounters the culture. It is the by-product of an involvement with the people, rather than the effect of a conscious effort or plan of action. In such a perspective, inculturation has to be considered not as “a passive living of our faith in a cultural context or incorporating some elements from a culture, but it is a process that animates, reshapes and profoundly renews that culture.”¹⁹ For example, in the Indian

context, among all the forms of inculturation, the *âshramatic* and *sanyâsa* vision of mission is to be considered as one of the genuine, inculturated and incarnated form of mission.

2.3.3. Mission Ad Gentes and Inter Gentes

Almost till the end of the twentieth century, a *missio ad gentes* – ‘mission to the people/nations’ or ‘for the people/nations’ – was prevalent, as a kind of mission directed at the people as they were the sole beneficiaries. But today, the awareness of a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-social context has radically changed the perspective. Now it is considered necessary to have an evangelizing mission that is principally ‘*missio inter gentes*’ – ‘with the people/nations’ or ‘within the people/nations’, where both parties – the evangelizers and the evangelized – benefit and are enriched. A mission ‘with the people’ and ‘among the people’ has to take into serious consideration the various cultural, social, religious, economic, political and human contexts of the people. The ‘*missio inter gentes*’ can give a lucid message that we – the Church, the missionaries and the consecrated – are not against the people, but with the people and the mission is exercised in collaboration with them, as a ‘shared or collaborated mission’.

For the pluralistic context of today, the ‘*missio inter gentes*’ could be a new model for a renewed mission theology of the Church. This change of paradigm

It also becomes a viable remedy for the growing fundamentalism in the society.

in the mission clearly emphasizes the aspects of solidarity and harmony with the people. An attitude and approach of ‘*missio inter gentes*’ certainly would pave the way for building greater rapport with the people of other faiths and cultures. It also becomes a viable remedy for the growing fundamentalism in the society. Moreover, such a collaborative mission of the consecrated with laity and non-Christians could become an effective antidote to counter the mounting secularization and atheistic agendas. In the multi-religious milieu of today, the ‘*missio inter gentes*’ facilitates a non-confrontational, dialogical approach with other religions and sections.

Conclusion

As a result of all these considerations, we can conclude that what is more important in the consecrated life today is a personal relationship with the Lord, the assimilation of Christ-experience and centring of one’s life on Jesus Christ, and consequently the arousal of

a genuine desire for an authentic apostolic and ecclesial mission. Without a committed search for God in study and contemplation, without having a profound Christ-experience and true love for Christ, all kinds of consecrated services and activities lose much of their purpose and significance. Any spirituality, lay or consecrated, either Eastern or Western, with profound Christ-experience affects all aspects of life, ordering them in a certain constellation.

The very organizing axis of the apostolic spirituality of the consecrated derives from the intense contemplation of the face of Jesus Christ and the experience of His infinite love, both in the Bible and in the Sacraments, along with a life oriented for others. Personally experiencing Jesus Christ always necessitates time for Bible reading, reflection, studies, liturgy of the hours, faithful participation in the daily Eucharist and other spiritual nourishments, along with the sensible reading of the signs of the times, discerned by the endowment of the Spirit. A revitalized consecrated life, permeated by a profound apostolic Christ-experience and with a definitive Christological orientation having *Caritas Christi* as the epicentre, could become a paradigmatic vision for the growth of the Church and society.

Endnotes

- ¹ Anthony Claret was born at Sallent, in the Diocese of Vic in Catalonia, Spain on December 23, 1807. He carried out a scintillating and prolific apostolic ministry in various capacities: as a fervent priest, a zealous Archbishop, a steadfast Apostolic Missionary, a great visionary-founder of a religious congregation, a renowned writer, a relentless social reformer, an enthusiastic popular preacher, an upright Confessor to the Queen of Spain, a Father of the First Vatican Council etc. He died on October 24, 1870 and was canonized on May 7, 1950 by Pope Pius XII. "Saint Anthony Mary Claret is a Saint for all," were the words of the Pope during his Canonization ceremony. With the apostolic experience expressed in his motto '*Caritas Christi urget nos*', Claret encountered the malice and evils of the society of his time and initiated Christian renewal wherever he went. Awakening the priests and the consecrated ever more to their call and mission was one of his key priorities.
- ² Severino Maria Alonso, *La Vida Consagrada* (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas) 1982, p.131.
- ³ The 'International Congress on Consecrated Life' held in 2004 brought out a book titled *Passion for Christ: Passion for Humanity* (Mumbai: Pauline Publications) 2005.

- ⁴ *El Colegio Instruido*, Vol. I (Barcelona: LR), 1860, p.66.
- ⁵ *Autobiography of Saint Anthony Mary Claret* (Chicago: Claretian Publications), 1976, no. 424; “The Temple and Palace” in *Selected Spiritual Writings*, Vol. III (Quezon City: Claretian Publications), 1991, pp. 199-200.
- ⁶ Angel Pardilla, *Christ’s Way of Life at the Centre of Formation for Religious Life* (Rome: Rogate), 2005, p.19.
- ⁷ José Cristo Rey García Paredes, *Theology of Religious Life: Mission* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications), 2006, p. 96.
- ⁸ *Oriente Lumen*, 10; Franc Rodé, “Consecrated life at the School of the Eucharist” in *Passion for Christ: Passion for Humanity*, p.250.
- ⁹ A. D. Mattam, “Theological Dimensions of Inculturation in the Indian Context” in *Eastern Theological Reflections in India* (edited by Xavier Koodapuzha, Kottayam: OIRSI), 1999, p.10.
- ¹⁰ Severiano Maria Alonso, *Ven Y Sígueme* (Madrid: San Pablo) 1993, pp.26-29.
- ¹¹ José Cristo Rey García Paredes, *Theology of Religious Life: Mission*, pp. 91-103.
- ¹² Bonifacio Fernández, “Committed to the Mission of Jesus” in *From Seduction to Mission: An Asian Commentary to Consecrated Life* (edited by Domingo Moraleda *et al.*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications), 1997, p.131.
- ¹³ Paul VI, Address to the Members of the *Consilium de Laicis* (2 October 1974), quoted in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41; *Redemptoris Missio*, 42.
- ¹⁴ Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1972, p.xiv.
- ¹⁵ George Nedungatt, *Spirituality of Syro Malabar Church* (Alwaye: STAR), 1989, p. 50.
- ¹⁶ José Cristo Rey García Paredes, *Un Largo Amanecer: Hacia la Nueva Forma de la Vida Religiosa* (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas), 1991, pp.300-302.
- ¹⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press), 1978, p.40.
- ¹⁸ Michael Amaladoss, *Mission Today: Reflections from an Ignatian Perspective* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash), 1989, p.22. RM: *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter of John Paul II on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate, 1990. SAC: *Starting Afresh from Christ*, Document by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2002. VC: *Vita Consecrata*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World, 1996.

BOOK REVIEW

Dr. John Sankarathil OSFS

Come and See: Formation for Discernment of Vocation, by George Ukken (Mumbai: Pauline Publications), 2009, p. 191, ISBN. 978-81-7176-669-7, Price - ` 95.

How do you recognise your vocation to religious community or priestly life? When did you realise that you have a vocation for a particular mission? How do you discern it? How do you proceed with it? Do you believe that your life is of infinite value and meaning in the sight of God? How do you foster your vocation? These are a few questions which haunt us sometimes, in our spiritual journey. In his new book, Fr. George Ukken, based on his life and experience, tries to answer such questions, and helps us to find proper answers to such questions in our personal life.

The book is divided into 15 small chapters; each includes a particular point to explain the theology of vocation in a modern perspective. As the author mentions in the book, this book is the outcome of his classes, given to the postulants of various religious communities. The author has succeeded in presenting the various dimensions of the theology and spirituality of vocation in such a simple language, that even

those in the early stages of religious formation can grasp it clearly and distinctly.

In fact, vocation is a gift from God and it makes sense through the response of self-giving. The gospels present Jesus as the authentic source of vocation. Formation engages each formee in an internal movement of discernment; and it is a journey of self-discovery before God in the context of one's commitment. When the formee discerns the vocation, he/she recognises Christ as the source of life; it also means that one recognises a certain special meaning in life. Throughout the Bible we are taught that God calls us from the moment of our birth and he continues to inspire us till the moment of our death.

The present day society gives rise to a new phase in the concept of vocation. The 'vocation-crisis', which the church faces today, implies a certain kind of emergency in our formation programmes. In other words, the so-

called vocation crisis invites us to evaluate whether our formation programme is relevant to the needs of the time. Those who are responsible for formation in different stages must make sure that the formation programme helps the formee to become worthy disciples of Jesus. In this perspective, this book gives ample guidelines, examples, and reflections to those who are engaged in formation to substantiate their formation programmes.

The formator is not simply a leader or animator, but he/she has a primordial responsibility to guide, motivate and enable the formee to reach his/her destination. Thus the formator needs to share and give witness to his/her own

mission and vision. Only by personal accompaniment, the formator can help those in formation to grow in their commitment. Hence, it is very important to spend enough time and energy with them. In any case, the formator has to be convinced of his/her personal vocation and he/she has to be enthusiastic about it.

This book is written in a simple language, with ample explanations, substantiating the points with their theological and biblical background. This book is recommended to all those who are involved directly or indirectly in the ministry of formation. The author deserves our applause as he has succeeded in bringing out his ideas and vision in a clear, yet creative way.

THE WORD OF GOD AND THE CONSECRATED LIFE

(Extract from the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*
on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church: 30 September, 2010)

With regard to the consecrated life, the Synod first recalled that it “is born from hearing the word of God and embracing the Gospel as its rule of life”.¹ A life devoted to following Christ in his chastity, poverty and obedience thus becomes “a living ‘exegesis’ of God’s word”.² The Holy Spirit, in whom the Bible was written, is the same Spirit who illumines “the word of God with new light for the founders and foundresses. Every charism and every rule springs from it and seeks to be an expression of it”,³ thus opening up new pathways of Christian living marked by the radicalism of the Gospel.

Here I would mention that the great monastic tradition has always considered meditation on sacred Scripture to be an essential part of its specific spirituality, particularly in the form of *lectio divina*. Today too, both old and new expressions of special consecration are called to be genuine schools of the spiritual life, where the Scriptures can be read according to the

Holy Spirit in the Church, for the benefit of the entire People of God. The Synod therefore recommended that communities of consecrated life always make provision for solid instruction in the faith-filled reading of the Bible.⁴

Once again I would like to echo the consideration and gratitude that the Synod expressed with regard to those forms of *contemplative life* whose specific charism is to devote a great part of their day to imitating the Mother of God, who diligently pondered the words and deeds of her Son (cf. *Lk* 2:19, 51), and Mary of Bethany, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened attentively to his words (cf. *Lk* 10:38). I think in particular of monks and cloistered nuns, who by virtue of their separation from the world are all the more closely united to Christ, the heart of the world. More than ever, the Church needs the witness of men and women resolved to “put nothing before the love of Christ”.⁵ The world today is often excessively caught up in outward activities and risks losing

its bearings. Contemplative men and women, by their lives of prayer, attentive hearing and meditation on God's Word, remind us that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (cf. *Mt* 4:4). All the faithful, then, should be clearly conscious that this form of life "shows today's world what is most important, indeed, the one thing necessary: there is an ultimate reason which makes life worth living, and that is God and his inscrutable love".⁶

Endnotes

¹ *Propositio* 24.

² Benedict XVI, *Homily for the World Day of Consecrated Life* (2 February 2008): AAS 100 (2008), 133; cf.

John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), 82: AAS 88 (1996), 458-460.

³ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life, Instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (19 May 2002), 24: *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 21, No. 447.

⁴ Cf. *Propositio* 24.

⁵ Saint Benedict, *Rule*, IV, 21: SC 181, 456-458.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Address at Heiligenkreuz Abbey* (9 September 2007): AAS 99 (2007), 856.

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