

S A N Y A S A

Journal of Consecrated Life



SANYASA

JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Vol. XVIII, No. 1

January – June 2023

SANYASA
Institute of Consecrated Life
Carmelaram Post, Bangalore – 560 035, Karnataka, India

SANYASA Journal of Consecrated Life

A biannual published by Sanyasa: Institute for Consecrated Life, Bangalore, managed by the Claretian Missionaries, in view of fostering theological reflection on the life and mission of consecrated life in all its aspects, and in its essential relationship with other forms of Christian life in the Church, with specific reference to the Indian and Asian Reality.

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SANYASA: JOURNAL OF CONSECRATED LIFE

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*Published by SANYASA: Institute of Consecrated Life, Bangalore
in collaboration with Claretian Publications, Bangalore, India*

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EDITORIAL

January 1 is an important date for all the Catholics. This first day of the New Year has many significances. Besides the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God and the remembrance of the circumcision of Jesus on the eighth day of his birth, we also celebrate the World Peace Day every first of January. And every year, Pope marks this day of World Peace by writing World Peace Day letter. On 16th December, 2022 Pope Francis released 56th World Day of Peace Letter.

In his World Peace Day message, Pope Francis asserts that there is light even in our darkest hour. He also recalls that all crises are interconnected and that we must not forget any of them, but work for the good of humanity.

“No one can be saved alone. Combatting Covid-19 together, embarking together on paths of peace.” This is the title of his message. We shall present here a few salient features of his message

Remain Steadfast

The Holy Father opens his message with a quotation from St. Paul: “Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1Thes 5:1-2).

Thus, the Pope recalls the words of Apostle Paul encouraging the Thessalonians to remain steadfast. Likewise the Pope writes, “when tragic events seem to overwhelm our lives, we are called to keep our hearts open to hope and to trust in God, who makes himself present, accompanies us with tenderness, sustains us in our weariness and, above all, guides our path.”

Darkness of the Covid-19 Pandemic

After inviting the humanity to remain steadfast, the Pope recalls the darkness of the Covid-19 pandemic. He exhorts us to see light even in the darkest hour, illustrating the Covid-19 pandemic as an example: “The pandemic seems to have upset even the most peaceful parts of our world, and exposed any number of forms of fragility.” He continues reflecting, “the time is right to question, learn, grow and allow ourselves to be transformed as individuals and as communities” reminding us, that “we never emerge the same from times of crisis: we emerge either better or worse.”

Pope Francis sees the pandemic as an experience that has made us all the more aware of the need for everyone to restore the world “together” to a central place in our lexicon. He is convinced that only the peace that comes from a fraternal and disinterested love can help the humanity overcome personal, societal and global crises. “Our greatest and yet most fragile treasure is our shared humanity as brothers and sisters, children of God. None of us can be saved alone”, he asserts.

Man-made Wars

In the context of dreadful avoidable aggression of Russia in Ukraine, Pope Francis is categorical that this is not the post-Covid era we had hoped for or expected. “At the very moment when we dared to hope that the darkest hours of the Covid-19 pandemic were over, a terrible new disaster befell humanity,” he lamented, pointing out that the world witnessed the onslaught of another scourge: another war, “driven by culpable human decisions.”

Pope Francis who even wept praying for the suffering people of Ukraine notes that the war in Ukraine is “reaping innocent victims and spreading insecurity, not only among those directly affected, but in a widespread and indiscriminate way for everyone, also for those who, even thousands of kilometres away, suffer its collateral effects – we need but think of grain shortages and fuel prices.”

“This war,” Pope cries, “together with all the other conflicts around the globe, represents a setback for the whole of humanity and not merely for the parties directly involved. While a vaccine has been found for Covid-19, suitable solutions have not yet been found for the war.” “Certainly, the virus of war is more difficult to overcome than the viruses that compromise our bodies, because it comes, not from outside of us, but from within the human heart corrupted by sin.”

No one can be saved alone

“What then is being asked of us?” the Pope asks, in light of all these difficult times: “First of all, to let our hearts be changed by our experience of the crisis.” In fact, he explains: “we can no longer think exclusively of carving out space for our personal or national interests, [...] instead we must think in terms of the common good.”

We cannot, however, ignore one fundamental fact, he continues: “Many moral, social, political and economic crises we are experiencing are all interconnected, and what we see as isolated problems are actually causes and effects of one another.”

And he calls on all those in positions of responsibility and on all men and women of goodwill “to revisit the issue of ensuring public health for all”; to “promote

actions that enhance peace and put an end to the conflicts and wars that continue to spawn poverty and death”; “to join in caring for our common home and in implementing clear and effective measures to combat climate change”; “to battle the virus of inequality and to ensure food and dignified labour for all, supporting those who lack even a minimum wage and find themselves in great difficulty.” He is categorical in stating that the scandal of entire peoples starving remains an open wound.

Pope Francis finally concludes asking each one of us to journey together, valuing the lessons that history has to teach us in New Year 2023.¹

The first issue of 2023 carries six scholarly articles with the common thread of insights for consecrated life. The articles also offer in-depth insights for happy and meaningful community life. The first article “Rooted in the Future, Audacious in the Present: Towards an Evolutionary View of Consecrated Life” by Paulson Veliyannoor challenges the pessimistic view about the future of consecrated life and the fears of its imminent death, and calls for trusting the Dream of the God of history who calls us forth neither from above nor from behind, but from ahead of us, from the future. Consecrated men and women are called to be eschatological signs; consequently, consecrated life is rooted not in the past, but in the future. We are called to receive God’s Dream that visits us from the future and respond to this visitation creatively and audaciously in the present. Such perspective will help us avoid clinging to past forms of living consecrated life and mourning the death of some of such forms, and be excitedly open to the Spirit who leads us forth in creative fidelity to the Gospel. To argue his thesis, the author primarily draws upon the theological insights of John Haught, supported by a variety of other theologians of religious life, invitations of Pope Francis, and the insights from Theory U from the secular discipline of management.

The second article titled, “Celebrating Life and Mission in Intercultural and Intergenerational Communities” by Rev. Fr. Mathew Vattamattam, the Superior General of the Claretian Missionaries is a timely one offering theological, biblical and practical insights to celebrate life joyfully in intercultural and intergenerational communities. Today, more than ever, we have many religious communities which are intercultural and intergenerational. Father Mathew begins presenting different attitudes found in these types of communities. And then he brings out the idea

¹ Thanks to FRANCESCA MERLO, “Pope’s World Peace Day message: There is light even in our darkest hour” [access: 16.12.2022], <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-12/pope-francis-message-world-day-for-peace-light-even-in-darkest.html>

of culture and the graces and challenges of intercultural and intergenerational communities. He also stresses the need to educate the members to live in these communities. He concludes elucidating the competencies which are required to celebrate life and mission in intercultural communities.

Then we have the third article titled, “Prophetic and Contemplative Dimension of Community Life” by renowned theologian of consecrated life, Fr. José Cristo Rey García Paredes. Quoting *Vita Consecrata*, he highlights the prophetic dimension of religious communities. Then, he brings out the prophetic style and action that are to be found in religious communities. Not only prophetic dimension but also contemplative aspect is essential for religious communities. The author asserts that contemplation is not only a form of prayer but also a way of being and acting in the community “on mission”.

The next article is on “Leadership and Organization of Religious Community” by Fr. Callistus Y.P. Joseph who himself is a provincial superior. From his life experience and vast reading, he points out beautifully the importance and essential components of leadership in religious communities. He sums up his insights into seven images. They are: 1. Widening the Tent of Our Hearts; 2. A Revolution of Tenderness; 3. Hospitality to Strangers; 4. Being Present at the Borderlands; 5. Embracing; 6. Celebrating Our Cultural Diversity and 7. Engaging in Web-watching and Web-weaving. He concludes using another image, the image of orchestra for the smooth and joyful living of community life under the direction of the superior.

The fifth article is by Fr. James Kannanthanam, an expert in religious leadership. His article, “Empathy: A ‘Must’ for Effective Leadership in Consecrated Life” highlights one of the important aspects of religious leadership, namely ‘empathy’. He brings out his insights from many practical examples. He begins his exposition by defining the concept and the components of empathy. Then, he proposes a few practical ways to develop empathy. He concludes presenting a few obstacles for developing empathy. This article is also very insightful for living joyfully in intercultural communities.

The last article is again by Fr. José Cristo Rey García Paredes on the theme, “Problems to Solve or Miracles to Embrace? Faced with Spiritual, Community and Institutional Pessimism”. This is another article related with leadership in religious communities. The author proposes “Appreciative Inquiry” as a model to be followed in exercising leadership in religious communities. He begins pointing out the deficit models that have been practiced many centuries bearing little fruits.

Then, he goes on explaining the essential components of “Appreciation Model” from different perspectives. He concludes stating that miracles can happen in religious communities if the members do away with what is taken for granted and change usual negative language into positive expressions.

From ICL: Institute of Consecrated Life – Sanyasa, we send you a lot of New Year wishes. May these articles enable the readers to live a joyful and fruitful community life with great missionary spirit and mutual love and support.

M. Arul Jesu Robin, CMF

Chief Editor

ROOTED IN THE FUTURE, AUDACIOUS IN THE PRESENT: TOWARDS AN EVOLUTIONARY VIEW OF CONSECRATED LIFE¹

Dr. Paulson Veliyannoor, CMF

After the ordination, I was briefly assigned to a Claretian community at a place where religious houses abounded. One day, as I went for a walk, I chanced upon one of my philosophy professors whom I hadn't met for ten long years. I was particularly pleased to meet him because he was a man well known for his integrity as a religious and dedication to his students. We walked along, talking. Our conversation gradually turned to the state of consecrated life, and he suddenly looked tired and crestfallen. Pointing to the many religious houses protected with tall walls around on either side of the road, my professor remarked, stoically: "Look, Paulson, religious life is already dead; we are merely prolonging the funeral."²

This was twenty-five years ago. Over the last several decades, the state of crisis in consecrated life "has led both casual observers and serious analysts of the life to predict its imminent, indeed inevitable, demise."³ However, looking back and looking around, I am not convinced that consecrated life is dead and gone or if the funeral has taken place already. Had it been so, you and I would not have been present here. But I do wonder if consecrated life has been on a ventilator, far too sick and for far too long. And I presume that many of you have the same concern as well. My professor's remark was a hyperbole; but he did have a point to make.

We are consecrated men and women. We chose what we chose; rather, we let ourselves be chosen by the One who chooses, because we found consecrated life meaningful, attractive, and rewarding. I would like to believe that we have been happy religious, despite the many imperfections within this way of life. After all, perfection belongs to God; we can only keep striving. Yet, we cannot deny the concern and worry we have about the current state of consecrated life. Is it failing? Will it die out? How long and how soon? We look around and see many religious congregations fading out; communities closing down; members leaving; those who

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remain losing hope; and no many new vocations coming in. During the presentation of the latest document from the Dicastery of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The Gift of Fidelity, The Joy of Perseverance*, it was observed that on an average 2,215 consecrated persons leave every year.⁴ This number would go up, if we add the numbers from the Dicastery for the Clergy, the Dicastery for Evangelization, and from the congregations of diocesan right. And these do not include the number of those who leave while in temporary profession. Indeed, as Pope Francis observed, “we are facing a ‘haemorrhage’ that is weakening consecrated life and the very life of the Church. The abandonment of consecrated life worries us.”⁵

However, can a way of life that is “deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, [and] is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit”⁶ fail? Can “*consecrated life* [which] *is at the very heart of the Church* as a decisive element for her mission, since it ‘manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling’ and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards union with her one Spouse”⁷ die out? Can Christ fail? I believe it cannot; and I believe Christ will not.

You might be familiar with the famous nine-dot problem in psychology. The problem presents you with three rows of three identical dots, which must be connected with only four straight lines without lifting the pencil or going over a line again. Now, this problem can only be solved if we break out of the habitual mental set to see the dots as a square, and re-perceive it in terms of a potential triangle. And to do so, you must approach the dots from a higher or deeper point. The nine-dot problem reveals to you how our solutions to life’s problems fail because we fail to break out of our habitual and instinctive mental sets and to approach them from a transcendental perspective. This is what is implied by the famous dictum commonly attributed to Albert Einstein: “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.”

Perhaps the “problem” of longevity and relevance of consecrated life can be resolved if we break out of our mental sets and approach it from a higher, transcendental perspective. My little effort here is to suggest such a change in perspective, a proposal to revise the way we look at consecrated life. I wonder if we have been looking in the wrong direction for far too long; if we have been excessively looking back at what has been behind us, *a la* Lot’s wife,⁸ and consequently, become frozen pillars of salt, unable to flavor the world.⁹ I believe it is high time we looked at consecrated life from an evolutionary, futuristic perspective. *Consecrated life is essentially rooted not in the past, but in the future*; and consequently, we are called to live it audaciously in the present, receiving it from the God of evolution and revelation who calls us, not from behind or above, but from *ahead* of us. We must look ahead, *a la* Peter as he walked on water towards Christ who was ahead, and avoid looking sideways or backwards and sink like it happened to him.¹⁰

Now, this is not an entirely new proposal. Scholars and practitioners have already suggested this evolutionary perspective for theology in general and theology of consecrated life in particular.¹¹ My intention is to build upon their suggestions while also drawing from some core concepts of Pope Francis' papacy and from the Theory U,¹² one of the modern theories of change and transformation. But before we do so, we need to break out of a mental set by revisiting two key concepts that have come to define the reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council – *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*.

Revisiting *Ressourcement* and *Aggiornamento*

The Conciliar concept of *ressourcement* referred to a return to the sources – *revertimini ad fontes* – and essentially pointed to a threefold return to the liturgical, biblical, and patristic sources of Christian faith. In the words of Yves Congar, *ressourcement* essentially aimed at, and rightly so, “a recentering on Christ and on the paschal mystery.”¹³ It acknowledged that “in order to go forward” in understanding faith and doing theology, “one first has to go backward.”¹⁴

Such return to the sources was precisely for the sake of recovering what is authentically true and essential so as to bring them forward for an *aggiornamento*, an adaptation to the signs of the times and renewal. The theology of the “signs of the times,” urged on by Pope John XIII and highlighted by the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*,¹⁵ has been considered one of the central legacies of the Council, and even a new *locus theologicus* of Revelation, making *Gaudium et Spes* the second constitution on Revelation.¹⁶

Both these ideas of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* impacted every Conciliar document, including the decree on the adaptation and renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*. The decree, at its very beginning, proclaimed thus:

The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the *constant return to the sources* of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their *adaptation to the changed conditions* of our time [emphasis added].¹⁷

This invitation to return to the sources not only of Christian faith but also of the original inspiration and spirit of the founders and the institutes as well as to adapt the life and mission of the institutes to the present realities of the world inspired much enthusiasm, introspection, and deliberate action on the parts of many congregations. Consequently, it triggered much renewal, revitalization, and a sense of contemporary relevance. However, it also led to crisis, heartburn, loss of vocations, and derailment of some religious orders. Apparently, there was an overdose of a return to sources and an over-adaptation to the spirit of the times without a sense of balance and perspective. As Catherine Vincie observes, “instead of gradual and steady development and adaptation of religious life that should have

taken place over centuries, communities [...] tried to make up for lost time in a few short years following Vatican Council II.”¹⁸ Often times the return to the sources was also misunderstood as a *return to the past*, leading to what Cristo Rey has pointed out as an “*archeologism*” and “*mythifying* of our Founders”¹⁹ which conflicted with the passion for an adaptation to the present times. Aquilino Bocos Merino observes that there emerged a plethora of words marked *ad nauseam* by the prefix “re” in circulation within consecrated life:

Poniendo como referencia el concilio Vaticano II, el uso de prefijos para expresar el avance del proceso de renovación y adaptación de la vida consagrada es notorio. Pensemos, por ejemplo, en palabras con el prefijo *re-* (revitalización, refundación, renacer, regenerar, reorganización, reestructuración, resignificación, resituación, reformación, etc.).²⁰

The *aggiornamento* ordered by the Council was also at times applied overenthusiastically to the ephemeral spirit of the times that did not last very long. Skewed versions of *aggiornamento* were also hastened by the highly individualistic and permissive social climate that followed immediately after the Council, a decade that was famously labelled “Me Decade” by Tom Wolfe²¹ and in which Christopher Lasch diagnosed narcissism as the core illness.²² The prescient warning of William Inge that “if you marry the Spirit of your own generation you will be a widow in the next”²³ has been borne out in many chambers of religious congregations. Did the spirit of the times blew too strongly so as to carry us away from the abiding Spirit of the Lord? Ignacio Iglesias comments on the plethora of workshops, seminars, courses, and publications that competed with each other to clothe consecrated life in new clothes, and not doing any great favors:

Cantidad de términos nuevos, borrándose unos a otros han recorrido, como un sarpullido, de arriba abajo la Vida Consagrada, en una especie de epidemia superficial, que nos hemos ido contagiando en cursos, cursillos, publicaciones, encuentros..., y que han movilizado nuestros bolsillos y llenado de libros nuestras bibliotecas.²⁴

Addressing the bishops who participated in the Second Vatican Council on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the opening of the Council, Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged the necessity of *aggiornamento* as well as the dangers of misappropriation of the concept. He said thus:

Christianity must not be considered as “something of the past”, nor must it be lived with our gaze ever turned back, because Jesus Christ is yesterday, today and forever (cf. Heb 13:8). Christianity is marked by the presence of the eternal God, who entered into time and is present in all times, because every time is brought forth from his creative power, from his eternal “today” [...]. This *aggiornamento* does not mean a break with tradition, but expresses its ongoing vitality; it does not mean reducing the faith, debasing it to the fashion of the times, measured by what pleases us, by what pleases public opinion, but it is the contrary: exactly as the Council Fathers did, we must bring the “today” that we live to the standard of the Christian event, we must bring the “today” of our time to the “today” of God.²⁵

Bishop B. C. Butler, one of the enthusiastic participants of the Council, demanded that the *aggiornamento* must be “conceived of in depth,” based on a keen discernment between what is eternal and what is contingent when it comes to the nature of Church and the gospel.²⁶ Curiously, in inviting us to appreciate *aggiornamento* in depth, Butler evokes images and analogies from biology and evolution, a perspective that several modern theologians have come to embrace. Perhaps it is time we stopped looking back in nostalgia and grief at the mixed past of consecrated life and began looking forward excitedly and in hope to what is in store for us. This is not to reject the prized concepts of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*; rather, it is to “appreciate them in depth” in creative and dynamic fidelity that *Vita Consecrata* demands of us,²⁷ linking them forever to the future that visits us in the present. As Bishop Butler excitedly observes,

The Church is a fountainhead of unpredictable freedom. The static element in her complex totality [...] is subordinate to the dynamic moment whose immediate source is the charisms, the grace-gifts, of the Spirit of Christ, given—as *Lumen Gentium* reminds us—as and to whom God chooses, whether to pope or humble layman or woman—or, we may add, to a bushman to whom the gospel has never been proclaimed by human lips. The Spirit bloweth where it listeth, and it is impossible to foretell, from the present state and condition of the Church, what her history in the coming generations will be.²⁸

The same holds good for consecrated life too that is at the very heart of the Church. To embrace this welcome fluidity of the actions of the Spirit in consecrated life, we must break free from our habitual mental sets and re-adjust our lens to look at consecrated life from a transcendental, futuristic, evolutionary perspective.

Paradox of Consecrated Life in the Dark Night, at the Crossroads

There is no denying the truth that consecrated life is in crisis, for the evidence is everywhere around us. Human organizations generally go through the stages of inspiration-innovation, rapid growth-experimentation, stabilization-maintenance, and decline-destabilization.²⁹ Authors such as Lawrence Cada, Raymond Hostie, Diarmuid O’Murchu, and Ted Dunn have alerted us to similar stage-wise life-cycle of religious life, with each cycle lasting around 300 years.³⁰

However, Sandra Schneiders speaks of two puzzling features – “a paradox” and “a malaise” – that she has found in many “dying” congregations, features that do not conform to the normal stage-wise transition to organizational death and decay. The first, the paradox, is that whereas “Religious congregations are exhibiting all of the sociological characteristics of declining institutions [...] they are not exhibiting the attitudes and behaviors that such decline usually precipitates.”³¹ The typical attitudes and behaviors she refers to are: despair, cynicism, self-interest, and protective maintenance strategies, etc. In place of these are found the features of

expanding organizations, such as:

energetic and visionary planning for the future, a willingness to risk, permeability of boundaries and increasing inclusiveness, active identification with the poor and oppressed [...], internal unity, a high level of personal commitment of members, and the relative absence of survival anxiety.³²

The malaise she has observed is “the pervasive sense of darkness that marks the day-to-day experience of many individual Religious and even of congregations [...], a darkness which is not gloom, pessimism, or self-pity. It can only be called suffering.”³³

Schneiders finds a resolution of these puzzling observations in the view of Constance FitzGerald that the current cultural and civilizational impasse and darkness that the entire world is undergoing may be understood in terms of the Sanjuanist category of the Dark Night in which active and passive purification is happening for the imminent birth of something nobler.³⁴ *Consecrated life is not dying; it is at the crossroads of a mutation into a newer form.* Ted Dunn who has worked with religious orders for more than 40 years observes as much: the crossroads where consecrated life presently finds itself is a “graced crossroads” where a “deep change” is awaiting her. “Religious Life is not dying. It is transforming just as it has through many lifecycle changes since the time of Jesus.”³⁵

And we know that this is true: Through the letters of St. Paul, we have the intimations of rudimentary forms of a life of consecration in those groups of women dedicated to prayer and charity. Down through the centuries, it has evolved and mutated many times through the life of desert fathers and mothers, reforms of Pachomius and Basil, monastic form of life, mendicant orders, lay associations or third orders, institutes of simple and solemn vows, secular institutes, societies of apostolic life, and many newer forms.³⁶ “How can we not recall with gratitude to the Spirit *the many different forms of consecrated life* which he has raised up throughout history and which still exist in the Church today?”, asks *Vita Consecrata* rhetorically.³⁷ If so, how can we not gratefully trust this Spirit to raise up newer forms of consecrated life in the years to come and not prepare ourselves to evolve into those forms? As José Cristo Rey García Paredes never fails to remind us that we live in the times of the Spirit and we need to re-situate consecrated life within the creedal proclamation “*I believe in the Holy Spirit*” and hence, in the Mission of the Spirit who calls us towards greater evolution.³⁸

Fore-visioning Consecrated Life from an Evolutionary Futurity

Reflecting on the prophetic nature of consecrated life, Saverio Cannistrà, former superior general of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, calls for a deepening of the theological reflection on consecrated life, specifically in terms of its eschatological

character that gives priority to time over space, to discontinuity over continuity, to formation over conservation, to expectation of a coming over nostalgia for the past.³⁹

Vita Consecrata affirms that by its very essence, consecrated life is eschatological,⁴⁰ tending towards the futuristic dimension of our faith. Yet, Cannistrà observes that theologians of consecrated life have not fully explored the rootedness of the prophetic character of consecrated life in its eschatological force, which, according to him, is “its strongest trait for an *ad intra* and *ad extra* renewal.”⁴¹ Consecrated life must be understood in terms of an *anticipatory future*. It has its one foot ahead of the times. The very eschatological nature of consecrated life invites it to be rooted in the future. The treasure of the Church is Jesus Christ, our Pasch and Living Bread.⁴² “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:21); and hence, consecrated life, which is at the heart of the Church, is and must be invested in the Risen Christ who comes to meet us from ahead. Therefore, our face, as consecrated men and women, must be set towards Jerusalem as was that of the historical Jesus (cf. Lk 9:51), receiving our present from the future.

God Who Calls Us from Ahead: Metaphysics of the Future

With an ecclesial climate more receptive of to the insights of evolutionary science, especially to the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) who perceived human being as evolution-conscious-of-itself and the entire creation as purposefully evolving towards Christ, the Omega Point, for union with God,⁴³ several modern theologians are beginning to advocate an evolutionary approach to Christian life. And they are in good company, for, St. Paul has affirmed unequivocally that the entire creation is teleological, groaning as in childbirth and longing for fulfilment (cf. Rom 8:19-22). Theologian John Haught argues that a unique feature of the biblical religions is this “ultimate futurity of reality,” the linear, upward perspective of history, as against the earth-bound cyclical-repetitive perspective of primitive religions.⁴⁴

What this means is that the God of the Bible is a *God of the Promise*, a promise that lies ahead. Abraham experiences a call to leave his then place and state of life towards a promise to be fulfilled in the future. God calls Abraham not from above or behind, but from *ahead*. Transcendence of the biblical God is to be understood not in spatial sense, but in temporal sense, in the sense that God is before and ahead of us, as Hans Küng has argued.⁴⁵

The promise that comes from this God who is ahead of us is, in fact, “troubling because it demands of us a willingness to let go of the present as well as to forsake our tendency to define reality only on the basis of what has already happened in the past.”⁴⁶ Yet, the promise is so compelling because it is gratuitous, extravagant, and

pleasantly surprising; and hence, generates hope in the one thus called. “Promise is the *form* of revelation, and hope is the indispensable attitude for the *reception* of revelation”⁴⁷ and “hope is a radical, unquestioning openness to the breaking in of God’s future.”⁴⁸ It is this future-oriented openness that Ilia Delio wants the Church to embrace in authentic catholicity which is “a consciousness of the whole order of things,” being “aware of belonging to a whole and act according to the whole.”⁴⁹ This openness is a radical openness to Christ who is the Alpha and Omega of evolution. “To be engaged in the mystery of Christ is to be caught up in the Spirit of new life, creativity, imagination, and openness to the future.”⁵⁰

Haught, therefore, argues that catholic theology must move away from a metaphysics of the past as well as from a metaphysics of the eternal present towards a metaphysics of the future.⁵¹ This is not because the past is dead or the present is bad; on the contrary, the past and the present are to be understood only in terms of the future that is forever beckoning us and towards which we are evolving. If metaphysics of the past is an “ontology of death,” metaphysics of the eternal present forecloses the possibility of becoming; on the other hand, metaphysics of the future is an *ontology of resurrection*, a life that is ever new. Christians are a people of the resurrection. It is this forward striving of Christian life that Saint Paul referred to when he stated that forgetting what lay behind he was straining forward to what lay ahead (cf. Phil 3:13-14), on which Saint Gregory of Nyssa based his concept of *epektasis* (επεκτασις),⁵² “an unceasing progress into virtue and the knowledge of God; Christian life is about a continuous climb towards perfection whose boundaries are limitlessness.”⁵³ Our call as Christians is to rest on this future and, anchoring our hope in it, to keep working in the present as “our action in the world matters” as “it contributes both to the deeper incarnation of God and to the redemptive gathering of the whole world, and not just human souls, into the body of Christ,” as envisaged in the Pauline vision for the world (cf. Col 1:13-20; Eph 1:9-10).⁵⁴

This is precisely the mission of the consecrated: to rest on the future and model for the world how to live, receiving from the future. Referring to the future direction consecrated life must take, O’Murchu comments:

The direction of evolution takes shape primarily in response to *the lure of the future*, not merely solidifying what has served us well in the past. Theologically, I understand that the central attraction of the lure of the future is a fruit and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵

Ted Dunn warns the consecrated that the old forms of dealing with change and *aggiornamento* do not work anymore. According to him, these old forms are: Merely making improved versions of the past, focusing on cosmetic and organizational external change instead of deep inner work, trying harder rather than differently, playing it safe by avoiding daring innovations, incremental rather than deep change, avoiding bad instead of creating something good, downloading old patterns and

systems rather than creating new operating systems.⁵⁶ We cannot cross a chasm in small steps; we need an evolutionary leap to transform consecrated life. O’Murchu identifies the characteristics of an evolutionary perspective: aliveness, emergence, paradox, lateral thinking, consciousness, spirituality, and discernment.⁵⁷ Dunn proposes five elements that can help consecrated life to evolve successfully:

Shifts in consciousness: creating a new narrative; reclaiming our inner voice: the seat and source of everything that lives; reconciliation and conversion: the womb of our becoming; experimentation and learning: acting our way into new way of being; transformative visioning: gather the wisdom, weave a dream.⁵⁸

Planting our roots in the future and receiving nutrition from the eschatological truth of consecrated life is the shift in consciousness, the new narrative that we need as the consecrated. It helps us let us go of the modes of being that do not work anymore and be “intellectually open and adaptable as possible” as *Vita Consecrata* invites us to be,⁵⁹ to allow ourselves to evolve. “*It is pain that brings us to a graced crossroads, but is Love that pulls us through.*”⁶⁰ And this Love is a person, the Risen Christ who calls us from ahead with the Promise that he will make all things new (cf. Rev 21:5). This is the *ressourcement* we need, for the source lies not behind, but ahead. And this is the *aggiornamento* we must embrace, updating ourselves today receiving from the future.

Let Us Dream: Pope Francis’s Call to Rest on the Future

No reflection is complete without drawing from the inspiring and prophetic papacy of Pope Francis. Three favored words of Francis – dream, discernment, and peripheries – underline the argument of being rooted in the future.⁶¹ As Haught observes, biblical faith actively encourages dreaming about the future because “the future has not yet fully arrived, it can come into our lives now only on the wings of dreams and imaginings.”⁶² The capacity to dream is a gift of the Spirit of God who calls us from ahead of us, as he promised prophet Joel: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28).

This is especially so when we are met with crisis. Crises are not moments to despair; they are moments to dream *with God*. This is the message that Pope Francis gave to the world during the covid-19 pandemic times, through his book *Let Us Dream*. Referring to his own three crises as “covid-moments,” the Pope commented: “Sometimes the uprooting can be a healing or a radical makeover.”⁶³ He observes:

Some respond to the suffering of a crisis with a shrug. They say, “God made the world that way, that’s just how it is.” But such a response misinterprets God’s creation as static, when it’s a dynamic process. The world is always *being made*. Paul in his Letter to the Romans 8:22 says creation is groaning from birth pangs.⁶⁴

We can so dream because time belongs to God, this is especially so with regards the future time that is safe in the mind of God who has plans for us, plans for our welfare and not for harm (cf. Jer 29:11). Hence the dream that we dream are not simply our wish-fulfilling fantasies, but God's own Dream for our future. And this calls for active discernment, yet another key word of the Jesuit Pope. We discern, refusing to give in to the present crisis and "the tyranny of the urgent." As Pope says:

Time belongs to the Lord. Trusting in Him, we move forward with courage, building unity through discernment, to discover and implement God's dream for us, and the paths of action ahead.⁶⁵

And to do so, Francis calls upon silent reflection, prayer, dialogue, reading the signs of the times rightly;⁶⁶ in short, to engage in continuous discernment of God's Will.⁶⁷ Since "discerning in the midst of conflict requires us sometimes to pitch camp together,"⁶⁸ where else to pitch camp other than in the assured future that the Risen Christ has promised us? This future is a liminal space, a periphery that the Church that goes forth must pitch its tent and operate from.⁶⁹ Though Pope Francis does not define periphery in temporal terms, it is uncontested that he leaves it polysemous and I propose that it could and must be read in temporal terms too, especially with the world crowding to inhabit the present like fetish and is unmindful of the future.

The papacy of Francis is an epitome of this capacity to dream, discern, and walk the peripheries of the future. When he has every reason to throw in the towel, faced with the multitude of scandals within the Church in general and the Vatican in particular, he goes on, with an enthusiasm beyond ordinary human imaginations, trusting in the God who calls him forth from ahead. His theology and ministry must serve as an exemplar for us the consecrated to live in the present rooted in God's Dream, discerning and receiving it from the future. An image from the 1865 retreat resolutions of Saint Anthony Mary Claret, the founder of my beloved Congregation, can help: "Simile of the compass. One point is fixed in the center, while the other describes a circle, the symbol of perfection".⁷⁰ He further elaborates it graphically in the resolution n.8 made during the retreat he made in May 1866:

I will imagine that my soul and body are like the two legs of a compass, and that my heart, like one point, is fixed in Jesus, while the other point of the compass is describing the circle of my appointments and obligations quite perfectly, since the circle is the symbol of perfection on earth and of eternity in heaven. (*Aut*, p.518)

The fixed point that his heart inhabits is the Risen Lord, whose promise he trusted in and whose dream he bought into for himself and his missionary sons and daughters. I believe this is the way ahead for the new life to be born.

At this point, I must gladly mention that my own religious order, Claretian Missionaries, have embraced this perspective since the last General Chapter wherein

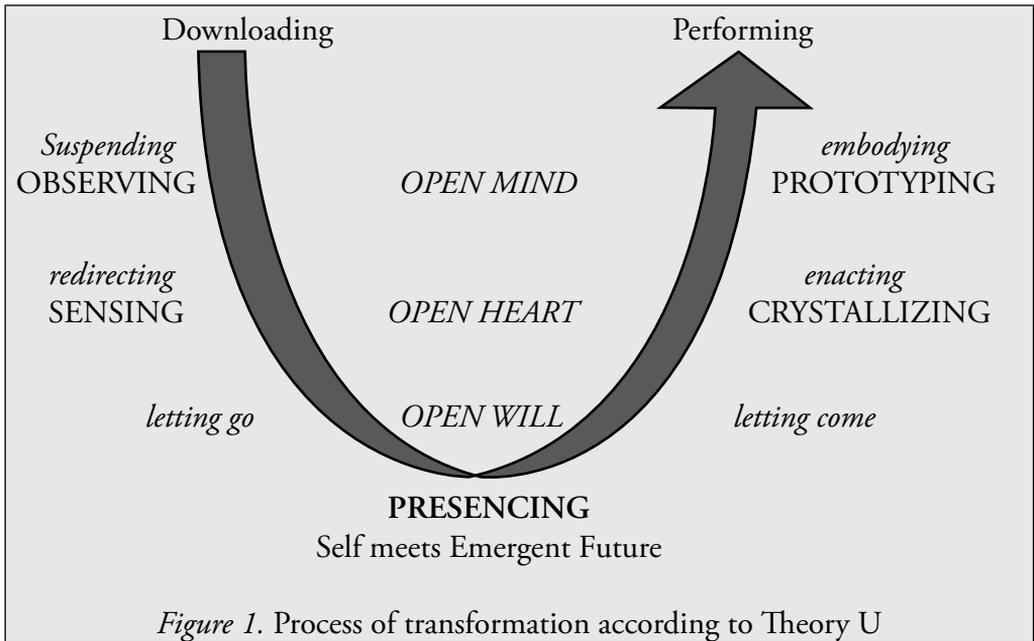
we collectively pitched our tent in the future, discerning God’s Dream for the Congregation through a discernment process that followed the *SAND* method: *synodal, appreciative, narrative, and discerning*. And I hope and believe that more congregations would receive from the future to be audaciously creative in the present.

Receiving from the Future: Insights from Theory U

The secular world is already catching up with this idea of planting one’s roots in the future and receiving from there. In the true spirit of *aggiornamento*, we need to learn from them as well. One of the recent change management methods that has become popular and productive among many business, social, political, and even religious organizations is Theory U, developed by Otto Scharmer and colleagues at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. Scharmer speaks of two sources of learning: we learn by reflecting on the past or we can learn by “sensing and actualizing emerging future possibilities.”⁷¹ The first is “necessary but not sufficient” for transformative change. Scharmer observes:

All traditional organizational learning methods operate with the same learning model: learning by reflecting on past experiences. But then I saw time and again that in real organizations most leaders face challenges that cannot be responded to just by reflecting on the past. Sometimes past experiences are not particularly helpful. Sometimes they are the very obstacles that keep a team from looking at a situation with fresh eyes. In other words, learning from the past is necessary but not sufficient. All disruptive challenges require us to go further. They require us to slow down, stop, sense the bigger driving forces of change, let go of the past and let come the future that wants to emerge.⁷²

The theory is called “Theory U” because the entire process is conceived of as a journey wherein we move down on one side of the U, delinking ourselves from the habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and sensing, all the way to the bottom where, in the nakedness of our being, we encounter the emerging future that meets us in the present, so that we can move up on the right side of the U, prototyping the emerging future into concrete reality. In other words, this is a kenotic process of *letting go* (of the past, old self, ways of seeing, judging, and acting) and *letting come* of an emergent future. This journey is depicted in the following diagram (Fig. 1)



At the heart of Theory U are two requirements: one is *presencing*, which is a combination of sensing + presence. We actively sense the emerging future and present ourselves to it with open mind, open heart, and open will to receive and realize the same. Scharmer defines presencing thus:

Presencing, the blending of *sensing* and *presence*, means to connect from the Source of the highest future possibility and to bring it into the now. When moving into the state of presencing, perception begins to happen from a future possibility that depends on us to come into reality. In that state we step into our real being, who we really are, our authentic self. Presencing is a movement that lets us approach our self *from the emerging future*.⁷³

This is not to deny the reality of the past or the present; doing so would be alienating what we have lived through, the cumulative experiences of a lifetime. On the contrary, in presencing, “the boundaries between three types of presence collapse: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one’s authentic Self.”⁷⁴ What is key to the transformation is that the past and the present are revisioned, understood, and experienced in the light of the *emerging future* that beckons us. The perception *begins* from the source of the emerging future.

The second requirement at the heart of Theory U is to undertake the entire U journey synodally with other stakeholders. We do not change the world alone; we do it together, in a synodal form of discernment. We co-initiate the process, we co-sense the reality, we co-present ourselves to the future, we co-prototype the future

into reality, and thereby we co-evolve into who we are destined to be. In this act of co-opting others, we must not just limit ourselves to our fellow human beings but reach out to the entire eco-system and its well-being. Thus, we move from ego-systems to eco-systems. This goes in sync with what John Haught observes as the hallmark of envisioning or dreaming of the Mystery of the Promise of God that is emerging from the future: this mystery is not only deep, but is broad as well⁷⁵ – it reaches out to our past and present; it also reaches out to the well-being of everyone, Jews or Gentiles as well as the entire universe. If we apply the preferred images of Pope Francis, it stretches up to and embraces all the peripheries of the world.

We can see how well these insights of Theory U apply to consecrated life (see *Figure 2.*) In fact, theologians have already begun to engage Theory U in fore-visioning consecrated life,⁷⁶ and that is good news. Theory U can be conceived of as a mode of living the Paschal Mystery that “all consecrated persons are called to live”⁷⁷ and that “is expressed in a distinctive way in the consecrated life.”⁷⁸ The left wing of the U invites the consecrated to live the kenotic Paschal Death, giving up the excessive fixation on the past modes of being and doing. At the bottom of the U, we meet the emergent future that incarnates God’s Dream. It leads us to the Paschal Resurrection whereby we let come, crystalize, prototype, and execute the Dream of God.

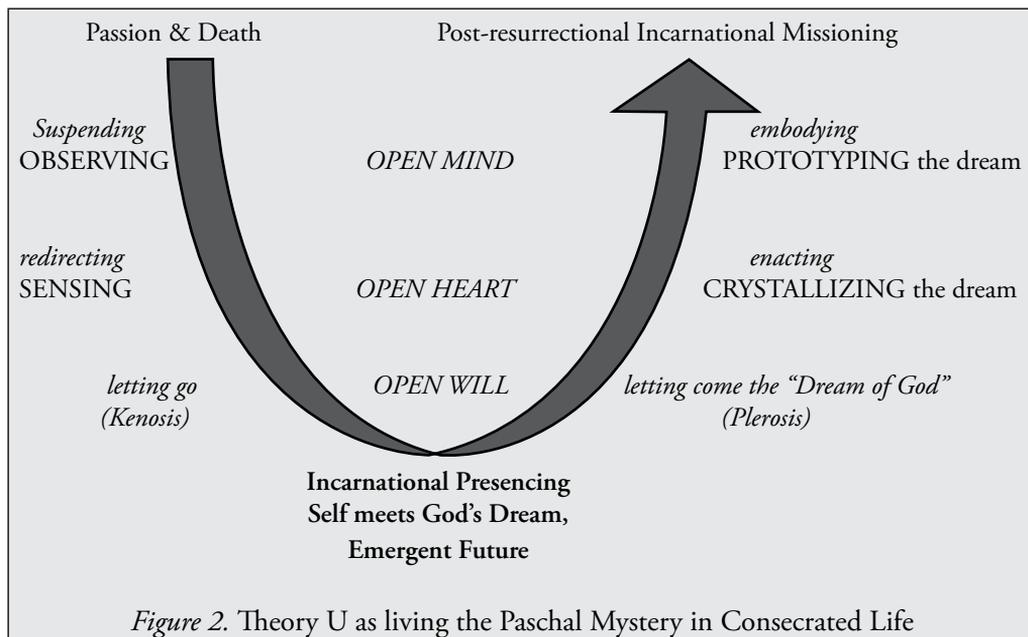


Figure 2. Theory U as living the Paschal Mystery in Consecrated Life

In this way, our being and doing become a post-resurrectional incarnational missioning⁷⁹ that is rooted in the future and audaciously engaging the present. Consecrated life will then truly become an eschatological sign and event in the

world, prophetically modeling for the world how to live with an inclusive catholicity that embraces the center and all temporal, spatial, social, and spiritual peripheries.

Conclusion

The present state of consecrated life with declining numbers, a sense of degeneration, and seeming loss of relevance has given rise to much heartburn among catholics about its impending death and decay. However, there is no reason to panic. The radical following of Christ that defines consecrated life is an expressed desire of Christ and hence, it simply cannot cease to exist. However, down through the centuries, consecrated life has mutated and evolved into many forms. What we witness in the present reality of consecrated life must be viewed from an evolutionary perspective wherein one form of being dies away giving way to the birth of newer and more vital forms of life. Our task is to start afresh from Christ,⁸⁰ who is the Risen Lord, ahead of us and towards whom we are asked to advance down “the paths of time with [our] eyes fixed on the future restoration of all things”⁸¹ in Him as the Omega Point of our evolution.

We are merely passing through the dark night of purification, both active and passive, of consecrated life. “Only those who overcome the distress of the night with the name of their beloved on their lips and his face impressed on their hearts, certain of the bond which unites them, can savor the spirited joy of the encounter”⁸² with the Lord of the future who meets us in the present and with the birth of newer version of consecrated life. The Magnificat of Mother Mary, consecrated woman par excellence, gives us a blueprint as to how to turn our eyes towards this evolutionary future that God is realizing in our present, and break forth into the joy of the Gospel.

I would like to end this reflection with a beautiful imagery given by Valerie Kaur, a social activist, at an inter-religious gathering in the United States in the year 2016. It was a time, and it still is, the United States has been going through very dark and troubled socio-political times. Many in the US were losing hope and panicking. There was pessimism and a sense of resignation everywhere. In her speech, Kaur referred to the darkness that was enveloping the entire society. But then she said,

The mother in me asks: ‘What if? What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if we are not a dead country but a country that is waiting to be born? What if our story is one of long labor?’ And what does the midwife tell you to do when you are in labor? ‘*Breathe and Push*’.⁸³

What if the darkness we live through in the current history of consecrated life is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb that nurtures a new life, a new and exciting form of consecrated life, waiting to be born? We, the consecrated men and women are in a collective labor. What does Kaur remind us

about the mid-wife's mantra to the one in labor? To breathe and push. Indeed, we must keep breathing and pushing. If we don't, we delay and even endanger the birth of the new species of consecrated life that is waiting to be born, as per the dream of God who calls us from ahead and promises us thus: "Behold, I am making all things new!" (Rev 21:5).

End Notes:

- ¹ This paper was originally delivered in Spanish as the Keynote Address at the Inauguration of the academic year on September 29, 2022 at the Instituto Teológico de Vida Religiosa (ITVR), Madrid, one of the six Claretian institutes of theology of consecrated life.
- ² I have discussed this incident previously in the following article: PAULSON VELIYANNOOR, "Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity: A Girardian Reading of Consecrated Life and its Formative Implications." *Sanyasa Journal of Consecrated Life* 5/1 (2010) 9-34.
- ³ SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS, *Religious Life in a New Millennium Vol. 1. Finding the Treasure*, New York: Paulist Press, 2000, 153.
- ⁴ CIVCSVA-CICLSAL, "The Gift of Fidelity, the Joy of Perseverance." December 10, 2020. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVQoL5H0pDw>
- ⁵ POPE FRANCIS, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life," January 28, 2017. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/january/documents/papa-francesco_20170128_plenaria-civcsva.html
- ⁶ *Vita Consecrata*, 1.
- ⁷ VC, 3.
- ⁸ Cf. Gen 19:26
- ⁹ Cf. Mt 5:12
- ¹⁰ Cf. Mt 14:22-31.
- ¹¹ We will mainly draw from the insights of JOHN F. HAUGHT, *Mystery and Promise: A Theology of Revelation*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993; *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2015 (Digital version on Amazon Kindle); ILIA DELIO, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011; *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015; CATHERINE VINCIE, "Changing Images for Developments in Religious Life: From Ressourcement and Renewal to Evolution and the Future," *Review for Religious* 2/1 (2022) 5-17; DIARMAID O'MURCHU, *Religious Life in the 21st Century*, New York: Orbis, 2016; TED DUNN, "Re-founding Religious Life," *Human Development: A Choice for Transformational Change* 30/3 (2005) 5-13; TED DUNN, *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation*, St. Charles, MO: CCS Publications, 2020.
- ¹² C. OTTO SCHARMER, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009; *The Essentials of theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018 (digital version); OTTO SCHARMER – KATRIN KAEUFER. *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013.

POPE FRANCIS, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020.

YVES CONGAR, *True and False Reform in the Church*. Translated by Paul Philibert, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011, 220.

¹³ YVES CONGAR, *True and False Reform in the Church*. Translated by Paul Philibert, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011, 220.

¹⁴ MARCELLINO D'AMBROSIO, "Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition," *Communio* 18 (1991) 530–555.

¹⁵ *GS*, 4.

¹⁶ The first being *Dei Verbum*. THOMAS MARSCHLER, "Signs of the Times as a New Locus Theologicus?" *Church Life Journal*, August 18, 2022. <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/authors/thomas-marschler/>

¹⁷ *PC*, 2.

¹⁸ *VINCIE*, 5.

¹⁹ JOSÉ CRISTO REY GARCÍA PAREDES, *Consecrated Life as a Parable of the Kingdom*. Vol. 2. Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2020, 135.

²⁰ Translation: "With reference to the Second Vatican Council, the use of prefixes to express the advance of the process of renewal and adaptation of consecrated life is well known. Let us think, for example, of words with the prefix *re-* (revitalization, refoundation, rebirth, regeneration, reorganization, restructuring, resignification, resituation, reformation, etc.)." AQUILINO BOCOS MERINO, "De donde vienen y hacia dónde van los institutos teológicos de vida consagrada," *Sequela Christi et missio spiritus*, edited by Carlos Martínez Oliveras. Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 2017, 608. In a footnote, Bocos confesses that these words are now used with a more futuristic sense than in earlier times. He also goes on to mention other prefixes too such as "in-" (e.g., inserción, inculturación, inclusión, innovación, incorporación), "inter-" (interrelación, intergeneracional, interdependencia, etc.), "trans-" (transcultural, transreligioso, etc.), and "con-" (convocación, concreencia, convivencia, etc).

²¹ TOM WOLFE, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening." *New York*, August 23, 1976. <https://nymag.com/news/features/45938/>

²² CHRISTOPHER LASCH, *Culture of Narcissism*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1991, 31.

²³ W. R. INGE, *Diary of a Dean: St. Paul's 1911-1931*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1950, 12.

²⁴ Translation: A plethora of new terms, erasing each other, have spread, like a rash, from top to bottom of Consecrated Life, in a sort of superficial epidemic, which we have been catching in courses, workshops, publications, meetings... and which have mobilized our pockets and filled our libraries with books." IGNACIO IGLESIAS, *Preguntas a las vida consagrada*, 2^aed. Bilbao: Mensajero (2001) 17.

²⁵ POPE BENEDICT XVI, "Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI," 12 October 2012, ¶4-5. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121012_vescovi-concilio.html

²⁶ B. C. BUTLER, *Searchings*, London: Continuum, 1975. See its last chapter, "The *Aggiornamento* of Vatican II" at <https://vatican2voice.org/3butlerwrites/aggiorna.htm>

²⁷ *VC* 36-37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ DUNN, "Refounding Religious Life," 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

³¹ SCHNEIDERS, 154.

³² Ibid., 155.

³³ Ibid., 156.

³⁴ CONSTANCE FITZGERALD, "Impasse and Dark Night," in Tilden H. Edwards. *Living with Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1984, 93-116.

³⁵ TED DUNN, *Graced Crossroads: Pathways to Deep Change and Transformation*, St. Charles, MO: CCS Publications, 2020, 5.

³⁶ VC 6-12; M. JEAN FRISK, "Brief Historical Overview of Consecrated Life," *Marian Library Studies* 31, art. 17 (2013) 11-28.

³⁷ VC 5.

³⁸ JOSÉ CRISTO REY GARCÍA PAREDES, "Teología de la vida consagrada: Líneas actuales," *Sequela Christi et missio spiritus*, edited by Carlos Martínez Oliveras 637-662, Madrid: Publicaciones Claritanas, 2017, 642-646.

³⁹ SAVERIO CANNISTRÀ, "What is Meant When Speaking of the Prophecy of the Consecrated Life?" <https://www.camilliani.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/3-TESTO-CANNISTRÀ-EN.pdf>

⁴⁰ VC 26. See also 14, 16, 27.

⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

⁴² *Presbyterorum Ordinis (PO)*, 5.

⁴³ PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *The Phenomenon of Man*, London: William Collins Sons & Co., 1959; *The Divine Milieu*, London: Harper & Row, 1974.

⁴⁴ HAUGHT, *Mystery and Promise*, 84.

⁴⁵ HANS KÜNG, *Eternal Life*, translated by Edward Quinn. Eugene, ORE: Wipf and Stock, 1981, 213.

⁴⁶ HAUGHT, *Mystery and Promise*, 86.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁹ DELIO, *Making All Things New*, 12.

⁵⁰ DELIO, *The Emergent Christ*, 4.

⁵¹ HAUGHT, *Resting on the Future*, ch.2.

⁵² GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, translated by Richard A. Norris Jr. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, 43.'

⁵³ LIVIU PETCU, "The Doctrine of Epektasis: One of the Major Contributions of Saint Gregory of Nyssa to the History of Thinking." *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 73/2 (2017) 774.

⁵⁴ HAUGHT, *Resting on the Future*, ch.4.

⁵⁵ DIARMUID O'MURCHU. *Religious Life in the 21st Century*. New York: Orbis, 2016, ch.1.

⁵⁶ DUNN, *Graced Crossroads*, 14-15.

⁵⁷ O'MURCHU, *Religious Life in the 21st Century*, ch.1.

⁵⁸ DUNN, *Graced Crossroads*, 18.

⁵⁹ VC 71.

⁶⁰ DUNN, *op.cit.*, 19

⁶¹ Archbishop Desmond Tutu is another tall Christian leader of our times who has emphasized the imperative to receive God's Dream from the future. His peace and reconciliation ministry was a practical demonstration of how to do so. Cf. TUTU, D. *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004.

⁶² HAUGHT, *Mystery and Promise*, 99.

⁶³ POPE FRANCIS, 34.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁷ The Pope began, on August 31, 2022, a series of catechesis on discernment delivered through his Wednesday audiences.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 20-24.

⁷⁰ ANTHONY MARY CLARET, *Autobiography and Complementary Writings*. Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2011, 517.

⁷¹ C. OTTO SCHARMER, *The Essentials*, 20.

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ SCHARMER, *Theory U*, 163.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁷⁵ HAUGHT, *Mystery and Promise*, 100.

⁷⁶ BARBARA KRAEMER, "We Belong To One Another." Conference on Engaging Our Diversity: Interculturality & Consecrated Life. Conference Center for the Study of Consecrated Life, Catholic Theological Union, May 8, 2020; Isabelle Lagneau. "Theory U in the Light of Our Spirituality." <https://rscjinternational.org/intranet/special-chapter-2021/process-u-discernment>; MARIA CIMPERMAN, "Prophetic Leadership and Intercultural Communities: Partners in Peace Building." *Intercultural Living: Explorations in Missiology* by Lazar T. Stanislaus – Martin Ueffing, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018; PATRICK NULLENS, "From Spirituality to Responsible Leadership: Ignatian Discernment and Theory-U." *Leading in a VUCA World: Integrating Leadership, Discernment and Spirituality* (185-207), by Jacobus (Kobus) Kok & Steven C. van den Heuvel. Cham, Switzerland: SpringerOpen, 2019 (Though this last resource is not specifically about consecrated life, but its insights are applicable to leadership in the said life.)

⁷⁷ VC 95

⁷⁸ VC 25.

⁷⁹ "Post-resurrectional incarnational presence" is a term I introduced in my doctoral thesis on the structure and dynamics of the phenomenology of the Eucharist, to refer to the mode of living in what I have termed as the "Kenotic-Agapeic (K-A) position," highest stage of transformation achievable by a human being, which is a mode of living the Paschal Mystery. cf. PAULSON VARKEY VELIYANNOOR, "Transformation in 'E': The Structure and Dynamics of the Lived Experience of the Eucharist". Doctoral dissertation in clinical psychology, Pacifica Graduate Institute, California, 2012, 367.

⁸⁰ CICLSAL, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, May 19, 2002. www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20020614_ripartire-dacristo_en.html#Looking%20Forward%20and%20Beyond

⁸¹ VC 59.

⁸² CICLSAL, *Contemplate*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016, 9 (p.41).

⁸³ VALARIE KAUR, "Breathe! Push! The Labor of Revolutionary Love," Bioneers Conference 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=llrl_Ob0jvg

CELEBRATING LIFE AND MISSION IN INTERCULTURAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITIES

Fr. Mathew Vattamattam, CMF

“But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believed in his name who were born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God himself” (Jn 1:12-13).

Introduction

Many religious Congregations are gifted with brothers and sisters hailing from different countries who enrich community life with their traditions, languages and customs. Many Congregations have already moved from being monocultural to multi-cultural and even intercultural. It also brings with it many graces and challenges.

In a broad sense, all of us come in contact with cultural differences in everyday life as most societies are like a mosaic of people of different cultures who share a sense of common identity based on caste, tribe, language or a geographical unit (country, state, city or village). The generational gap is also felt in many communities when elderly and young religious who have been formed in different ecclesial seasons and contexts (pre-Vatican, post-Vatican, modern, millennial etc.) live and work together. The marvel of diversity among us is the manifestation of the creativity of the Holy Spirit. We humans can take diversity as a threat and fail to benefit from the gift of difference or welcome it as a treasure to cherish and grow into wholeness and holiness. The agony and ecstasy of the intercultural and inter-generational communities enact this drama of life.

In this article, we shall explore the dynamics of intercultural and inter-generational communities and how they can be used to better serve the life and mission of the

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Congregation. Awareness of these dynamics and mindful living of our missionary vocation will help us live the trinitarian mystery of unity in diversity.

1) Different Attitudes to Intercultural and Intergenerational Scenario in Communities, Organisms and Missions

Do you live in an intercultural community with members hailing from a cultural group other than yours? How is it for you when you find yourself living with a member who thinks and acts very differently from what you are accustomed to? Excited? Fed up? Irritated? Tolerating? Confused? Or other?

Perhaps, your present community is not intercultural yet, but your province/delegation is. How does your province/delegation deal with diversity and cultural differences among its members? How is the generational disparity lived in your Organism? Are you appreciative of being multicultural? Is there subtle or strong tension or polarity between locals and foreigners, majority and minority groups, and elderly and young? Do you ignore or overlook cultural and generational differences in the Organism? What are the common prejudices held about the various groups and how do these prejudices affect the fraternity of the province/delegation and its mission? Intercultural and intergenerational communities can have great missionary potential as well as very delicate equilibrium which we need to handle with prudence.

2. Some Basic Observations Related to Intercultural Communities

a) Individual differences are greater than cultural differences

Hence, there can be conflicts and tensions equally in monocultural communities. Personal maturity and integrity of the members are the most important factors that contribute to the harmony and missionary vigour of a religious community.

b) We belong to many cultures, not just one culture

As I am member of many social groups (local, national, ethnic, sub-ethnic, educational, religious, etc.), I share the values, attitudes and customs (culture) of all these groups. In spite of commonly shared cultural values, no two persons from the same cultural group are alike.

c) Conflicts are normal in any human group

Community conflicts assume different cultural tones depending on the members who constitute it. Usually, the conflict is between two predominant groups based on power distribution. For example, locals and “outsiders”. When “outsiders” are weak or very few, the conflict shifts towards people who come from two regions or two ethnic groups. Conflicts that drain apostolic energy can be resolved by growing to higher levels of religious maturity where the uniqueness of the person and the interests of the Congregation are valued above and beyond group-based identities and interests.

d) Intercultural communities favour our openness

In spite of some benefits for mutual understanding due to shared cultural values, monocultural communities impoverish its members in terms of openness to the breadth of God's action in the world. Intercultural communities, despite the pain of initial integration of differences, favour personal growth as well as openness of mind and heart to God's creative diversity in the world.

e) Ethnocentrism is a normal phase of development of intercultural intelligence

Like the stage of grandiosity of early childhood in individual life, cultural or ethnic superiority is a stage of growth in social life. At the earlier stages of development of self, national, ethnic or group identities play a significant role in our self-definition. At higher stages of personal evolution, cultural identity is subordinated to a wider horizon to include all humans.¹ As a missionary grows spiritually, he knows that he truly belongs to God and, therefore, belongs to everybody.

f) Charism and mission unify the members of a community

Without the centrality of the charism, any effort to promote communion in community is merely a cosmetic intervention. A religious verbalized it thus: "I think I can live and work with my community member from any culture provided he is willing to abide by the *Constitutions* to a reasonable degree. But I will surely have difficulty to live in community with a member from my own culture if he does not care for what the *Constitutions* demand."

3. What is your idea of Culture, your culture and the culture of your community members?

It is helpful to explore what you understand by culture. Culture can be seen as a way of life expressed in signs, symbols and customs with its enduring and changing aspects. Each culture is impregnated with a worldview and a set of meanings. Each person imbues traditions and values from the socio-cultural milieu and grows in it in a unique way. There are visible and invisible parts in a culture. When you are in front of a person, you see his/her outside appearance and behaviour patterns, but you need to know the person's culture and background to make sense of what you see outside. An iceberg is a helpful image of culture. Two thirds of an iceberg are under water. If the larger part underwater is ignored, it can make sink even a big Titanic. Using this image, let us do the following exercise:

Draw an iceberg or a tree on a paper. Then think of a known person of another culture. Imagine that person's appearance and behavioral patterns (way of greeting, eating, praying, expression of emotions, preferred food, hobbies, reading, sports, entertainment etc.,). Now make a chart of the culture that contributed to the making of that person. Fill in the upper part of the iceberg. Discuss with the person or read about the culture of his place and fill the lower column of the picture.

The upper visible part

Language, dressing, greeting, hairstyle, gestures, food, eating style, way of praying, music, art, hobbies, reading, emotional display, social communication, eye contact, leisure activity, sports and entertainment.

Lower invisible part

Invisible part of life, human nature and God, relationship rules, Notions of time, views on value of work, motivations for achievement, role of adults and children in family, importance of face, harmony, tolerance for change, communication styles, gender roles, thinking styles.

Each person is a unique image of God, shaped by his culture and also shaping the culture together with others in a personal and collective journey of life. You may develop greater understanding for each person when you respectfully glimpse the unique person, an image of God, whom the culture of his upbringing presents to you and as he presents that culture to you in his unique manner.

It is interesting to observe that even people who manifest higher levels of racial or national pride and prejudices keep their preferred saints out of their prejudices. For example, Saint Claret is not seen as a Catalan bishop; St. Francis of Assisi as an Italian mendicant; St. Rose as a Peruvian lady or St. Anthony as a Portuguese friar. They are intimate friends and benefactors at the soul level. Indeed, men and women of God transcend their cultural boundaries and belong to everyone at a deep level. A missionary by his very vocation goes beyond his racial and national boundaries and embraces everyone in his heart, filled with the fire of God's love.

How do the nationalities or ethnic origins of your favourite saints affect your relationship with them?

4. Graces and Challenges of Intercultural and Intergenerational Communities

In the context of the massive movement of people across continents due to immigration and globalization, harmonious co-existence of peoples has become a challenge. The prophetic role of the religious today has the task of "spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community and even beyond its boundaries by opening or continuing a dialogue of charity especially where today's world is torn apart by ethnic hatred and senseless violence."² Intercultural communities are of special significance in this context. We shall list a few of the blessings and challenges of intercultural communities.

a) Blessings

In the communities where differences are perceived positively, there are many blessings. Some of them are:

- *Witness of God as the Father of Us All*

The Christian conviction about God as the Father of all is affirmed through the living testimony of people of different cultures forming a family.

- *A Model of Communal Harmony*

An intercultural community is a prophetic sign of harmony and communion in the context of a world wounded by ethnic conflicts, racial prejudices and communal wars.

- *Opening to Broader Perspectives about Reality*

The presence of members from various cultures gives opportunity to challenge the limited world vision of a single culture and to open up to broader perspectives in one's life.

- *Better Self-knowledge and Personal Growth*

Contact with people of other cultures sheds light on one's own unquestioned beliefs and prejudices and enhances greater self-awareness. People who have been in another culture with a positive outlook seem to achieve greater personal growth and refinement as humans.

- *Cultural Confrontation and Mutual Learning*

Exposure to other cultures lead to healthy confrontation among cultures that can shed light on each culture's limitations and idiosyncrasies, and mutually benefit from the best of one another.

- *Apostolic Effectiveness*

An intercultural community has richer resources and more paradigms to address various pastoral needs. It is all the more relevant for a multicultural society.

b) Challenges

In the communities, where differences are perceived as a threat, there are various defensive dynamics that drain away the vitality of members and enthusiasm for mission. Though these dynamics are present in any immature community and between immature persons, they assume large proportions in an intercultural group when individuals have a high degree of ethnocentrism. We identify a few common challenges in intercultural communities.

- *Stereotypes and Prejudices*

Stereotypes are generalizations about a group of people that oversimplify their culture. Prejudice is a pre-judgement on a member of an outgroup based on preconceived ideas without any reference to actual experience. For example, when

I consider Indians to be stingy, I expect John who is from India to have the trait of stinginess.

- *Cultural Domination*

In an intercultural context, persons from an economically/numerically/socially advanced group tend to consider themselves as superior to others, and impose their group norms as normative for everyone.

- *Self-Victimization*

One who suffers from low self-esteem may easily perceive discrimination and ill-treatment from others even when there is no objective evidence for it. He may play the “victim” role in relation to those perceived as belonging to a “superior” culture and even perceive persecutory behaviours in them in neutral situations.

- *Cultural Shield*

In intercultural communities, members may defend their personal agenda using cultural differences as a shield. They may rationalize an unacceptable behaviour either by defending oneself in the name of culture (“in our culture we do like this”) or projecting the blame on the difference of culture (“The foreign superior/formator is imposing his culture on us”). When the cultural card is played in times of trouble, it tends to attract supporters and drown the real issues in the “troubled waters.” Group coalitions based on cultural affinities are not rare in times of elections and in decision making bodies.

- *Minority Discount*

In an intercultural context, a member from a minority group may enjoy privileges and attention which the majority group may not be granted. Some mistakes done by the minority member may be easily overlooked by the superiors. For e.g., superiors tend to ignore negative vocational signs when the first member from a new culture is to be promoted for profession. But the same signs in a person of the majority culture would be taken seriously.

- *Majority Group’s Cultural Insensitivity*

The predominant group in an intercultural community tend to indulge in practices and customs of their culture without taking note of how it affects others. This can provoke other members to form their own sub-groups or look outside for affiliation.

- *Communication Failure*

Cultural misunderstanding among members is common in an intercultural setting. The behaviour of a person may be understood by his/her community members using the interpretative key of his/her own culture.

5. Educating Ourselves to Form Witnessing Intercultural Communities

Living in intercultural communities is not easy. Experience has taught us that goodwill and missionary zeal are necessary but not enough to form intercultural communities. There are times when good people have hurt each other and harmed the mission because of their lack of preparation to live in an intercultural community context. Hence, understanding of the group dynamics of intercultural groups and developing intercultural competencies are important for the life and mission of intercultural communities.

a) Spirituality of Interculturality

We need a sound spirituality grounded in catholic theology to live in an intercultural community meaningfully. Our experience of God as Trinity which reveals unity in diversity is the foundation for it. The mystery of Trinity upholds the “dignity of difference” because the very identity of the Divine Persons rests on what is different and their relationship is in the very identity. Father cannot be Father without the Son or vice versa. Father and Son cannot be without the Holy Spirit. Our faith in the Trinitarian God makes better sense when we experientially know that peace, joy and freedom are possible only when love allows each person to be himself in his community. It is a useless and hurting venture to force communion by eliminating differences.

Jesus himself learned to move out of his Judean comfort zones to meet with people on the social and cultural peripheries: the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4), the Canaanite woman (cf. 15:21f.), the centurion (cf. Mt 8:5f.). He even depicted a Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-37) and a tax collector (cf. Lk 18:9-14) as heroes of his parables on showing and receiving God’s merciful love. His apostles were men who came from groups of incompatible differences: fishermen, publicans, pharisees, scribes. His love held them together and engaged them in his mission. When Jesus died the group got dispersed. The risen Lord gathers them together once again (cf. Jn 21; Lk 24). In the Church, the Holy Spirit gathers people of all nations by the preaching of the Good News.

The Church had to struggle to get out of its Jewish cultural baggage to embrace the gentiles into her fold. The surprising and visible action of the Spirit which did not call for the practice of the Law of Moses opened the eyes of the early Church to recognize that God does not discriminate between nations. Faith in Jesus builds community. Paul was very clear about it, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Only a religious who has found his/her identity as the child of God, loved, called and anointed by the Spirit of Christ, can see his/her own brother or sister in a member who is different in age, culture, race or language.

Reflect on this story

A sage asked his disciples, “when do you know that the night is gone, and day is born?”



One disciple said, “Well, when you can distinguish a white thread from a black one.” “No”, said the sage. “When you can make out a jack tree from a mango against the horizon”, another tried.

The teacher again said, “No”. Others offered other solutions but could not satisfy the teacher.

Finally, the wiseman emphatically said, “Listen, when you can look into the eyes of a stranger, and see your own brother or sister in those eyes, then the day is dawned for you. Until then you are in darkness.”

Reflection: When and how do you get disconnected from the foundational love in your heart in the context of community living? What do you do to get back to this charismatic source?

b) Moving from Ethno-centrism to Cultural-relativism, a Developmental Perspective

Recall one of your first trips to outside of your native place during which you encountered people who speak a different language, practice another religion or have different customs. What were your feelings? Surprise, excitement, shock? When a person from another ethnic group or a different country joined your community, what changes did happen in you? What changes did happen in you when you were sent to a community away from your culture?

There are studies on the stages of intercultural development that we go through when we relate closely in other cultures or with people of other cultures. The stages presented by Milton Bennett is helpful to check out our own progress in intercultural sensitivity. He speaks of a move from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism through different rungs in progression. Awareness of these stages through which an individual passes through in his/her contact with people of other cultures is helpful for missionaries to improve their intercultural relations.

i) Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is an early stage in intercultural relations at which a person tends to hold the view that one's own group is the center of everything, and others are scaled and rated in reference to it. A highly ethnocentric person sees his group as virtuous and superior and the values of his group as universal. He also sees outgroups as contemptible and inferior and reject their values. It is akin to the typical grandiosity of a child in its early stage of growth. Everyone is ethnocentric to some degree and it is by becoming aware of our own ethnocentric tendencies we can grow towards better ways of relating with others. There are three stages of ethnocentrism:

Denial: People at this stage have little contact with other cultures and they tend to think that others think and act alike. They believe that they are right and those who behave differently are ignorant. People in denial mode could be authoritarian and insensitive to the different needs of others; for example, expressing disgust about food of other cultures. They stick to their own people and avoid contact with others.

- *Defense:* At this stage people recognize the existence of other cultures, but discount their validity. One's own culture is considered as better than others and the only valid way to live. They denigrate other cultures and assert the superiority of their own culture. Cultures are perceived in competing relationship. People are seen in dualistic terms of "us" and "them", and they tend to surround themselves with their own people and avoid others. Members of minority groups in such a stage may react in an exaggerated way by aggressive criticism of the majority group or going to the opposite of "going native" by identifying with the majority.
- *Minimization:* At this stage people minimize cultural differences and assume that all cultures are fundamentally similar. People of other cultures are not considered inferior or unfortunate, but the goodness in the difference is not recognized. At this stage a community seeks conformity to have a smooth running. One may think that what works in a culture works everywhere.

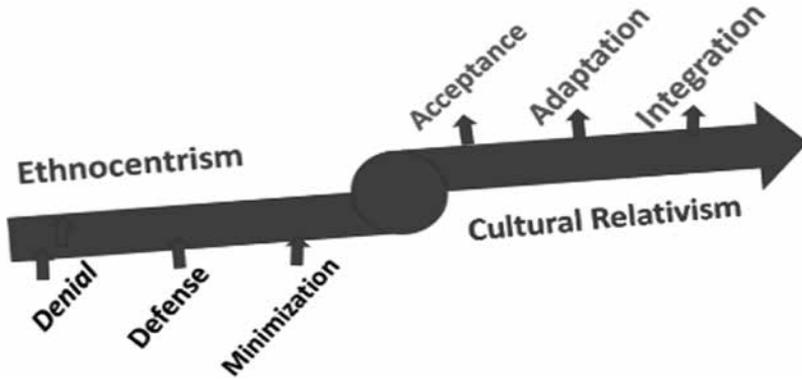
In an intercultural community the above stages provoke various reactions in the members such as group tensions (cultural groups, age groups, ministry groups) and people playing "cultural card" to defend personal interests.

ii) *Cultural Relativism*

Cultural relativism is the opposite of ethnocentrism. “Cultural relativism means that we understand a culture from its inside and look at the behaviour of people from their point of view. Further we respect the differences that contrast with our own culture.”³

- *Acceptance of Cultural Differences:* At this stage we are willing to recognize other cultures and accept them as valid alternatives to their own worldview. Now differences are acknowledged and understood. It is as if we are culturally “neutral,” because we tend to see differences as a fact of life. People with rigid and dogmatic religious ideas take time to accept different ideas as valid alternatives. Acceptance does not mean abandoning critical thinking or ignoring principles and core values. Rather it is more of openness and respect for differences.
- *Adaptation of One’s Thinking and Behavior to Cultural Differences:* We begin to view differences as valuable, positive and often complementary. We look for creative adaptation of other cultural norms to integrate into the new context better. Instead of getting irritated about the apprehension of a member from a collectivistic culture, we now encourage him and affirm his small steps to do things alone.
- *Integration of Cultural Differences into One’s Own World View.* We come to realize that our true identity transcends all cultures and cannot be equated to any single culture. It gives the freedom to integrate the positive values of other cultures into our own world view and relativize our own native culture. We can critically look at our own and other cultures with inner freedom and genuine appreciation for the goodness they embody. As missionaries, we experience greater meaning of our vocation and mission because we realize that when we belong to God, we belong to everyone’s cultural frames of reference. Though we maintain our own cultural identity, we naturally integrate aspects of other cultures into it.

The growth from ethno-centrism to ethno-relativism is beset with many struggles with which most of us have first-hand experience. Personal wounds and personality styles of members complicate this complex process of growth. But it is highly rewarding to advance in this path. We need to keep in mind that ethno-relativism is different from moral relativism. There are cultural practices that are unacceptable because they are morally wrong. For example, practices like *sati* (burning the bride in the pyre together with the body of a deceased husband), killing twins, genital mutilation, etc. are unacceptable on ethical grounds.



Recall your own process of growth towards cultural relativism and see where you would place yourself and reflect on what you need to do to move further.

c) Cultural Shock and Reverse Cultural Shock

It is not rare that we experience cultural shock when we step into a new cultural milieu and a reverse cultural shock when we return to native culture after living a long period in another culture.

Cultural shock is the feeling of anxiety that a person can experience after they have moved into an entirely new environment. Generally, it surfaces within a few weeks of arriving in a new and different cultural context. It grows out of the difficulties in assimilating the new culture without knowing what is appropriate and what is not. We may experience a dislike for or even disgust (moral or aesthetical) regarding certain aspects of the new or different culture. The cultural shock may entail the stages of honeymoon (early excitement), frustration (loneliness, adjustment problems), adjustment (manage feelings and getting familiar with the new situation) and acceptance (settlement to start working on the goal).

Reverse cultural shock (re-entry shock) is experienced when we return to our own native culture after spending a long time in another culture. The changes at both ends can be uncomfortable.

Mindfulness of what is happening and openness to go through the changes together with our spiritual values and a pinch of humor will serve to deal with the cultural shock.

6. Competencies to Celebrate Life and Mission in Intercultural Communities

Breaking and building, dying and rising constitute the Pasqual path to life and love. Here are some principles that can support our life and mission in intercultural communities:

a) Priority of Vocational Values over Cultural Values

A religious community is formed by the call of the Lord to follow him and the charism of the institute to serve the people of God. Hence, we are not representing any cultural group or a country in our communities. Vocational values enshrined in the Constitutions should guide the course of the community rather than cultural values. Communities which overlook the congregational norms (daily prayer, plenary meetings, recollections, community project, accounting, etc.) have more cultural conflicts.

b) Training in Intercultural Competence

We should not take for granted that a good religious automatically grows in his capacity to relate well with people of other cultures and work in a different culture. We need to pay attention to the following:

i) Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence is the “ability to engage in a set of behaviours that uses skills (i.e., language of the place, relational skills) and qualities (e.g., tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility) that are tuned appropriately to the culture-based values and attitudes of the people with whom one interacts.”⁴ It can be cultivated with effort.

ii) Interpathy

Interpathy is the skill of sensitivity for imaginatively entering into the framework of another culture. It enables one to enter a second culture cognitively and affectively, to perceive and conceptualize the internal coherence, and to respect that culture as equally valid as one’s own.⁵

iii) Priority of Inculturation

Our presence in another cultural milieu is because we are sent to proclaim the Good News to the people there. In an intercultural community, customs, language and practices of the host culture should have priority over that of the culture of individual members.⁶

iv) Cultural Enrichment

Creating opportunities for knowing and appreciating the culture of the members is important in an intercultural community. Cultural feasts and presentations are helpful for getting to know the others in perspective.

v) Problem Management

When relational problems arise between two persons, it is to be handled as personal issues rather than as cultural issues. Conflicts and tensions are natural for any group. An intercultural community can grow into greater cohesion when it

is able to handle conflicts by focusing on core issues of conflict to find suitable solutions.

vi) Collective commitment

Joyful intercultural community is the fruit of the intentional commitment of all members. Honest dialogue and empowering conversations can overcome prejudices and stereotypes and promote the best in each one for the common good.

7. The Joy of Intergenerational Communities

It is beautiful for any religious community to have elderly members who enrich the community with their wisdom and experience. They are also reminders of a meaningful evening of life that the young members could visualize for themselves. A community is not a romantic group of young people on a picnic trip, but rather a family consisting of the presence of young, middle aged and elderly members sharing life and mission together in community.

In a consumer society which thrives on the pursuit of individual comforts, an elderly person is perceived as a burden for others. People generally abhor retirement for fear loneliness and monotony. In such a social context, the elderly missionaries who happily spend up themselves for others by doing household chores, hearing confessions, receiving visitors, listening to the pain of others, or visiting sick neighbours are indeed living testimonies of the joy of the Gospel. When health fails, they are missionaries from their sick bed praying and suffering for the Church and the Congregation. Middle aged members need to be mentors and companions of younger generations to help them assume responsibilities with confidence and take up the service of leadership. Thus, they prepare themselves to join the group of wise elders. On the part of younger members, the presence of elderly missionaries is important to benefit from their experiential wisdom. They need to learn to build on the past achievements of their elder brothers and sisters rather than undoing the past to build something new to their credit. The wisdom of the elders is necessary to end the drama of immature missionaries who uncritically replace innovations of their predecessors with their novel projects which would eventually be changed by their successors.

In a dysfunctional community, the generation gap is experienced as a threat to each other's comfort zone. Often the people close to us watch the emotional battle between the missionaries with pain and may even be dragged into this conflict. On the contrary, a healthy religious community can unite the gifts of the young, middle aged and elderly missionaries and assure continuity and the needed changes in mission. We need to "promote among ourselves attitudes, of mutual and loving appreciation, of interests in who the other is and for what he does. In this way healthy communities can develop: Where dialogue occurs, grace is shared,

a sense of trust and freedom develops, the joy of the Gospel is shared, pardon and reconciliation heals our wounds, and no one and nothing (i.e. abuse of social media, the new technologies, and other interests) isolates us from one another.”⁷ The key to build bridges between generations is the willingness to “waste time” in patient dialogue. The elderly must listen to and encourage the young, and the young, in turn, must take time to listen to the elderly. Without this attitude of “wasting time” in listening, we cannot build community.

Conclusion

We are all different and unique but differences add beauty and richness to religious life. When we are able to see Jesus in every member of our congregation, we will be able to say with St. Paul, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of *you are one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal 3:28). It is important that we walk the path of interculturality to reach the level of maturity to consider and treat every member of our congregation as truly our own brothers and sisters. It also requires that we create an awareness of the richness and missionary potential of intercultural communities. We all make mistakes sometimes but we must learn from those moments of failures and intercultural immaturities. The global scenario also changed significantly and multiculturalism is a fact of life in most places. Thus, joyful intercultural communities have a great witnessing value of fraternal communion which Jesus earnestly desired from his disciples: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that *they may all be one*” (Jn 17:20-21a).

End Notes:

¹ Ken Wilber describes this growth as a move from ego-centric, to ethno-centric to world-centric vision of life.

² Cf. *Vita Consecrata (VC)*, Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World (March 25, 1996), 51.

³ EVERETT M. ROGERS – THOMAS M. STEINFATT, *INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION*, Illinois 1999, 226.

⁴ BROOKS PETERSON, *Cultural Intelligence. A Guide to Working with People from Other Cultures*, Yarmouth 2004, 89.

⁵ DAVID AUGSBURGER, *Pastoral Counselling across Cultures*, Philadelphia 1986, 14.

⁶ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate, Rome 1999, No. 53.

⁷ *Witnesses and Messengers of the Joy of the Gospel*, Declaration of the 25th General Chapter of the Claretian Missionaries, Rome 2015, 70 #1.

PROPHETIC AND CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION OF COMMUNITY LIFE

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Introduction

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, the fruit of the Universal Synod of Bishops of 1994 stresses the prophetic dimension of consecrated life.¹ From the prophetic tradition, we know very well that the prophetic dimension is closely linked with contemplation (cf. Jer 1:4-10, Is 6:1-13). *VC* too stresses the importance of contemplation for consecrated persons (cf. *VC* 17, 22-28). In this article, we shall highlight the importance of the dimension of prophecy and contemplation in the community life of the consecrated persons.

1. Prophetic Communities

All forms of life in the church are called to be prophetic. Moses put it very well when he expressed a very intimate desire and exclaimed, “I wish all the people prophesied!” (Num 11:25). Consecrated life is called to enhance — in a humble way — the prophetic and luminous dimension of the whole church. Talking about the “prophecy” of consecrated life sometimes raises misgivings. We, as consecrated persons are heirs to great prophetic traditions. But who among us spontaneously feels a “prophet”? Which community would call itself a “prophetic community”?

It is not difficult for us, however, to recognize that there are prophetic people, actions and prophetic initiatives among consecrated persons and that we are all heirs to a congregational prophetic tradition that we admire. Most of the Founders Foundresses and the first and pioneer missionaries of various congregations extended the mission in distant places, in other cultures, with very few means, and risking their health. Besides, we can also evoke the prophetic testimony of what we call

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“prophecy of ordinary life” and which we have discovered as prophetic traits in some of our own community brothers and sisters.

However, talking about prophetic communities is very risky, even though we know that this is God’s call to us at this time, and in the contexts in which we live. This is also the call of the Mother Church: she highlights the prophetic dimension of consecrated life.

The Second Vatican Council gave rise to this by presenting religious life as a sign that manifests, witnesses, prefigures, proclaims, and testifies.² The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* has specially developed the prophetic dimension of consecrated life in the third part where it presents the consecrated life as *Servitium Caritatis*.³ J.R.M. Tillard rightly said that consecrated life “empowers the prophetic wing of the Church.”

And for this reason, every consecrated person should wonder whether our religious communities enhance the prophetic wing of the particular Church in the context in which we find ourselves. We should also accept the fact that religious institutes do not have exclusive monopoly in their prophetic potential, but rather a “shared prophecy” with many other people and communities. Community prophecy will be possible if we are very attentive to the signs of the times, the signs of the Spirit in the place, and the historical moment in which we are and that calls for a prophetic style and action.

2. Prophetic Style and Prophetic Action in Community

Consecrated person can express his/her prophetic gift in various keys: (a) The prophecy of hospitality or embracing the difference; (b) the prophecy of the meaning of life; (c) the prophecy of voluntary impoverishment; (d) the prophecy of realism; (e) prophetic joy in community and (f) prophetic wisdom and imagination.

a) The Prophecy of Hospitality and Community Interculturality: Embracing the Difference

Hospitality makes us servants of God’s covenant with our land and all the peoples who inhabit it. Without hospitality, religious communities become self-referential and even hostile and violent towards those who are different. Exclusion is becoming the primary sin of globalization processes. Hospitality, however, enables us to welcome “the other,” the outsider, the stranger. Today, hospitality is regarded as an authentic theological category:⁴ its highest expression is seen in the Crucified Son of God who opened his arms to receive us, excluding no one, while we were still sinners and unfaithful to his covenant. Hospitality is missionary, and it leads us to approach and welcome the “other:” those in need, the marginalized, the excluded, the awkward, those of another culture, religion, race and genre. Hospitality to the

“other” makes us more compassionate, less institutional and more liminal. For this reason, we need to create institutional spaces for the shared mission with the laity, cultural insertion, communities embedded in the midst of poverty; and open ourselves up to gender diversity.

b) The Prophecy of the Meaning of Life

If before the question was, how to live according to God, now the question is how to live, just like that? The disconnection with God makes everything else banal. Modernity has de-sacralized the world and idolized realities that it had desacralized. For many people, science is today’s “theology” that explains everything; economics is the god that solves everything; people love money and science. But the new gods are unfaithful; they do not always accompany the human person; they abandon him in despair when he faces difficulties, illness, and death.

In the Consecrated Life, we proclaim that “the gods and lords of the earth, do not satisfy us” (cf. Ps 16). We rebel prophetically against the idolatry of money, sex, and power through our vows. Through our dissenting voice and behavior, we try to be prophets of the meaning of life. Where there is transcendent hope, there is meaning.

c) The Prophecy of Voluntary Impoverishment (Poverty)

Voluntary poverty unmasks “the misery of prosperity”.⁵ Those who seek only economic prosperity do so at the expense of their health, culture, education, and moral enrichment. The idol of the new economy is disgraceful because the rich no longer need the poor to get rich: after the misfortune of the exploitation of the poor, the worse misfortune has come that they are no longer exploitable now as they are already discarded. Money is supposed to free us from our concerns; but unconsciously, it becomes our ultimate concern. To have money you have to pay a high price, which makes you miserable. Who will be able to free human beings from the bondage of economy?

In this context, voluntary poverty emerges as a liberating, anti-idolatrous alternative, as a denunciation of the misery of prosperity. Voluntary poverty calls for us to reject certain things, to renounce comfort, and the accumulation of objects and money to overcome the anguish of death. Also, in the context of the mission, economy has to be ostensibly de-idolized to become only a means. The prophetic imagination will give way to new ways of gratuity, of faith in the providence, of non-market missionary presence, of services not focused on profit.

d) The Prophecy of Realism, of Ordinary Life

Without realism in our life, we become anxious and easily move towards depression. Without authenticity, the utopias and visions lose their transformative capacity becoming spectacular, but not energizing. We need “Christian realism,”⁶

or “prophetic realism.” The principle of reality asks us — on the one hand — not to want things that exceed our charismatic capacity (the talent received!), but also — on the other hand — that we exploit all its possibilities.

In our religious communities, we do not have spectacular charisms or high intensity prophecies. We are groups of pilgrims who, amidst distress, darkness and temptation, make a pilgrimage — with all God’s people — to the new Jerusalem. Being a religious community also involves pruning more than a bit of the edges of individual charisms and prophecies. In our collective prophecy, differences are integrated. That is why our prophecy is of low intensity, which is exercised over a very long period of time. In this prophetic model, realism prevails over utopia, the day-to-day life over any spectacular event, the century over the moment. We may call it “prophecy of ordinary life.”

Prophetic imagination and prophetic realism maintain a permanent tension and contrast. The Jesus of the three temptations in the wilderness is for us the paradigm of realistic prophecy. The apocalyptic Jesus who weeps before Jerusalem is for us the paradigm of utopian prophecy. Both types of prophecy, the realistic and the apocalyptic, have coexisted with tension throughout history.

e) Prophetic Joy in Community

Our postmodern and globalized culture obsessively seeks happiness which is confused with pleasure and is intended to achieve through consumption, waste, and enjoyment of sexuality. Health and sexuality have become increasingly prevalent obsessions. Anyone who does not live up to the cultural body stereotypes and sexuality has little value.⁷ The desire for happiness is greater than the actual enjoyment of it. Anything that does not generate pleasure is considered unhappiness. It is evident that this culture affects us consecrated persons. But in our ascetic tradition, we have resources that allow us to cultivate our countercultural prophecy. We know the art of keeping adversity at bay so that it does not overpower us. We know that not all adversity is a punishment, and that nothing is achieved effortlessly. We know that we can live with suffering and find redemptive power in it. Many of consecrated persons show a happy and blessed countenance, because in them the beatitudes of Jesus are happening. The most fascinating result of consecrated life is when it maintains hope, good humor and joy, in the midst of the tragedies in the world and in personal lives, and can maintain “permanent euphoria.” This does not prevent us from recognizing, by prophetic realism, that this dimension of prophecy is mediated by the prophecy of tears.⁸ The alternative living that consecrated life proposes entails the symbolic passage through Gethsemane, through religious or political judgment, public disgrace or the climbing and falling on the way of Calvary. Like Jesus, we must also weep for losses and in the face of the tragedy of cultures that close their doors to God’s visit. The prophetic beatitude believes that “blessed are those who

weep” because God will wipe the tears from their eyes. Therefore, crying can be transformed to smile and hope, regardless of everything.

f) Wisdom and Prophetic Imagination

There is a growing sense of nostalgia for “wise” men and women who are capable of guiding humanity in times of confusion, chaos and change. Wisdom is a gift of the Spirit, which interconnects and unifies our knowledge, feelings and experiences. The gift of wisdom connects and integrates the three stages of time: past, present and future. Biblical prophecy has much to do with the gift of Wisdom. Wisdom is bestowed upon certain people to enlighten and guide humanity towards the Church. The person graced with this gift not only has the capacity to know about what is happening, but he or she also penetrates the mystery of reality and is granted to “open the book and untie its seals”; he or she uses the “seven eyes” of the Spirit to perceive reality and history; he or she is granted the sensitivity of God. Therefore, the wise person is solidly grounded and serves as a support and guide to others.

He is a guide who sees, who feels, who reflects in himself the wisdom of God. Wisdom is transcultural. The wise are people who revalue cultures, open them up to new horizons and give them solidity. Wisdom is the best mediation to enable intercultural dialogue and the alliance of civilizations. That is why, in these times of transformation, of intercommunication, of mutual dependence, wisdom is an invaluable gift. Prophetic wisdom is a necessary gift to overcome fundamentalist visions, dogmatisms, and condemnatory attitudes towards “what is different”. The gift of wisdom sees alternatives, where there seems to be a dead end, it discovers life where death prevails. Wisdom is serene, imaginative, creative; it makes the unpredictable certain, the difficult easy, the unrealistic viable. Jesus is the Wisdom of God who proclaimed: “Learn from me ... for my yoke is easy to bear and my burden is light”.

We are at a time when religious communities can enhance the prophetic wing of the Church, precisely in the realm of wisdom. The fact that in the oldest regions of the many congregations, members are aging is not a disgrace, but the opportunity to spread the gift of wisdom to God’s people and society. Prophecy and wisdom will lead us to discover the possible gift of spiritual paternity that is granted to us. This is how “our elders will prophesy.” It is the prophecy of wisdom.

Authentic prophecy is to dare to sail against the current in the tide of linearity and conventionalisms. In such daringness is born a change of vision and thought, bring in the grace of an authentic *metanoia*. Whoever has received the grace of such a change, of such an experience, becomes something like a detonation, like an explosion within an accustomed group. The prophetic ministry that we need today must emerge as a new nonlinear, integrative and relational consciousness. The

prophetic community style energizes us to be attentive to the challenges of our time, our places and to give them prophetic response. Some of these prophetic responses could be: (a) the cry of mother Earth; (b) the cry of the poor for justice; (c) the dream of peace and reconciliation; (d) the meaning of life and its care and (f) the new digital and technological continent.

3. Contemplative Community

Contemplation is a form of prayer, but it is also a way of being and acting in the community “on mission.” Contemplation is not closing our eyes, looking inward, and imagining transcendent issues that have little to do with the issues that concern humanity today. And “if God so loved the world that he sent his only Son,” how are we going to contemplate him disconnected from this world? The “mystique of the open eyes” (J.B. Metz) tells us that God is not found “digging pits in the soul” (Erich Przywara), or by moving away or freeing ourselves from the real world, but by relocating to other levels of perception. But how to do this?

The contemplative stance opens us to ambiguity, paradox and the unknown; it separates us from a set of preconceived ways of being and thinking. To come into contact with our God, to follow Jesus and to be open to the Spirit is to do one of the most difficult, but essential inner work. It leads us to love the world, as God loves it.

Seeking God seriously in our real world is a demanding and dangerous adventure. It means exposing oneself to God in a human reality that so often questions and denies him; because God is questioned and denied wherever there is injustice, violence, savagery, death, natural disasters, illness, depression... Dietrich Bonhoeffer sought God in such circumstances — in the concentration camp and in the context of the world war! He found him in suffering; and he said to himself, “Only a God who suffers can save me.” Another contemplative and mystical experience was that of Etty Hillesum, in the last phase of her stay in the Auschwitz extermination camp, which allowed her to write in her journal: “And if God does not help me to move on, I have to help God.”¹⁰

Our consecrated life is contemplative when it discovers God — saddened, suffering, marginalized, discarded — in the victims; when identified with the Crucified one it cries out “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me”; it is contemplative when it discovers divine energy everywhere, around us and through everything: as a personal dynamic manifested in reciprocity, creativity, inclusion, and hospitality. In us, that energy is embodied. Everything is part of the mystery of how God is bringing them to birth from all eternity because he is “eternal father – eternal mother”. God’s energy is always working on behalf of creation.¹¹ A contemplative is the one who feels grounded in God, incorporated into Jesus

Christ, and allows the Holy Spirit to breathe and move through him/her. The desire to live more contemplatively is the work of the Spirit.

Contemplation opens our hearts to listening to “the others” for truth, without focusing on what we would like to hear or receive from them. In the contemplative space, we do not seek to control the other. We discover that we do not always have the best response to what challenges us. When we choose to become more contemplative, we become more capable of realizing the differences and understand them, without putting a derogatory label on them. One learns to “deny oneself,” (Mt 16:24) which is an indispensable condition for following Jesus.

We live at a rapid pace, with so much frenzy, that we are unable to contemplate for lack of personal and collective time. Contemplation requires time and we don't have it! Ordinarily we “react” to situations, but we do not “respond” because we say we do not have time. We do not enter into the space of contemplation because we are afraid of being paralyzed, without activity, without love of work because we are afraid of being paralyzed, without activity, without doing any “work”. And yet, the truth is that authentic contemplation is a source of creative and generative capacity. Mystics and contemplatives know that true contemplation ends in action and that often action is more radical because it has its roots in contemplation.

The contemplative environment gives rise to “different” encounters in which there is place for pause, stillness, no immediate need to speak or to grab the microphone, but never passivity, apathy, or uneasiness. Contemplation is not about being silent, cloistered in our thoughts: it is letting ourselves be touched by the Spirit, letting Him pour into our hearts and transform them. And this requires a certain discipline. There is synergy when we forget ourselves and listen to others attentively and lovingly.

In Pauline texts, we find exhortations such as “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit” (Eph 4:30), “do not quench the Holy Spirit,” (1 Thes 5:19) so that we do not impede the Spirit from breathing and blowing life into us. The Church is the realm of the influence of the Holy Spirit: “where the Spirit is there is the Church; and where the Church is, there is the Spirit” (St. Irenaeus).

Karl Rahner's well-known definition that a 21st century Christian “will either be a mystic or nothing” applies to every religious community. It is an invitation to embark on the journey towards the mystical so that our life has meaning and is appealing.

4. Liturgical Community – When Contemplation Becomes Adoration

We should not forget that one of the fundamental characteristics of the missionary community is its contemplative and liturgical dimension. It is very important, to be a community inserted in the *missio Dei*, to know God, to contemplate in silence, to worship God, to celebrate God's presence and to seek God's will passionately:

“Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth” (Ps 46:10).

The *missio Dei* that defines our missionary and community life must become the great center of our contemplation. This has a lot to do with the community liturgy. A liturgy configured by the *missio Dei* gives shape, nourishes and it sends forth the missionary community as Jesus did: “As the Father sent me, so I send you (Jn 20:21).”¹²

Sometimes we think that the most important thing in the liturgy is to make it attractive to people’s tastes. Liturgy should not be manipulated in that sense. It is not theatre, nor is it a show for characters to win over people by their skillful performance. In liturgy the Spirit creates alternative visions and recounts God’s loving will for the world and our concrete history.¹³

A liturgy shaped by the mission is passive and active at the same time, as the community of the book of Revelation. By liturgy we refer to the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, the community celebration of reconciliation, the celebration of prayer and anointing to alleviate our psychic and physical illnesses and insurmountable addictions. The community in the state of liturgy is an assembly of Christians in mission with God, partners of the Holy Spirit, who embody the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ The *ite missa est* should not be a routine formula, but the daily sending that configures the community.

The ecclesial liturgy is for religious community the spiritual eco-system — prophetic and contemplative — in which the whole spectrum of life is integrated every day. The liturgical year with all its colors and seasons and feasts is an authentic path of spirituality that we traverse as a community along with all the people of God. The liturgical community does not isolate itself, nor does it separate itself from history. In every liturgical moment the community feels connected to the Holy Spirit who turns the gifts into the body and blood of Jesus and offers them to us in communion — as food and drink:

“That is why we ask you to keep these gifts holy to the outpouring of your Spirit so that they may be for us the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord” (Eucharistic Prayer II, first epiclesis).

It is also the Spirit that causes the “Word” we hear outwardly proclaimed to penetrate the depths of our hearts and transform us. The Spirit is the primary generator of communion in community:

“We humbly ask you, that the Holy Spirit gather in unity all of us who partake of the Body and Blood of Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer II, second epiclesis).

End Notes:

¹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata* (VC), Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II on the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World (March 25, 1996), 84-95.

² This is what the Second Vatican Council refers to in LG 44 when it presents the profession of evangelical councils as a “sign” that can and should effectively attract all members of the Church to fulfill without failing the duties of Christian life. And it also indicates that this way of life has the mission of imitate and represent in the Church the lifestyle of Jesus, and manifest and witness to prefigure, proclaim and show a new and eternal life conquered by redemption, the power of the glorious Christ. The reason for being of religious life is “to be a sign” expressed by seven verbs or actions. The recipients of these actions are the members of the Church, all the faithful, all men. Subsequent documents have highlighted the prophetic dimension of religious life: “In the variety of its forms, fraternal life in common has always manifested itself as a radicalization of the common fraternal spirit that unites all Christians. The religious community is a palpable manifestation of the communion founded by the Church and, at the same time, a prophecy of the unity to which it tends as its ultimate goal” (*Fraternal Life in Community* (FLC), 10).

³ “The profession of the evangelical councils presents them as a sign and prophecy for the community of brothers and sisters and for the world” (VC 15). In the exhortation there is also a broad section dedicated to “prophetic witness of consecrated life in the face of the great challenges of our time” (cf. VC 84-95).

⁴ Cf. HANS BOERSMA, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross. Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*, Baker Academic, 2004; LEONARDO BOFF, *Virtues for Another Possible World. The Hospitality: Right and Duty of All*, Sal Terrae, Santander 2006; LUKE BRETHERTON, “Tolerance, Hospitality and Education: A Theological Proposal”, in SCE 17/1 (2004), 80-103; Byrne Brendan, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2000; INNERARITY D., *Ethics of the Hospitality*, Peninsula, Barcelona 2001; POHL, CHRISTINE, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999; RICHARD, L., *Live the Hospitality God*, OIUMSA, Buenos Aires, 2000.

⁵ Cf. PASCAL BRUCKNER, *The Misery of Prosperity*, Tusquets, Barcelona, 2002. Pascal Bruckner published it in 2002 and won the “Book of Economy 2002” award. The title echoed Marx’s phrase “misery of philosophy.”

⁶ Cf. REINHOLD NIEBURH, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, Scribners, New York 1953.

⁷ PASCAL BRUCKNER, *Perpetual Euphoria (On the duty to be happy)*, Barcelona 2001.

⁸ Cf. A. ARVALLI, “Religious Life as a Prophecy? The Tears of a Difficult Unfinished Transition”, *Believe Today* 27 (2007) 131-144.

⁹ “As we contemplate the situation of the world, the Church, the Congregation, and our own lives in the light of the Missionary Definition, we have felt the call to discover how Jesus walks beside us, to listen to his word, to sit at his table, and to light, to return to the community to be sent back”: Claretian missionaries, Statement of the XXIV General Chapter, *Men on Fire with God’s Love*, n.51, pp. 61-62.

¹⁰ ETTY HILLESUM, *Daily*, July 11, 1942.

¹¹ Cf. ANNA HUNT, *What are they saying about the Trinity*, Paulist, Sydney 1998.

¹² Cf. ANDREW RIDER, “Mission-Shaped Liturgy,” *International Review of Mission* 95 (2006) 352-358.

¹³ Cf. TIMOTHY MILLER, ed., *Spiritual and Visionary Communities: Out to Save the World*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2013.

¹⁴ TIM SUTTLE, *Public Jesus: Exposing the Nature of God in Your Community*, Kansas City, The House Studio, 2012.

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

Fr. Callistus Y.P. Joseph, CMF

“Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:12b-15).

“Superiors should reflect both the charity with which God loves the brothers and respect for the human person and so lead the other members to cooperate with active and responsible obedience, even in virtue of the vow, in carrying out their assigned duties and in undertaking new ones” (*Claretian Constitutions*, 94b).

Introduction

In his reflection on “Authority of Our Major Superiors and Their Consultors”, Fr. Mathew Vattamattam CMF, the Superior General of the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Claretian Missionaries), reminded that “we are called to discern and act ‘according to God’s heart’ and animate the respective organism, accompanying persons, fostering missionary cooperation, promoting creativity and innovation according to the impulse of the Holy Spirit.”¹ Leadership in religious life is not a kind of leadership which vies on power and position to boost self-importance after the model of secular institutions, but rather imitate Christ, the Good Shepherd, who came to serve than to be served and “to give his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11). In the local level, this applies to the governing structure of the local community, with superior, consultor and econome (minister) forming the governing structure of the community. They animate the respective community with clear vision with a sense of mission based on the charismatic gift in the Church.

Fr. Callistus Y.P. Joseph, CMF is a native of Kandy, Sri Lanka belonging to the Claretian Province of Germany. He made his final profession of evangelical counsels on July 16, 1991. He completed his philosophical studies in Arul Anandar College, Madurai, India and his theological formation in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Germany. After his time at the Pallottine Pastoral Theological Institute in Friedberg (Diocese of Augsburg), he volunteered to work in South Sudan. There he accompanied the people on the way to their country’s independence in 2011 and remained committed to peace and development. He stayed on the ground for five years, coordinating the development projects of “Solidarity with South Sudan,” an association of more than 200 religious congregations. Presently, he is serving as the Provincial Superior for the second term.

In our world and society — in macro, micro, and intermediate levels — leadership has become a contested theme. This trend is not much different within the church and religious congregations.

For this reason, leadership has become a favourite theme in the business and various other sectors. A plethora of leadership theories and models have been proposed. Although all of them are not proving to be successful, most or some have been effective because they are based on serious research and have been tested in real flesh-and-blood human organizations. This partly explains the impressive success and effectiveness of some companies in the business world.

Unfortunately, a very little research or soul-searching has gone into the way leadership is exercised within the church and religious life. Governance and modes of governance are taken for granted by those both in leadership positions and in other states. Not much substantial time and effort have been invested to learn from others as to how those effective theories and models could be adapted to ecclesial/religious contexts.

This is not to claim that the way leadership is exercised within the church and religious circles is wrong. The contention is this: the way leadership is exercised cannot be static. Leadership and governance styles have to evolve in keeping with what is evolving around us. What is core and integral to ecclesial and religious life has to be preserved; but it does not exclude the possibility of integrating what is proving to be effective in secular and organizational settings.

How can we imagine leadership at this crossing place, as members of inter cultural community especially “not an era of change but a change of eras”?

We would like to offer some images and reflections to spark your imagination because we know that we do not just see images “but we see through images.”

How then might these images speak to you today as leaders?

Traditionally we have seen *servant leadership* as the model that is spoken of when we reflect on leadership in religious life. But there are other images that could widen our imagination as we venture into the service of leadership in religious communities. They are:

1. Widening the Tent of Our Hearts
2. A Revolution of Tenderness
3. Hospitality to Strangers
4. Being Present at the Borderlands
5. Embracing
6. Celebrating Our Cultural Diversity
7. Engaging in Web-watching and Web-weaving

1. Widening the Tent of Our Hearts

The prophet Isaiah said: “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes” (54:2). This is a helpful image for us today because it speaks of both flexibility and rootedness, unbounded hospitality and secure identity. We are invited not to hold back, to stretch wide but at the same time to “strengthen our stakes,” by ensuring that what holds the tent in place goes down deep.

This verse invites us to make space in our hearts, for Christ and for those who live on the margins of life. In this time of rapid change and challenge, we need to ask ourselves again: Are we really grounded? “Is Jesus really our first and only love; as we promised that he would be when we professed our evangelical counsels?” Have we embraced the vision and values that inspired our founders and foundresses? The Gospel was central to their lives as a concrete expression of their passionate love for Jesus Christ.

It is important that those elected or assigned to leadership roles to take seriously the need to be grounded in prayer and consciously to practice the process of discernment. How are we being challenged by the Gospel today in our living environments? How is our charism being stretched and enlarged today? Does it expand our minds and hearts into radical and sincere living? Do we have the passion of our founder for the Gospel, for the mission? Are we also close to the people, sharing their joys and sorrows, seeking to understand their needs?

The responses needed today are often not found in the big initiatives of the past but instead are like tiny mustard seeds — a word of hope, a listening heart, a compassionate presence, a healing glance. This mysticism of encounter happens everywhere — it is “far reaching, personal and outgoing.” Karl Rahner rightly predicted that the Christians of the 21st century will be mystics or they will not be Christians.

We have seen this mysticism in action in our communities at sick beds, on city streets with homeless people, on the borders with separated families, in refugee camps, in hospitals and parishes with people who are struggling — in fact wherever we are. While the needs of the world are complex and extensive, do we believe that it is the small, the hidden, and the unknown acts of kindness and love that will transform our world? It is the quality of our presence individually and in our community living, that matters above all, so that people can see the presence of God in us.

2. A Revolution of Tenderness

Another image of leadership that is popular stems from the preaching and actions of our present Pope. Pope Francis speaks often about a revolution of tenderness

reminding us that “God’s tenderness brings us to the understanding that “love is the meaning of life.”² We are called to pour the love we receive from the Lord back into the world — into our communities, the Church and wider society. Through this revolution of tenderness and love, the Pope is proposing a humble way to move continents and mountains.

This is the Christian revolution that we are called to lead. It is a revolution in the true sense of the word — the return to the origin of the Gospel as a way forward, a revolution of mercy. In the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all, we should not forget that the Gospel has to be lived by us first in our communities. The role of the Superior is to see that this commandment of love is lived genuinely among us so that seeing us, others will come to believe in the risen Lord.

But in order to be capable of mercy we must quiet ourselves to listen to God’s word and to contemplate his mercy. Then we need to reach out with this merciful love first to ourselves as leaders — for we are often hard on ourselves — and then to become mercy to our brothers and sisters in the community.

3. Hospitality to Strangers

The image of the tent reminds us of the story of Abraham and Sarah and their hospitality to the three strangers at Mamre. Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent. Jewish sources recount that the tent was probably open on four sides, therefore Abraham could see anyone approaching. He was probably not feeling his best self; it was the hottest part of the day and to complicate matters, God was standing right in front of him and then there were these three strangers arriving. As leaders, doesn’t it sound familiar — everything happening at the same time!

We are told that when Abraham looked up, he saw the strangers and rushed out to greet them. He brought water to wash their feet and invited them to refresh themselves while he went to get them something to eat. He offered them food in abundance and then stood near them under the tree while they enjoyed the food. When the strangers asked Abraham where his wife Sarah was, he replied that she was in the tent. One of them said that he would return in a year’s time and that by that time Sarah would have a son. Sarah who was by now at the entrance to the tent, just laughed, she thought to herself that this was simply impossible since she was well beyond child-bearing age and Abraham too was old. When asked why she had laughed, she became afraid and denied that she had done so.

Yet we know the happy ending to this encounter at the tent in the desert — Sarah and Abraham received the gift of new life. The visitors, sent by God profoundly changed their life, creating a future of which they could never have dreamed. We notice that with the arrival of the strangers, Abraham appears to have ignored God,

yet he did exactly what God would have wanted, because of his deep relationship with the living God.

This is part of Abraham and Sarah's journey in faith. It can perhaps help us to reflect on the meaning of our life as religious today. We can ask ourselves as leaders of our communities: Is God standing before us? Because if he is not, there is a danger that the love which animates us could grow cold... and the "salt of faith" could lose its savor.

4. Being Present to the Periphery

Another image that the papacy of Pope Francis has offered to the Church is the image of the periphery. This is not only of the geographical periphery but the existential peripheries that we live in.

Today we form communities of members arriving through the four sides of the congregational tents — people of all ages who want a listening ear, those who are "searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world."³ They are not strangers to us. When they pass by or come to ask for sustenance or just for a moment touch our lives from afar, "What do we have to offer them?" "What is the nourishment that we can give?" "What is the unbounded generosity and (tender) love that is an essential part of our... community witness."

"Borderlands – Periphery"⁴ is a rich metaphor. It represents the multitude of places and opportunities where people from different cultures and contexts cross over to one another in order to learn and grow together. This happens through the building of relationships that gift one another and lead to mutual transformation. This is not merely about surviving side by side but it is a process of building deep connections, celebrating and appreciating difference, committing to collaborate together.

We must provide the practical things needed at that moment but we are called to give more — a radical prophetic witness, of having a global heart; "of being a pilgrim and prayer presence" ever watchful, "making intercession, firm in faith," with God and with the world on their behalf.⁵

Leaders in our communities have to be present to the new life that is to be born in us, the transformation that is happening, unknown to us, in and through these multiple encounters. Have we like Sarah sometimes lapsed into a certain cynicism, thinking that giving birth to something new is impossible? Or like Abraham will we stay near our brothers, listening to their questions, engaging in conversation, feeling called to new responses. In dialogue we find the best ways for our lives.

Religious communities, like the Church itself, is living through difficult times, "the heat of the day." Far from becoming irrelevant it would seem that community

life is perhaps “assuming a new and unexpected role” by showing how to accept and live “the difficulties of the present day with faith and even with joy.”

5. Embracing Vulnerability

These days every Congregation takes the process of transformation very seriously and ventures into the reorganization of the structures. It points to a life cycle moving through the stages of birth, maturity, loss and diminishment, leading in some cases to conclusion. We are living the cycle of passion, death and resurrection at personal and organizational levels. This very process is a call to accept our vulnerability.

As community superiors we are faced with the same reality at the very local level. Sometimes, the question of how to continue the ministries assigned to a community or how long can we do this are raised. They are very real realities of our participation in the paschal mysteries. We have to acknowledge our past blindness and negligence especially where we failed to protect the most vulnerable among us through the issues of abuse of minors and vulnerable come up again and again.

This calls us to a deep humility that creates space for conversion and change. We are called to face the future with courage and conviction that what matters is our presence among and our encounters with the people of today and their needs. Pope Francis reminds us that “we are heirs to those who have gone before us and had the courage to dream.”⁶ These dreams were often born in times of great social need with scarce resources.

Today we seem to be in this waiting time where we are being called to be patient, to allow time and space for the new to break through. Richard Rohr describes “liminal space” as “the crucial in-between time when everything actually happens and yet nothing appears to be happening.” It is the waiting time.

In this liminal space, our local superiors have to encourage and facilitate when they share their insights with one another and listen deeply as we share how we feel that God is calling us; such conversations can reveal the whispers of the Spirit.

It is through our own limitation and weaknesses as human beings that we are called to live as Christ lived. The profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience is “a radical witness to the power of the Paschal Mystery” as we surrender everything to the one who offers eternal life. Can we have conversations about fragility and vulnerability? Do we believe that God is preparing the way for something new in our own lives? In the life of the world?

6. Celebrating Our Cultural Diversity

Many Congregations have moved from a monocultural context to the challenge of multiculturalism or interculturality. How then to exercise leadership amid this growing diversity both locally and globally? We need to ask ourselves a bigger

question: How can we missionaries, as a congregation, as an institution with a purpose, with a charism, bring a positive contribution to the challenge of global intercultural living? How can we as leaders serve this larger purpose?”⁷ The question certainly has its relevance in a world impacted by globalization growing to be a multicultural society.

Now is perhaps the time for us to demonstrate a new way of relating with the “other” in our communities, that embodies a hopeful perspective for future life in the world. We know that the only way forward for humanity is to transform the planet into a more open and inclusive place, based on the values of solidarity, justice and dialogue.

Fr. José Cristo Rey García Paredes CMF, renowned theologian of consecrated life writes, “Our identity is planetary and global. We are citizens of the world... How are we to transform (this) vision into some deep and fundamental convictions, assumed by each and every one of the members who share the mission?”⁸ Our communities are nodal points of a much larger canvas of cultural, historical, and economical dynamics. With that global perspective, we begin to realize that the “gifted diversity” within our local community and our connectivity across the world can make a significant contribution to prophetic mission that we are called to.

Many times, in South Sudan the local people, bishops and clergy — though very grateful for the many ways in which their needs were being met — repeatedly ask the religious living among them: “How do you form a community from so many different tribes living together?” This is why it is important to work together and with others in order to learn how to live interculturally, to confronting prejudice and racism and our ethnocentric attitudes and behaviors. A local superior has to be focused on such prophetic elements of our community living and foster them through regular community dynamics that will bring this joy of living in intercultural community.

7. Engaging in Web-watching and Web-weaving

The Mennonite theologian and peace activist John Paul Lederach has much to teach us about processes of leadership in today’s world. He uses the term “moral imagination” to describe something “which calls people to go beyond things that are immediately apparent and visible.”⁹ He describes moral imagination as “the capacity to give birth to something new.”¹⁰ A person with moral imagination seeks to uncover possibilities not yet dreamed of. Reflecting on his work as a peace-maker, Lederach realized that the use of a “web approach” enabled the process of change in many difficult contexts. The lines, connections and knots which we see in a web provide insight into what Lederach calls “a relationship-centric approach.”¹¹

The art of web-weaving means that we should look at relationships through “the lenses of social crossroads, connections and interdependence.” Webs of relationships create the social energy necessary to provide new purpose and direction. Leaders, Lederach says, need to learn the skills necessary for web-watching and web-weaving. They need to be able to identify social crossroads where connecting links can be established with others in order to strengthen society’s sense of interdependence.

Lederach presents a number of important concepts which can help us be part of leadership at the local level. He speaks about weaving webs, noticing turning points, being yeast and establishing platforms. These concepts have a scriptural resonance. Turning points are those moments of conversion that turn people in another direction. They are moments, pregnant with new life which often arise from barren ground. Isaiah spoke of new life coming out of the dead tree. Here “new things come into existence, old things are reshaped and our ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking and so forth are transformed.”¹² For Lederach, yeast is usually a small group of people who are in the right place at the right time. They create a pull in an organism or in a society. They are willing to risk; to step out and venture into unknown territory “without any guarantee of success or even safety.”¹³

Lederach sees risk as a vocation that involves a mysterious journey that allows imagination to rise up and “carry people towards a new, though mysterious and often unexpected shore.”¹⁴ It means being able to embrace vulnerability and fear. Finally, for Lederach, platforms are relational places which keep groups of people in creative interaction.

Conclusion

Fr. Mathew Vattamattam, the Superior General of Claretian Missionaries, is fond of using the metaphor of a symphony¹⁵ when he writes about the leadership.

If a Congregation is like an orchestra conducted by the Spirit of Christ, playing a piece of amazing grace, each of one has to play his/her part in the symphony in total attention to the conductor who leads the band.

Discernment is like each player tuning his instrument to the music in harmony with other players in total adhesion to the direction given by the conductor. The whole group together creates the beautiful music that evokes a deep sense of harmony, joy and peace in everyone. Cacophony results when each one plays his/her own music without any reference to other players and the conductor.

The metaphors of web weaving and orchestra are powerful images of discernment for individuals and for community. As consecrated persons, we will be faithful to our mission in the Church only in the measure we listen individually and collectively to the Holy Spirit and go forth where the Spirit leads us.

End Notes:

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- ² FRANCESCA MERLO, “Pope on Theology of Tenderness: Faith is the Connection”, In Vatican News, Pope Francis meets participants at a conference titled “The theology of tenderness” on 13th September 2018 [access: 06.12.2022], <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-09/pope-francis-theology-tenderness-conference-rome-audience.html>
- ³ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*. For the Induction of the Year of Faith, Rome 2011, no. 13.
- ⁴ POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, Rome 2013, no. 20-24.
- ⁵ CICLSAL, *Keep Watch*. A letter to Consecrated Men and Women Journeying in the Footsteps of God, Vatican 2014.
- ⁶ POPE FRANCIS, “Homily on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. XXI World of Consecrated Life”, Vatican 2017 [access: 07.12.22], https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html
- ⁷ MATHEW VATTAMATTAM, “My Spirit is for All the World. Called and Sent as Missionaries in an Intercultural World”. Circular Letter of the Superior General of the Claretian Missionaries, Rome 2019.
- ⁸ JOSÉ CRISTO REY GARCÍA PAREDES, *Another Community is Possible! Under the Leadership of the Spirit*. Claretian Publications, Madrid 2018.
- ⁹ JOHN PAUL LEDERACH, *Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford University Press, New York 2004.
- ¹⁰ JOHN PAUL LEDERACH, *Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, 27.
- ¹¹ JOHN PAUL LEDERACH, *Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, 78.
- ¹² MARK JOHNSON, *Moral Imagination. Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1993, 212.
- ¹³ JOHN PAUL LEDERACH, *Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, 39.
- ¹⁴ JOHN PAUL LEDERACH, *Moral Imagination. The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, 48.
- ¹⁵ MATHEW VATTAMATTAM, *Claretian Community: Walking forth in the Spirit of Christ*, Rome 2019.

EMPATHY: A 'MUST' FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN CONSECRATED LIFE

Dr. James Kannanthanam, CMF

Sometimes people take the freedom to walk across the compound of our institute to go other side or for a leisure walk. While walking with another priest, I saw a lady sitting quietly on the wayside in front of our building. I reminded her that it is a private property. She immediately apologized and told me that her son felt giddy and wanted a bit of time to relax and they would leave soon. We saw the boy a bit away, sitting with his head on his arms. The other priest reached to him and asked him whether he could provide him a little water or something. I was impressed by the way this priest was empathic to the boy and responding with such understanding. It should have been on the next day or so, I spotted in the same place two boys in shabby cloths around the same age of the other boy. Even as I started to enquire why they were sitting there, the one who was walking with me, another priest, summarily dealt with them and they had to leave the place immediately. He turned to me said, "These are rogues. They come here to steal or they are drug addicts." He might be true as well — not long back we had lost certain valuables from our chapel. But I was feeling uncomfortable at heart, not only for those boys who were chased away but also wondering about the way we religious and priests often deal with people. What prompts me to explore the theme of empathy is also from my experiences in the counselling and therapy, coming to know how many people in authority show little understanding for those they were called to care about. Even when they are good at heart and desiring the good of the community, often they fail to show understanding to their own members. A bit of sensitivity and empathy can make a big difference in the atmosphere of the community.

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Let us take a few examples that we come across often:

Sr. A is a newly professed sister appointed in a community with multiple tasks. She feels ill-equipped and diffident. Overwhelmed with many things to do and demands from different members for help, she expresses her difficulty to the superior. But the superior's response is, "You have only complaints to make. You think that no one else has done these works before you." Instead of trying to understand her predicament and empathizing with the junior sister, the superior makes her feel helpless and miserable.

Sr. B is burdened with so much work all the time that she hardly finds time even for prayer or sleep. She being a person who cannot say 'No', finds that she takes upon herself many works that others could have done by themselves. She feels that her vocation itself is at stake. She asks the provincial to relieve her from the assignment and to be away for a renewal course to find some time for reflection and prayer. But the provincial, preoccupied with the amount of work Sr. B was doing is concerned about the difficulty to find another one with the same commitment and forces her to continue the work. Eventually Sr. B falls sick. But for the superior the work to be done is more important than empathizing with the sister under pressure.

Another superior with her insecurities and complexes has to remind the subordinates, "I am the superior" or "I am much senior to you, how do you dare to speak..." The superior here makes no effort to listen to the other having felt threatened of her authority and tries to enforce obedience by reminding the others of her own position and authority legally vested on her. She can hardly give ears to the ideas and opinions counter to her own.

Yet another superior's comment is, "You bring shame to us. Congregation spends so much for your studies, and you get this result!" Instead of trying to understand what efforts and struggles the person has gone through and encourage her with hope, the superior here adds to the feeling of worthlessness the sister is experiencing with her poor results despite all her hard work.

A formator shouts at his formee who failed to put off the pump as he slept off, "Idiot! You are irresponsible. See how much water is lost." The formee getting this reprimand from the formator thinks of leaving the congregation. His thought was about the sleepless nights he spent providing water for the community, and for just one failure, his formator got so much wild!

Coming from a culture where there is no inhibition to interact freely with the complementary sex, Sr. C is surprised how others in the place she is assigned now are greatly bothered about the freedom with which she is interacting with everyone. Superior reprimands her as if she has done a great mistake. And Sr. C thinks of leaving the congregation.

In all these cases, the superiors are either focused on their own mindset, the work to be done or their own power and position. They failed to place themselves in the experience of the other and to make an effort to see how it is experienced by the other. Empathy is all about placing yourself in the experience of the other and to see and experience things as the other experiences it and then accompany him or her to better ways of coping with the situation. Capacity for empathy is, no doubt, an essential quality not only for those in authority, but for every religious and priest.

Definition

Webster dictionary defines empathy as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner”. It distinguishes empathy from sympathy: Sympathy implies sharing (or having the capacity to share) the feelings of another, while empathy tends to be used to mean imagining, or having the capacity to imagine, feelings that one does not actually have.¹ Thus, empathy refers to the ability to relate to another person’s pain vicariously, as if he or she has experienced that pain oneself. “It involves experiencing another person’s point of view, rather than just one’s own, and enables prosocial or helping behaviors that come from within, rather than being forced.”² Thus it is often said empathy is like walking with the shoes of the other and having a personal experience of the other’s difficulty.

Some definitions distinguish the emotional and cognitive components of empathy. The cognitive empathy involves understanding others’ thoughts and feelings without necessarily reacting emotionally, whereas emotional empathy involves experiencing emotions in response to others’ emotional experiences or expressions.³

Other definitions highlight the social-relational aspects of empathy. “Empathy is, in fact, an ideal that has the power both to transform our own lives and to bring about fundamental social change. Empathy can create a revolution. Not one of those old-fashioned revolutions based on new laws, institutions, or governments but something much more radical: a revolution of human relationships.”⁴

Karla McLaren includes a response of action when he defines empathy along with social and emotional skill that helps us feel and comprehend the emotions, wishes, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others. Essential to it is a capacity to help others, because empathy tends to involve some form of action that allows us to interact with and offer support, assistance, or a listening ear to people we empathize with.⁵

Empathy is change from self-absorption or focus on the work to other-focus and person orientation. Not only in the west but, now worldwide, we live in a culture of individualism, fostering our own gratifications and asserting our ways on others. Religious people, despite their avowed commitment to the welfare of others, are not much different from others when it comes to concrete events and people with whom they live. They need to make conscious effort to develop empathy. It is crucial for establishing relationships and behaving compassionately and building up true community. Empathy helps us to build relationships and cooperate with others in the apostolate. It gives us the capacity to see the struggles of the members of our community in their efforts to fulfill the mission and to give encouraging words even when physical support is difficult.

Pope Francis has been advocating to the Roman Curia for a change in the style of administration. During two days of intense meetings in the Vatican, the world's cardinals assessed the landmark reforms he has made to the Church's central government. The cardinals acknowledge the radical change seen in the empathic approach of the members of the Curia. Tablet reports, "several cardinals expressed their appreciation for how bishops visiting Roman Curia offices are now more likely to feel they are being listened to rather than reprimanded or micromanaged."⁶ In the new Constitution made for the Curia, the Pope has stressed the need of placing the Curia at the service of the local churches, a reform in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. He made it clear that the Roman Curia should not be a bureaucracy that exists for itself but instead should be there to support the Church's evangelizing mission. As Cardinal Fitzgerald observed, "A new spirit of service is developing, rather than of power."⁷ It indicates a spirit of listening, understanding, one that is more empathic.

Components of Empathy

McLaren describes six components of empathy.⁸ We shall see them briefly in the context of religious life experiences.

1. Emotion Contagion: Author says that before empathy can take place, one has to sense that an emotion is occurring in another or that an emotion is expected of you. The process of empathy depends on our capacity to feel and share emotions. Empathy is first and foremost an emotional skill. It is in this aspect we religious usually fail. Before perceiving the emotion of the other, we are already carried away by the awareness of duties at hand and work to be accomplished. Our expectations coming from dutifulness takes precedence and we fail to be in touch with the feelings of the other, let alone the perception of our expected emotion. Hence our instinct to correct, advice, reprimand and command takes over before we give time to feel with the other.

2. *Empathic Accuracy*: This is our ability to accurately identify and understand emotional states, thoughts, and intentions in ourselves and others. This is an interactional and observational skill which depends on the capacity to perceive our own and others' emotions. We perceive here the type of emotion and its intensity. When a member of the community is expressing her difficulty, she encounters in the work she is doing, you need to identify whether the person is feeling frustration or anger and you need to gauge its intensity — if it is anger, for example, whether it is a mild irritation for nobody bothered about it or rage for having been criticized for not helping elsewhere when she was struggling with her own work alone. “Emotional awareness and accuracy are crucial to skilled empathy.”⁹

3. *Emotion Regulation*: Emotional regulation is the ability to understand, regulate, and work with our own emotions that we may not be engulfed in emotions and overtaken by them. McLaren observes that regulation is not a matter of being stoic or suppressing our own emotions as we engage with others. “Intelligent, empathic Emotion Regulation isn't about controlling, eradicating, or chasing down emotions; rather, it's about working with them as vital, irreplaceable tools”¹⁰. Observing and understanding the feelings within us as we engage with others' problem help us towards the next component in empathy, i.e., Perspective Taking. Regulation also helps us not to lose the objectivity required in taking stock of the situation at hand and not to be blurred by countertransference issues. Empathy is thus distinguished from feeling sympathy. By sympathy one may identify with the other's feelings so much that he or she finds difficulty to see things more objectively.

4. *Perspective Taking*: This is the skill by which we are seeing the world as the other sees. “Skilled empathy helps you take the perspective of others and to imagine what life feels like for them — how they feel, how they approach situations, what their intentions are, and how they'll respond to others and to circumstances. When you take the perspective of others, you often imagine the emotions that they might be feeling.”¹¹ This is the most important skill of empathy. This capacity to take the perspective of others depends on the skills to feel, share, and understand emotions. Without feeling with and understanding the other, one cannot skillfully take the other's perspective. In McLaren's words, “When you take the perspective of others, you essentially don their demeanor, attitudes, expectations, emotions, and intentions; you put yourself in their shoes so that you can see the world from their perspective and understand what they might do next (or what they might wish for).”¹² When we have the perspective of the other, we will have an idea what the other will do in such situation as well. For example, when Sr. X is under such pressure of doing the works according to contradictory expectations of different members of the community, you would with the affective connections have established an insight into her next response. Persons who do not have the skill to see the perspective of others will attribute thoughts, emotions, ideas, and intentions to them that might

be far from reality. When judgments are made on such basis, the person will feel misunderstood, misjudged and angry or sad.

We should not forget that to have correct perspective, we need first to understand our own feelings and distinguish it from that of the other. Such grounding will help us to feel calm, centered, focused, relaxed, and awake, and help us turn our focus inward in a simple and calming way.¹³

5. *Concern for Others*: Having felt with the other and seen things as he or she sees, one feels a concern for him or her. The quality of our response depends on our ability to care about other — our sensitive concern will help us engage with them in a way that displays our care and compassion. This concern is very natural to our mission and vocation. But because we have not gone through the previous process of feeling, and understanding and forming the perspectives, we prematurely jump into judgements, corrections and directives. So, we respond with, “It is all your mistake” or “You should have...” or “You dare to question me” etc. Rule books become the basis of action. We forget what Jesus said, “Sabbath is made for man, not man for Sabbath.” But if you have placed yourself in the shoes of the other, your response will be like, “Oh! How difficult it should have been for you to...” or “I can see that you” In fact, all of us have the capacity for concern for the other and desire it as a virtue. But many of us have not developed the skills to express it and thus we are perceived as hardhearted. Many religious perhaps consider it weakness to express empathic concern for the members of the community while they may show it to outsiders! McLaren’s warning is worth taking note of, “If you don’t seem to care about others, then every other aspect of your empathic skills will be discounted as unimportant at best and manipulative at worst. Concern for others is a deal breaker: If you seem to have it, you can get away with almost anything, empathically speaking. But if you don’t seem to have it, you’ll be exiled.”¹⁴

6. *Perceptive Engagement*: McLaren’s contention is that without a positive action coming from the concern you felt to the other, empathy is not complete. Perceptive Engagement is the pinnacle of empathic skill according to her, “because it combines your capacity to sense and accurately identify the emotions, thoughts, and intentions of others; to regulate your own emotions; to take the perspective of others; to focus on them with care and concern; and then to do something skillful based on your perceptions.” But when you do something for the other, it would not necessarily work for you at all and that might not even be in your best interests. It is not like going to a restaurant with your friend and ordering a costly item to please her, but first perceiving what might be her taste (even if it is not of your liking) and ordering it. “Perceptive Engagement is about meeting the needs of the other.”¹⁵

When you are meeting the need of the other, it may be that you refrain from any action. What Sr. X needs at that moment may be is a need to be unseen, untouched, and undisturbed. When the best for the person is to be left free, that becomes the perceptive engagement.

It is important to remember that the engagement is not just with negative emotions of the persons. We need to attend to all emotions.

Empathic responses are just as likely in situations of joy, laughter, and a lack of need as they are in troubling or consolation requiring situations. Empathy is first and foremost an emotional skill, and skilled empathes work with all emotions, not just the painful ones. It's just as empathic to laugh and joke with someone as it is to offer them a shoulder to cry on. Empathy is about perceptive emotional interaction and engagement; it's not restricted only to consolation.¹⁶

We need in the community a capacity to perceive the joyful moments of others and celebrate it with simple acknowledgments and nonverbal expressions of joy in ourselves. In one study it is found that displaying empathy for a partner's positive emotions was five times more beneficial for relationship satisfaction than only empathizing with his or her negative emotions.¹⁷

How good are you in empathy?

<i>Signs of Empathy</i>	<i>Lack of Empathy</i>
1. Your perception of the emotion of the other before even the issue is presented.	1. Your focus is on the issue than the emotion.
2. You feel the problem of the other.	2. You see the problem of the other
3. You can easily gauge the emotional intensity of the other — e.g., one is in rage or in mild anger.	3. Hardly distinguish the intensity of an emotion.
4. Good at listening to what your subordinates have to say.	4. Interrupt the other half way through the story of the other.
5. You distinguish one emotion from another easily — e.g., sadness and anger	5. Hard to distinguish one emotion from another.
6. Others feel comfortable to tell you their problems.	6. Subordinates feel discomfort to share their problem. Their response even when in difficulty is, "I have no problem."
7. You can easily pick up the other's feeling.	7. You find difficulty to know whether one is happy or sad.

8. You often think what others may be feeling.	8. You hardly think of others' feeling.
9. You feel moved within seeing or hearing of others' plight.	9. You have a stoic attitude. Nothing seems to affect you.
10. You try to help others who are suffering.	10. You do not feel an urge to come to the aid of people suffering.
11. You care deeply about each member in the community.	11. Each one seems to take care of himself or herself without your involvement
12. You forego your needs and involve in helping others without being asked for.	12. You do not sacrifice your routines and timetable unless compelled.
13. You perceive the need of the other in the context and respond.	13. You respond according to your preconceived understanding.

Developing Empathy

Human beings are capable of empathy. As Roman Krznaric tells, “Forget the traditional Darwinian idea that we are primarily motivated by self-interest and an aggressive drive for self-preservation — a vision of ourselves as *Homo self-centricus*. The emerging picture of human nature is that we are just as much *Homo empathicus*, with a natural capacity to meld our minds to others.”¹⁸ He adds that we can develop this quality further by our efforts: “The first habit of highly empathic people is to “switch on your empathic brain,” by which I mean embracing this more sophisticated understanding of human nature. It is about recognizing two things. First, that the capacity to empathize is part of our genetic inheritance, with roots deep in our evolutionary pasts. And second, that empathy can be expanded throughout our lives — it is never too late to join the empathy revolution.”¹⁹

Empathy is very much part of human nature. According to de Waal, “Empathy is second nature to us so much so that anybody devoid of it strikes us as dangerous or mentally ill.”²⁰ John Bowlby’s research revealed that lack of secure attachment in the childhood stunts the development of empathy, especially the ability to make the emotional connection with other people’s feelings, which is the basis of affective empathy. Secondly it shows that one of the most effective ways to nurture emotional capacities such as empathy in children is to show them empathy as a parent.²¹ It might be true not only for children, but forming our candidates showing empathy would guarantee the development of their capacities to feel with the others. Even if they were not blessed with the proper development of empathy in childhood, the formators’ empathic approaches should bring the corrective education. Bowlby clarified that change continues throughout the life cycle and

in the right circumstances, with the right stimulus, we can overcome the limits of insecure attachment.²²

Though empathy is part of natural development, I believe that it may not reach automatically to the level of a Christian ideal of universal and free of self-focused to other-focused attention in a way that Jesus expected of his disciples (Mt 5:46, 48; John 13:15). Often our empathy is limited for certain people and we may feel less empathy for those outside of our own relations and friends, group, ethnicity, or country. Hence it is a challenge for the religious to feel with others of different cultures and form collaborative inter-cultural communities.

Krznaric affirms that empathy can be developed.

Our personal empathy quota is not fixed: we can develop our empathic potential throughout our lives. Our brains are surprisingly malleable, or “plastic,” enabling us to rewire our neural circuitry. Empathic ability is a bit like musical ability — part nature and part nurture... Psychologists have repeatedly shown that adults can tap into their latent empathic abilities by making a conscious effort to focus on the minds of others.”²³

Important thing to know is that you can make a difference — you can change. As Krznaric says, “If your experience of your own or others’ emotions is very uncomfortable, you can approach emotions in new ways so that you can access their wisdom and their gifts, and you can change.”²⁴

Practicing empathy requires a combination of skills and an awareness of both emotion and cognition.²⁵ In developing empathy we can try out different things:

1. Make a mental note every time you notice an instance of empathic thinking or action in yourself or others.²⁶
2. Develop self-awareness. It is your internal, intrapersonal capacity to identify your own emotions, sensations, and inner thoughts. There are many empathic mindfulness skills that are suited to different types of people.
3. Develop an awareness of what kinds of contexts bring out empathy in yourselves and others.²⁷ Are you less empathic when you are with tensions of your work? Are you more empathic with your family members, friends, community members or strangers?
4. Be aware of your outlook. It is your overall approach to life, which is identified on a continuum from positive to negative.²⁸
5. Consciously strive to make the imaginative leap into other people’s mental world.²⁹
6. Acknowledge the humanity of other people — their individuality and uniqueness — and treat them as beings of equal worth to ourselves.

7. Come to know people. As Oskar Schindler of the famous Schindler's List says, "When you know people, you have to behave toward them like human beings."³⁰ Never treat another as an object but as a person who deserves respect.
8. Listening closely and watching for nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language will help us to tune into the meaning behind the words being used by the other and determine the other's feelings and intent.
9. As often used in counselling situations, remarks such as "I see" and "I understand" communicate empathy. Behaviors such as nodding, leaning forward to the other as you listen, stopping what you are doing and giving full attention, or paraphrasing what the other said are communicating empathy.
10. Sensitivity to people of other cultures is an important competency for empathy. When you are working with persons or groups from other cultures, whether they are from other states or from other countries, empathy will help you make a real connection with them. Open your mind to understanding their culture, feelings, needs, and concerns. You can ask questions, for example, and you can read newspapers or books from that culture.
11. Being aware of what may have influenced the perceptions and feelings of others is an important part of empathy. It will help you understand people and be more tolerant and sympathetic.
12. When you accept the fact that others have equal rights to their feelings or points of view, even if you don't agree with them, you can deal better with different situations.
13. Having a knack for knowing what will appeal to the members of the community and to have a service-oriented attitude toward members and sensitivity to people of other cultures are important attitudes expressing empathy.
14. Conversation and empathy are intimately intertwined: conversation itself has the power to forge empathic connection.³¹
15. Trust in others and their goodness. It will make you feel more sympathetically with them when they make mistake.
16. When you are aware of your own failures and mistakes and are empathic to yourself, you are more prone to be considerate in the mistakes of others as well.

Empathy to Oneself

In the process of being empathic to others, we should not forget to be so to ourselves. McLaren in her version of a mindfulness meditation suggests to welcome our emotions rather than treating them as problems in and of themselves. We need to turn toward our emotions and ask them what they are doing. She says that we

need to work as a partner and a friend to our emotions, and use our empathic capacity to enter into a deep empathic relationship with our own emotions.³²

Obstacles for Empathy

According to Krznaric, there are four things that prevent us from feeling empathy: prejudice, authority, distance, and denial.³³ First is prejudice. Most of us have assumptions and prejudices about others. We are prone to stereotyping, making quick judgments based on first impressions, and casually project our biases and preconceptions onto people while knowing very little about the reality of their lives.³⁴ We assume that Sr. X being a junior sister will behave in a particular way. We say that new vocations are not as committed as from the previous generations. Our perception of others is colored by our mindset. We judge the others' behaviors, habits of eating, dressing, and entertainments as good or bad in relation to our own cultural practices and expectations. Deeply grounded in one's own expectations, one may judge the others' demeanors as worldliness, lack of seriousness and signs of lack of vocation. Particularly elders in the community will have more difficulty in empathizing with the differences they notice in the younger generations. Living in inter-cultural communities, these prejudices bring enormous difficulties in peaceful living. People from other cultures would easily feel misunderstood and judged. They may not even understand why somebody gets upset about something so normal in their own culture. Facing such criticisms, one may even decide to leave the community.

Obedience to authority is another thing that is cited as obstacle to empathy. People who show very little of empathy to the subordinates claim that they are just obeying the directives from higher authorities, like those who participated in the genocide of Hitler claim that they were just obeying orders. Experiments show that "a substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act, and without pangs of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority."³⁵ Is it then that many of us in authority do not care about the feelings of the other members because our focus is just on the implementation of directives from above? Even when there may not be anything wrong, if properly understood, in the directives from above, it may be used as a rationalization for the lack of empathy by people in authority.

Another reason cited for lack of empathy is distance, "spatial distance remains a barrier to the spread of empathy. When we do not know people, when their lives are far away and unfamiliar, our capacity to care about them is more difficult to ignite."³⁶ When the disaster happens in a faraway place, or for a person unknown to us we tend to feel less about it. This would naturally mean that we feel more empathy for people whom we know deeply. It is a common experience that people who do counselling will feel more sympathetic to their clients than others.

Stanley Cohen in his book *States of Denial* argues that we are products of a “culture of denial” that allows most of us to know about atrocities and suffering yet also block them out and do nothing, “turning a blind eye”... Sometimes we turn away because we do not wish to admit that we might be somehow responsible, either through our acts or omissions.³⁷

We may fail to have empathy also because of our tendency to blame others for their predicament. If we jump into conclusion that the problem with the junior sister is on account of her own lack of commitment, obedience, or laziness, etc., we will show little understanding to the real issues faced by this sister. We judge others again based on our past experiences and expectations. Victim-blame is a defense we use to escape from our own responsibilities in the problems.

One of the great challenges of feeling empathy according to Krznaric is in relation to disagreeable persons. It is an issue we face in our daily lives as religious too, ‘how to empathize with a person whose ideas are in conflict with mine?’ He reminds us that empathizing does not destroy the possibility for moral judgment. You can gain an understanding of someone’s worldview without having to agree with his beliefs or principles. Thomas Nagel who wrote a classic article called “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” argues that it is impossible for us to step into the shoes of other people as we cannot experience the way a bat experiences when it is hanging upside down on a tree. But Krznaric argues that even in the case of our enemies, by discovering what we share and what we don’t, it becomes possible to get a good grasp of the feelings, beliefs, values, and experiences of other.³⁸ Thus, though we don’t agree with the people who have opposing views and morals, we still can step into their shoes and have an understanding of what they see and why they act or feel in the way they are doing.

Krznaric describes many obstacles to empathic conversation. “Some people have a tendency to become combative when a discussion gets tense or heated, while there are those who move fast to blame others and make them feel guilty.”³⁹ Marshall Rosenberg, inventor of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), gives an approach to conversation that is especially designed to resolve conflicts that “allows our natural compassion to flourish.” He explains the elements of radical listening in NVC, “The first element, presence, involves emptying your faculties and listening to the other person with your whole being, letting go of preconceived ideas and judgments about them.... A second element is to consciously focus on identifying the other person’s feelings, and a third is to make a concerted effort to understand their needs.” His contention is that from the moment people begin talking about what they need rather than what’s wrong with one another, the possibility of finding ways to meet everyone’s needs is greatly increased.⁴⁰

To go beyond these obstacles, we first need to grasp how they prevent us from stepping into others' shoes. Thus, self-awareness is very important in combating our prejudices and failures to show empathy.

Empathy in Your Pastoral Work

When you are continuously in caring apostolate and exposed to others' pain, you tend to be highly empathic initially but when the "emotional residue" accumulates, you may shut down, burn out, and become less willing or able to give yourselves.⁴¹ When you are highly sensitive and overly focused on the needs of others, you may experience 'empathy fatigue'. Empathy fatigue refers to the exhaustion you as a caregiver might feel both emotionally and physically after repeatedly being exposed to stressful or traumatic events.⁴² You might also feel numb or powerless, and lacking of energy. Then you may have to take time to withdraw and be alone for a while, as you will find it draining to be in the presence of other people.

Highly empathic people are more likely to be targeted by manipulative individuals and so it is important to create healthy boundaries in all relationships.⁴³ Such people need to ask whether they are meeting the other's need or one's own need to be needed.

Emotions – Irrational?

The question could be raised whether one has to be empathic to the irrational emotions. Of course, feelings have a history. Every person reacts differently to the situations on the basis of the past experiences and one's emotional history. They need not be all rational and to be promoted. But feelings are to be understood from the personal settings. In empathy what one does is to view and experience things from the other's platform. Viewing from one's own experiences and mindset, it may look irrational why Sr. X has to be frightened by small insect like cockroach that creeps into her room. Our rational evaluations can be useful in bringing insight later on for the other who is perplexed, but empathy demands from us to first to have a perception of the way it is experienced by Sr. X and communicate that understanding. Exploring how X has come to such irrational emotions and enlightening her with more realistic understanding can follow later through accompaniment when it is required. Being in charge of our own emotions is part of growing in maturity. As Peter M. Kalellis observes, "When feelings are not guided by logic and are left to run rampant, they can destroy everything of value in an individual's life."⁴⁴ As rational beings, we need not agree with the reasoning and the consequent emotions of the other, but with empathy we grasp how X is feeling and responding.

Points to Ponder

As superiors and leaders, can we, instead of reacting to situations that irritate, make it proactive by seeing and acknowledging the predicament that the other is

experiencing? For example, if you are irritated that the other member did not come on time for a meeting, before making a judgment like, “because of you we lost so much time,” or “you are irresponsible...” say something like, “I am sure, you might have been struggling to be here on time, but...”. Our attempt to blame and fret on the spilled milk is of little use. Rather, if we were to focus on what is the best before us on a given situation, an understanding comment will elevate the spirit of the persons and we will get better response. I recommend the book by Richard Carlson, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff... and it's all small stuff*. He reminds us that many of the things that we think of as “big stuff” are really just “small stuff” that we are turning into big stuff. We need to take our attention off all the little things that most of us have learned to take too seriously and take time to reflect on the miracle of life.⁴⁵ That will lead to a sense of gratitude.

Carlson emphasizes also on the need of learning to listen. He says, “If you ask people what frustrates them and makes them angry, many will tell you that “not being listened to” is right near the top of their lists. So, being more attentive to what others are saying also helps you avoid many, if not most, interpersonal conflicts.”⁴⁶

How empathic are you? Do you feel more empathic to some people and to others much less? Not everyone experiences empathy in every situation. Some people may be more naturally empathic in general and people also tend to feel more empathic toward some people and less so toward others.⁴⁷ In community life it can create divisions and conflicts. When one shows more empathy towards people of the same culture, language, caste, etc., others will notice it and talk about it. While favors are easily given to certain categories of people, others may fail to get even what is rightful from you. Some people become easily targets of your irritation and you will brand them in your mind as black-sheep. Their every act will be scanned negatively and often questioned. But empathy calls for greater sensitivity for those who are different from us and give allowances for diversity. As we cannot be understanding the motivational factors from other cultures, empathy should prevent us from making negative comments of their behaviors and be making efforts to put ourselves in their shoes to understand them.

Conclusion

When we develop empathy for one another in the community, we feel connected, supported and would feel the burden of our works shared even when others are not able to physically help us. When we feel heard and understood, it lightens our struggles. Empathy, thus, is not only very important quality to be developed for proper interpersonal relationships, it reveals the maturity of the consecrated people. This quality will indicate how good the person is in understanding others in their difficulties, adapting to new places and people and how successful he or she would be as a missionary. Even when you are not stepping out of your culture, the

comfort of the people who come to your community depends on your empathy towards them. With empathy we act more as neighbors to others and thus become a true Christian. Empathy is indeed the touchstone of human maturity and hallmark of empowering leadership.

End Notes:

- ¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>
- ² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy>
- ³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/empathic-intervision/202209/the-big-idea-no-more-cognitive-and-affective-empathy>
- ⁴ KRZNNARIC ROMAN, *Empathy. Why it Matters and How to Get it*, Penguin Random House Company, New York 2014, 7.
- ⁵ KARLA McLAREN, *The Art of Empathy*, Sounds True, Colorado 2013, 12.
- ⁶ LAMB CHRISTOPHER, 'The fires are reinvigorated', *The Tablet*, 10th September 2022, 3.
- ⁷ LAMB, *ibid*
- ⁸ McLAREN, 36.
- ⁹ McLAREN, 42.
- ¹⁰ McLAREN, 45.
- ¹¹ McLAREN, 46.
- ¹² McLAREN, 46.
- ¹³ McLAREN, 115.
- ¹⁴ McLAREN, 50.
- ¹⁵ McLAREN, 12.
- ¹⁶ McLaren, p. 51
- ¹⁷ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy>
- ¹⁸ KRZNNARIC, 30.
- ¹⁹ KRZNNARIC, 31.
- ²⁰ KRZNNARIC, 45.
- ²¹ KRZNNARIC, 43.
- ²² KRZNNARIC, 44.
- ²³ KRZNNARIC, 55-56.
- ²⁴ KRZNNARIC, 68.
- ²⁵ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/empathic-intervision/202209/the-big-idea-nomore-cognitive-and-affective-empathy>
- ²⁶ KRZNNARIC, 61.
- ²⁷ KRZNNARIC, 62.
- ²⁸ KRZNNARIC, 66.
- ²⁹ KRZNNARIC, 63.
- ³⁰ KRZNNARIC, 79.
- ³¹ KRZNNARIC, 130.
- ³² McLAREN, 113.
- ³³ KRZNNARIC, 63.

³⁴ KRZNNARIC, 64.

³⁵ KRZNNARIC, 69.

³⁶ KRZNNARIC, 71.

³⁷ KRZNNARIC, 74-75.

³⁸ KRZNNARIC, 96-97.

³⁹ KRZNNARIC, 140.

⁴⁰ KRZNNARIC, 140-141.

⁴¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy>

⁴² <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-empathy-2795562>

⁴³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy>

⁴⁴ KALELLIS, PETER M., *Pick up your Couch and Walk!*, Crossroad, New York 1994, 33.

⁴⁵ RICHARD CARLSON, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff... and It's All Small Stuff*, Hyperion Books, 1977, 11.

⁴⁶ RICHARD CARLSON, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Work: Simple Ways to Minimize Stress and Conflicts*, Hachette Books, New York 1998, 63.

⁴⁷ <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-empathy-2795562>

PROBLEMS TO SOLVE OR MIRACLES TO EMBRACE? FACED WITH SPIRITUAL, COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL PESSIMISM

Dr. José Cristo Rey García Paredes, cmf

I begin my reflection on “Appreciative Inquiry” with the following allusion to an experiment: in 1982, researchers at the University of Wisconsin conducted a study of the learning process. They videotaped the play of two teams. Team A was asked to analyse the *mistakes* they had made. Team B was asked to analyse only *the successes*. Both teams played again and improved. But team B doubled their score compared to team A.

1. THE DEFICIT MODEL

When evening comes — also at other times, such as on a day of retreat or the Spiritual Exercises — we examine our conscience. We examine everything that weighs on us, that we have done wrong. We repent, ask for forgiveness and promise to be better. The dismay comes when we discover how few expectations of progress are open to us!

We also do collective examinations of conscience. Our organisations and those who lead them, our General and Provincial Chapters, often start from the problems. The analysis of reality confronts us with social, political, religious, economic, ecclesial, congregational, personal problems... After this range of problems, we stop to analyse their causes. Then we try to find solutions and plan how to implement them.

The same is true when programming the mission: we ask ourselves about the deficiencies, the problems in our world, we try to diagnose why, and then we offer our solution and how to implement it. The result is often “more of the same”! This is the formula for change that tradition has handed down to us: we look at our problems, diagnose them and find solutions. We focus our attention on what is wrong or broken. And since what we look for are problems, problems are what we find. We assume that it is up to us to fix everything and that every problem has a solution.

Aren't many leaders who think that their role is to solve problems? Aren't many of us who think that our advancement in the spiritual life is to solve our problems,

to overcome our evil tendencies (lusts) and to avoid sin and make the purpose of amendment? In this model of change we focus our attention on the deficits. This assumes that a person on a spiritual journey, a community, an institution, a missionary work is first and foremost a problematic reality. On the other hand, what does not cause problems is hardly paid attention to.

2. THE APPRECIATION MODEL

We could, we should, adopt another perspective. Let us recall St Paul's observation: "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom 5:20). And if this is true, shouldn't we rather look at what gives life to human systems? Shouldn't we ask ourselves what are those *vital sources* in ourselves, in communities and organisations, in the world to which we are sent? And from there, could we not envision a better future of positive relationships with ourselves, with others, in our organisations?

It has been found that doing so improves the system's ability to collaborate and to change.¹ *The first prerequisite for this new model* is to *change our outlook*: from a disparaging outlook towards what is wrong and what works badly — to an appreciative outlook — towards what is right and works very well.

- For an appreciative gaze the self, the community, the organisation are expressions of beauty and spirit.
- We are — on the different levels, personal, community and organisational — an organic whole. This means that each of the parts is defined by the whole. We cannot think of an organisation without its parts, of a person without all that constitutes him or her.
- "God so loved the cosmos that he gave his Son" (Jn 3:16), the world that God created to exist without deadly poison (Wis 1:12-13). This positive outlook will lead us to make an examination of conscience of what works in us, in the community, in the organisation, in the mission.
- We will find a series of statements that describe where we want to be, what our dreams are, what our best moments have been, where the best energies have come from, what methods or paths have helped us the most.

3. HOW TO CHANGE THE MODEL: DO AWAY WITH "WHAT IS TAKEN FOR GRANTED"!

There are certain mechanisms in us that constantly block us and make change impossible. It is something apparently unimportant: "that which we take for granted" and which we never criticise, because we assume it to be so.

- What we take for granted (assumptions) plays a very important role in our behaviour, in our way of thinking, in the functioning of our communities

or organisations: “Assumptions are the set of beliefs shared by a group that make them think and act in a certain way”².

- We assume, for example, that an unchained dog is dangerous, that an atheist is a person to be avoided, that a homosexual tendency is a deviation....
- Assumptions work on an unconscious level. There are many of them. They make us act without thinking, without re-evaluating.
- Many assumptions operate at an unconscious level: they block a new vision. They prevent us from seizing opportunities for improvement.

We need to unmask this whole world of assumptions, verbalise them, make them visible, discuss them. It is not enough to say that “we have always thought this way”: we need to find out if they are valid and true today. This happens, for example, when we assume that certain prayer or retreat practices cannot be discussed and must always be done in the same way: for example, monthly retreats or annual retreats... Assumptions explain how we function, or how groups function.

4. STOPPING ALONG THE WAY: EVOKING THE BEST OF THE PAST (“MEMORIA”)

There are times when we must make a stop along the way to recover our energy, get our bearings and move on. At that stop, it is good to *remember the* most energising moments of our life, of our history — as a person, as a community, as an organisation. Memory is not a mere recollection; it is an updating of the past that pours its *energy* into the present. Shared memory is *synergy*. When we are charged with that energy, we discover our capacity to re-dream what seemed impossible and to generate something new. In all this, the Spirit is at work.

Didn't Jesus say that the Spirit will come and remind us of everything... and bring us to the whole truth? (Jn 14,6.26).

When we only see problems, we are also part of the problem. And when we see only unsolvable problems, we are the ones who have no solution. “Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinner” (Lk 5:8), Simon Peter says to Jesus; “O man of little faith, why did you doubt” (Mt 14:31), Jesus replies to Peter. It is possible to walk on water without sinking. We are obsessed with learning from our mistakes. But why do we not allow our successes to multiply sufficiently to dislodge our failures? Let the sorrows fade from our faces and the smiles of those who have hope that something new is coming into the world. A person is renewed, changed and activated when he or she feels involved in the atmosphere of the Spirit, touched, penetrated and activated by Him. He should not dwell too much on reading and studying the diagnosis of his illnesses, but on welcoming the superabundant Grace that is offered to him. An organisation is renewed, changed and activated when all the people in it, instead of focusing on all that is sick or dying, embrace the Spirit that leads

them to share positive memories and seemingly impossible dreams that lead to the unforeseeable.

5. EMBRACE THE MIRACLE

The questions we ask ourselves change us; and it depends on what they are to see whether they are for the better or for the worse. Individuals and organisations that investigate problems and difficulties get stuck in business as usual; individuals and organisations that ask themselves what their strengths are, how they can become more capable and revive their dreams, transform systems.

«There are only two ways to live your life. One is as if nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is a miracle» (Albert Einstein). «Our world is not a problem to be solved, but a miracle to be embraced. If we were to become aware of this every day and realise what gives life to human systems, we would contribute to the process of building a bigger and better life» (David Cooperrider).

And this is true for each of us as well as for our communities and organisations or bodies.

- When we embrace the miracle that is each of us, that is our community, that is all of us who are part of an organisation, then we embrace it all with an appreciative eye. We are open to dialogue with everyone and everything; to recover the best of our past, to put all our resources into action and involve everyone — who is affected by it — in the change; to build a vision for the future that we can share and in which we can all collaborate.
- When one has experienced limitation, incapacity, even sin, one does not need prophets of woe to crush, denounce, condemn. He does not even need to turn against himself and accuse himself, to punish himself. He does not need to turn to someone to solve his problem. What he needs is a prophecy of good news that leads him to recognise the best in himself and in his world: to affirm his past and his present with its strengths, successes and potential, to perceive his wellspring of life, the system of virtues that — in spite of limitation — characterises him, to honour in his own person the grace that far outweighs his sin.
- In order to do this, it is necessary to find out where Grace is hidden, from where the inner Spirit acts and where it leads us. “A passion can only be overcome by a greater passion”, said the Fathers of the desert. When an organisation knows its limitations and incapacity, it does not need to blame itself, nor prophets of doom announcing its end: what it really needs is the consolation that comes from the Spirit, it needs to be embraced by the miracle, to hear the good news that it has an auto-poietic, regenerative capacity, based on relationships, capacities, strength and possibilities.

- Together we can discover new opportunities and possibilities, generate innovations, think differently, transform our systems. This is how we generate “meaning”.

The four steps that appreciative enquiry suggests are these:

- Discovering the best in ourselves, or in our institutions;
- dream and visualise the processes that will work well in the future;
- design, plan and prioritise what will work well;
- implement and execute the design.

“No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. We have to learn to see the world anew”.

6. CHANGING OUR LANGUAGE

The language we use shapes our reality. A contemptuous language shapes a despicable reality; an appreciative language builds a valuable, appreciated reality. “For a hammer everything is a nail. For a troubled person everything is trouble.

We increasingly use clinical language to talk about our institutions: “they are sick”, “they are dying”, “they need palliative care”... If an organisation always hears how sick it is and how much it needs to be healed, the members will behave as if the organisation is sick. What we focus our attention on, what we always talk about becomes our reality. If we put our focus on what is wrong or mistaken, or what has been lost, we will tend to see everything through that filter.

A plant does not grow closed in on itself, but turned towards the light. The brain does not hear “no”. If I say “don’t think of elephants” the brain only hears “think of elephants” (fascinating brain research).

With our language and our enquiry, we create a reality. When we truly dialogue, when we take on other points of view, we find that reality is multiple, that there are several realities at the same time. And that, therefore, there are many more paths than we imagine.

Appreciative enquiry leads us to ask questions that will influence the outcome in some way. The questions we ask ourselves take us out of our assumptions, disorient us, make us discover new aspects of reality.

A genius (a genius staff) always asks questions that no one else would think of. For example:

“What would the universe look like if I rode on the tail of a beam of light at the speed of light?”

Positive questions induce positive change. They bring out the best in us. They become magnetic fields that seduce us and make us creative. Let us stop thinking about our weakness, because it weakens us.

Do we not believe that where sin abounded, grace abounds? Do we not believe that God keeps his covenant and that his Spirit activates everything and gives everything a future until we arrive at the complete truth?

Everything is interconnected! Nothing is resolved without entering into relationship. In the openness to relationship everything is reborn, it becomes poetic. In the Whole every part is saved. Passion for the whole makes us discover the Miracle.

End Notes:

¹ Cf. JANE MAGRUDER WATKINS – BERNARD MOHR – RALPH KELLY, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*, Pfeiffer, San Francisco, 2011; DIANA WHITNEY – AMANDA TROSTEN-BLOOM, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry: a Practical Guide to Positive Change*, BK Publishers, San Francisco 2003; SUE ANNIS HAMMOND, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, Thin Book Publishing, Bend 1996.

² DIANA WHITNEY – AMANDA TROSTEN-BLOOM.

DOCUMENTATION

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

To the Community of the Claretianum Institute of Theology of Consecrated Life¹

Dear brothers,

Dear Cardinal (Aquilino) Bocos (Merino): you understand these Claretian things, don't you?

Dear bishops and priests, good morning and welcome!

I thank the Fr. Rector for his kind words; thank you.

You are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the *Claretianum* Institute of Theology of Religious Life. During this half-century, you have rendered many valuable services in accordance with the spirit and mission of Saint Anthony Mary Claret, who was greatly committed to supporting and promoting consecrated life in all its forms. And your publications, your works have helped me greatly in life, as a formator of young seminarians.

You carried forward in the Church the desire to be close to the communities of consecrated life and to help them. The contribution of the Claretian Missionaries to religious families, through spiritual accompaniment, doctrinal enlightenment and, above all, legal advice, is known throughout the world. Your publications and journals are proof of this, some of which have existed for more than one hundred years. In what is today called the Dicastery for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, Cardinals Arcadia María Larraona and Arturo Tabera, as well as Fr. Jesús Torres – ah, I remember him well: he was good, Torres, always hidden away – they left their mark, while other missionaries have been and are valid contributors in this and in other Dicasteries.

¹ This is the message given by Pope Francis to the faculty members and the students of *Clartianum*, Rome, one of the six institutes of Consecrated Life of the Claretians when they had private audience with His Holiness on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the institute on 7th November, 2022.

Following Vatican Council II, the founding of the Claretianum Institute and that of Madrid had a very positive outcome, as did the Higher Centres of Manila, Bangalore, Bogotá and Abuja, following in their footsteps. In these decades they have all rendered, and continue to render, fruitful service to the understanding and development of the theology of consecrated life. In their programmes, the charismatic, Christological, historical and canonical origins and dynamics are structured. Their attention to the contributions of the human sciences has contributed to offering a more human face to consecrated life. I am not exaggerating, but you, with your work, have greatly, greatly humanized consecrated life. Let us thank God for the multiple expressions of the activity of your Institutes, which have helped so many people and communities: the study days and weeks, the conferences, the accompaniment provided to the chapters and governance of all types of institutes, societies of apostolic life and new forms of consecrated life. Thank you for the life and service of the six Institutes, but also for the initiatives you have organized and continue to promote in many other places: Mexico, Poland, the United Kingdom, Indonesia... Your presence is very visible in the local Churches and in the conferences of Major Superiors throughout the world. And also, I remember my first experience, as a bishop, of the 1994 Synod: how much you helped in that Synod on consecrated life! Your input was positive, always open, always removing unfounded fears. I remember that Synod well.

I thank you in a special way for the care reserved to the dissemination of the Magisterium of the Church, both of the Popes and of the Dicasteries most closely linked to consecrated life.

In this time in which the Church wishes to live her synodal vocation more intensely, I am pleased to note that your service to consecrated life is marked by the desire to implement what Saint Anthony Mary Claret valued so highly. Indeed, you have not only maintained communion with the Apostolic See, with the Pastors of the particular Churches and with the Federations of Major Superiors, but you have also endeavoured to share your service of animation and renewal with other ecclesial vocations and ministries: religious with other charisms, secular priests and lay people.

I encourage you to continue to serve consecrated life in the Claretian spirit, that is, by being missionaries. Consecrated life cannot be lacking in the Church and in the world. Fr. Claret also used to repeat those words of Saint Teresa that Saint John Paul II recalls in the Exhortation *Vita consecrata*: “What would become of the world if there were no Religious?” (no. 105). You help to consecrated men and women, before being intellectual, is witness, it is confession that Jesus is Lord. The

first service of your Theological Institutes must be to offer themselves as houses of welcome, praise and thanksgiving; as places where charisms are shared and the desire to live the spirit of the Beatitudes and the eschatological discourse grows. In them, communion must be manifested and the option for the poor and solidarity, fraternity without frontiers and constantly outgoing mission must be encouraged. With this disposition, the gift of consecrated life and its mission in the Church and in the world will become more appreciated.

Today, consecrated life cannot let itself be discouraged by the lack of vocations or by aging. This would be a temptation, an encouragement: “But what should we do?”. This is the challenge. Those who let themselves be overwhelmed by pessimism put faith aside. It is the Lord in history who supports us and invites us to fidelity and fruitfulness. He takes care of his “remnant”, looking with mercy and benevolence at its work, and continues to send his Holy Spirit. The more we approach religious life through the Word of God and the history and creativity of the Founders, the more we are able to live the future with hope. Religious life can only be understood by what the Spirit does in each of the persons called. There are those who focus too much on the outside (structures, activities...) and lose sight of the superabundance of grace that is in people and communities. Therefore, please keep away the spirit of defeat, the spirit of pessimism: this is not Christian. It is not Christian. The Lord will not fail to be close to the people, and He will do it this way or that way, but it is he who is important.

Although I know that you are already facing many challenges of our time, I would like to invite you to emphasise the value of fidelity in following Jesus in accordance with the spirit of the Founders, to be attentive to community life: in an era where individualism is proposed in this way, be attentive to community life!, I urge you to live interculturality as a path of fraternity and mission, and to promote the encounter between the different generations in consecrated life, in the Church and in society. And I want to emphasise this: the encounter between the different generations. Young people need to associate with old people, they need to talk, and old people need to talk with young people. Looking ahead, the prophecy of Joel, so beautiful! With this dialogue, with the spirit, the old will dream and the young will make prophecies: they will be able to go forward, but with the dream of the old. Please do not let the old die without dreaming: it is part of a mission. The young will do it. Let your young frequent the old and let the old frequent the young. At one time, in the post-Council period, there was this mentality of restructuring things: some congregations removed the old to a home for the old. Please, this is criminal! It's curious: religious women — I'm thinking of a case in point - old

women religious, who worked well, after two months in the old people's home — poof!, to the other world. Of nostalgia, of sadness! The old must die dreaming, and those who make the old dream are the young, who must take the place of the old. Do not forget this: let them speak ...

Five years ago, with the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium*, I specified the contribution of ecclesiastical studies and theological centres to the new phase of the Church's mission in which we find ourselves. I thank you very much for the commitment with which you have heeded this call of mine, and I urge you to always seek new ways to serve the Lord and God's holy faithful people. As I have told you on other occasions, do not be afraid, cultivate increasingly God's style - and what is it, God's style? It is simple: closeness, compassion and tenderness; He Himself says it in Deuteronomy: "Think, what nation has its gods as close as you have me?" Proximity, which is compassionate and tender. Closeness, compassion and tenderness: this is God's style - continue to help so many consecrated men and women to be "a kind of Gospel spread throughout the centuries" (CICLSAL, Instruction: *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 2). Do not tire of going to the 3 frontiers, even to the frontiers of thought; of opening paths, of accompanying, rooted in the Lord in order to be bold in mission.

Saint John Paul II already warned of the danger to consecrated life of a diminished regard for study. Neglecting theology, reflection, study, and the sciences, impoverishes the apostolate and encourages superficiality and frivolity in the mission (cf. *Vita consecrata*, 98). Superficiality, eh? I thank you because you continue to help so many to remain attentive; because you continue to take care of the quality of study and research. The problems of our time require new analyses and new syntheses (cf. *ibid.*). Your institutes, you, professors, and you, students, have a major task before you.

The Gospel teaches that there is a poverty that humiliates and kills, and another poverty, that of Jesus, which liberates and makes happy. As consecrated persons, you have received the immense gift of sharing in Jesus' poverty. Do not forget, either in your lives or in your work at university, those who live the other poverty. May you let life triumph over death and dignity over injustice (cf. *Message for the Sixth World Day of the Poor* [2022]). To truly encounter Christ, one must touch: touch his body in the wounded body of the poor, not just look at them: touch them; in confirmation of the sacramental communion received in the Eucharist (cf. *Message for the First World Day of the Poor* [2017]). How many founders, foundresses and consecrated persons have lived, and live, this way!

Paraphrasing the prayer that concluded the homily for the sixtieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, I invite you to pray with me: “We thank you, Lord, for the gift of the Council and for the blessing that these institutes of theology of consecrated life have been and are for the Church. You who love us, deliver us from the presumption of self-sufficiency and the spirit of worldly criticism. You who feed us with tenderness, deliver us from self-referentiality, from the diabolical deception of polarizations, deliver us from ‘isms’. And we, your Church, with Peter and like Peter, say to you: ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that we love you’” (cf. Jn 21:17)” (cf. *Homily*, 11 October 2022).

Dear brothers, dear sisters, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, may the Holy Spirit always assist you in the service you perform at the Claretianum. From my heart I bless you. And I ask you please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.

BOOK REVIEW

S. DEVADOSS, CMF

Consecrated Life. A Radical Following of Jesus Christ. Christological Foundations

Consecrated Life Series – 10

Claretian Publications, Bangalore 2022, Pages: 376.

The recent addition to the Consecrated Life Series published by Claretian Publications in collaboration with ICL: Institute of Consecrated Life – Sanyasa is a book by Dr. S. Devadoss, CMF, titled *Consecrated Life. A Radical Following of Jesus Christ. Christological Foundations*. It is a book written keeping in mind the consecrated persons and offering them solid Christological foundations. The objective of consecrated life is to follow Jesus radically and to live a life in the style of Jesus Christ. Thus it is very essential for the consecrated persons to know theologically and practically what it means by following Jesus radically. This book is the source for this need.

The book totally has nine chapters; each chapter highlighting one aspect of Jesus with deep biblical and theological insights. At the end of each chapter, the author brings out certain aspects which are relevant for the consecrated persons of today. The chapters are eventually balanced; each chapter having approximately 40 pages.

The first chapter is titled “Christological Perception of the Theology of Consecrated Life and Its Theological, Pneumatological and Ecclesial Perspectives”. In this chapter, the author highlights vividly the Christocentric aspect of consecrated life. He points out categorically that consecrated life is meant for the radical following of Jesus from biblical, theological, pneumatological and ecclesial perspective.

The second chapter deals with “*Kenosis* of Jesus Christ”. The *kenosis* of Jesus is presented as the template for the consecrated persons to follow. Having Phil 2:6-11 as the base, the author explains the meaning of *kenosis* and its importance for total self-surrender. Learning lessons from the *kenosis* of Jesus, the author exhorts the consecrated for self-emptying.

The third chapter is about “The Mission of Jesus”. the author summarises the mission of Jesus as proclamation and establishment of the kingdom of God. Then, he goes on explaining the concept of God’s kingdom, Jesus’ perception of God’s reign, impending and imminent aspects of God’s kingdom, God’s kingdom in Jesus’ parables and miracles and finally he brings out the importance of the consecrated persons sharing the mission of Jesus.

The next chapter presents “Jesus’ Perception of His Self-identity”. In this chapter, the author explains in a simple language the titles of Jesus like Messiah/Christ, the Son of Man, the Son of God and Lord (*Kyrios*). The author concludes the chapter highlighting the impact of Jesus’ identity on the identity of the consecrated persons.

The fifth chapter titled, “Consecration of Jesus and the Consecrated” deals mainly about Jesus’ consecration with special reference to his life of chastity, poverty and obedience. While dealing this chapter, the author makes a conscious effort to draw lessons and insights for the consecrated persons of today.

The next chapter is about “Pre-easter and Post-Easter Communities as Models for the Community Living in Consecrated Life”. For religious, community life is indispensable. Though there was no religious community life as we have today at the time of Jesus, we can learn a lot from the Apostolic community as well as the Jerusalem community. This chapter deals with these two communities and presents implication and relevance for the present religious communities.

The seventh chapter titled, “Praying Jesus – Model for Consecrated Persons”. In this chapter, the author explains in detail the prayer life of Jesus beginning from the prayerful atmosphere during Jesus’ infancy. He concludes the chapter stressing the importance of prayer in the life of consecrated persons.

The last but one chapter has the title: “The Paschal Mystery of Jesus and Its Relevance to Consecrated”. The author deals in this chapter, the problem of suffering, Jesus’ self-awareness of his death and its salvific meaning, resurrection and the Easter experience and sending of the Holy Spirit. The author concludes the chapter stressing the importance of paschal mystery in the life of the consecrated persons.

The last chapter is titled, “Jesus – Universal Saviour”. This chapter highlights biblical connotation of salvation and the Church tradition and salvation. The author deals in details the idea of salvation quoting the position of different theologians including the contemporary ones. He concludes the chapter stressing the spirituality of consecrated and God’s plan of salvation.

Indeed, it is a book well-written for everyone to read and understand. Though the book contains deep theological truths, the author has made it simple for even ordinary persons to understand. It is reader-friendly with logical and coherent

consistency. This book is a must for every consecrated person. Possibly, this is the first book that relates Christology to the consecrated in such a detailed and systematic manner. I sincerely appreciate and congratulate the author and ICL: Institute of Consecrated Life – Sanyasa for bringing out this wonderful, exciting and thought-provoking book.

Sr. Anjela Gari, CFMSS

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A biannual published by Sanyasa Institute for Consecrated Life, Bangalore

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