

AT THE SERVICE OF LIFE

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FOREWORD

Fr. Angel Dario Carrero, Franciscan theologian and poet, describes in his article, “*On the Track of Religious Life in Latin America and the Caribbean*”, the creative and original acceptance of Vatican II from a Religious Life in a context where signs of life were sprouting. In the succeeding years, it has gone from utopia to disappointment and frustration, to listen in a “deep common dark night” to the call to a conversion of faith-life: “from exodus to exile”, which means assuming the past with humility, savoring the non-negotiable elements of faith and being more ready to the newness of God breaking forth in history. All these start from a sense of mysticism which opens us to hope.

In “*The Spirituality of Consecration*”, **Sr. Josune Arregui**, Carmelite Sister of Vedruna, starting from an understanding of consecration as an act of God that defines our religious identity, describes the spirituality that animates us and urges us to bring life to our world. These are: the sense of belonging that allows us to discover ourselves anchored to the Mystery that we proclaim; moving ahead with our eyes fixed on Jesus which makes us “guides in the journey”; in fraternal and circular communities that render visible the Center which gathers us together; the contemplative gaze of the reality wherein we are called to incarnate ourselves. Sr. Josune concludes her article by presenting the Eucharist as a unique opportunity of making our lives a fruitful offering uniting it to Christ’s own offering.

For its theological depth and intercultural interest, we include a reflection presented by **Fr. Richard Kuuia Baawobr**, Superior General of the “White Fathers”, to the so called Council of 18 and is entitled “*Celibacy (in Chastity) in Consecrated Life in Africa*”. Starting from the cultural value of fecundity in Africa, Fr. Richard explores this culture to present continence as a source of life and of human development, as a way to continue transmitting life through other means. Celibacy for the Kingdom is the imitation of Christ who renders us capable of loving all in freedom. Fr. Richard continues his reflection emphasizing the community dimension of celibacy in consecrated life and concludes by courageously stating some challenges for the formation and effective living of celibacy.

Fr. John Fuellenbach, SVD provides a theological foundation to the Justice and Peace Ministry, understood as an essential contribution to the building of the Kingdom of God. It is a Kingdom yet to come because only God can lead us to the fullness of life for which we aspire and which, at the same time, is embodied in history. The words justice, peace and joy best

describe the content of the Kingdom and can lead us truly to the new heavens and the new earth which reflect the renewed world. His article “*Some Thoughts on the Justice and Peace Ministry of the Church in the Setting of the Kingdom of God*” provides points for reflection towards a new consciousness full of hope.

Finally, we publish here the story of a life experience, “*Fe y Alegría in Prison*”. **Sr. Maria Luisa Berzosa, FI**, directress of “Fe y Alegría” (Faith and Joy) in Rome, describes a situation where in the great work of education does not only reach places “where the asphalt ends”, but goes through the prison bars of Rome and thanks to a group of volunteers, religious and lay, succeeds to open new horizons to those deprived of their freedom and promoting friendly relationships with them.

ON THE TRACK OF RELIGIOUS LIFE
IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE
CARIBBEAN
MEMORY, BALANCE, AND PROSPECTIVE

Fr. Angel Dario Carrero, OFM

Fr. Angel Dario Carrero, ofm, is a Puerto Rican theologian, Custodian of the Franciscans of the Caribbean, and President of the Conference of Religious in Puerto Rico. For seven years, he served as theological assessor to the CLAR and is the author of various books.

Original in Spanish

1. Council kairós and creative reception

With the passing of fifty years since Vatican Council II, it has been emphasized that this particular Council was an intense moment for the interior spirit of Christianity. One says today, with reasonable pride, that the Church, under the action of the spirit, has left sterile anti-modernism to enable an open and fertile dialogue with the modern world. It was a period of availability to the Church to adapt to a new and more profound understanding of the Gospel in a context characterized by a will of emancipation. According to Rahner, it is also that the Church begins to discover itself as a universal Church. At the level of the consecrated life, the Council urged an “adequate renovation” with three aspects: a return to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a return to the foundational sources and an adaptation to the changing conditions of the times.

The Council has become a point of reference, in a particular way for us from Latin America and the Caribbean, not only because of its ecclesial opening to modern culture, but also for its claim of real universality, as well as for its emphatic call to a renewal from the multiplicity of the charisms. The post-council period is also a time of visibility of the Church, of the religious life, and of the theology of this continent – not as a miming prolongation, but as a creative force of its own construction.

The Council propelled the unprecedented process of reflection on the faith, starting from the singularity of our own wounds and dreams. The

Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, celebrated in Medellín in 1968, will manifest itself as one of the more living examples - at the universal level - of the creative reception of the Council.

One has spoken of Medellín as the beginning of the maturing age of the Church of Latin America and the Caribbean. Pope Paul VI expressed to Cardinal Pironio upon receiving the Conclusions: “Really you have raised up a historic monument.” The enthusiastic tone by which he referred to this Conference confirms that we are before the “the most serious effort in the history of the Latin American Church to incarnate evangelization in history.” The religious life was transformed and has left its indelible mark at the interior of this magnificent effort, above all by means of the accompaniment solicited by the Latin American Confederation of Religious Orders (CLAR), founded in 1959. In 1974, the CLAR formed a theological team assessing the inter-congregational and intercultural character that has accompanied religious in their spiritual journey until today. The uninterrupted continuity of theological reflection has been one of its greatest secrets.

2. Modernity and its reverse

One of the symbols of the great originality and universal impact of this effort is exemplified by that openness to Modernity as an ecclesial motto, which is not to be translated in this context as a mere assumption of its values. It also had the spiritual boldness to confront the harmful side of modernity, that which generates poverty and misery across two thirds of the world’s population. A decisive note of the religious life is represented by the adoption of the outlook of liberation.

Not only for Christians of the South, but also for Christians of the entire world, Medellín undoubtedly affirmed that “ecclesial identity today passes through solidarity with the poor and the insignificant; in them we encounter Christ that shows us the way towards the Father.”

Joseph Ratzinger captured with lucidity the unsettling perspective: “the progress of the Church cannot consist in a tardy embrace of the modern age, such as the theology of Latin America has taught us, in an irrefutable way. And from here stems the right to cry out for liberation.”

Gustavo Gutiérrez explicitly expressed the originality of this reinterpretation, stating it in the reverse: “Vatican Council II draws great lines for the renovation of the Church; Medellín signals the guidelines for a transformation of the Church based on its presence in a continent of misery and injustice.”

Religious life, though committed to a utopia, did not fall into the hands

of the modern euphoria, because it recognized in its direct contact with the reality of misery that there exist clear disagreements between God and the world. Sin manifests itself not only deep down within the conscience, but also in social structures. Neither did it try to place itself against the trend and spirit of an age marked by immobility and historic pessimism: the rereading of the prolepsis of Jesus and the anticipation in history of the end of history, prevented such a paralyzing lack of hope. Religious life testifies to an eschatological hope that contemplates and assumes the ‘already’ of the signs of the times within the persistent ‘not yet,’ which maintains an attitude of discernment.

Religious life recognized, as Walter Kasper expressed in that moment, that the Christian hope is only credible “if her witnesses take sides in the praxis for the oppressed and dispossessed”; and that it will not be credible “if one limits oneself to testing an orthodox theory without showing it to be efficacious and generous in concrete orthopraxis.”

3. The poor and the causes of poverty

Religious life did not limit itself “to think of the world,” but rather looked to “situate itself as a moment of process through which the world is transformed: opening itself in the love that liberates, in the construction of a new society, just, fraternal—to the gift of the Reign of God.”

For this, one had to investigate the causes of poverty, for only from a knowledge of them could one establish a way of real transformation; although it might imply confronting—as in fact it did—the violent resistance of the political, economic and military power, or the religious spheres closely linked to these worldly powers.

This causal investigation obliged one to assume anew, in the theological-pastoral reflection, the socio-analytic mediation (seeing), together with the hermeneutic mediation (judging) and the practical mediation (acting), which builds up the other steps in a circular triad. Although it has to do with a promising methodological element, from the beginning it remained established that the social sciences were not what allows for a profound understanding of reality: “one perceives by experience and by direct contact, and it proclaims it with a language that, from more than a scientific analysis, draws near to the questionable denunciation of the prophets of Israel.”

Another aspect of the profile of the new religious life was the place given to the prayerful reading of the Word of God, for it has to do with placing oneself together with the many poor, not as mere sociologists, educators or social workers, but as a way of following Jesus Christ. The

religious life focused, as never before, on the invocation of the Word, which is not disconnected from the reality of the world, but rather illumines and transforms it.

This spiritual path allowed religious life to move beyond its “minority of age” and to assume “its own destiny.” The Church achieves its maturity of age—thought Paulo Freire—when “it does not conceive itself as a neutral reality, nor has to hide its own opinion”, when “it does not create a dichotomy between the worldly and the transcendent, nor separates salvation from liberation” – When it stops being a reflection to become a source. The Latin-American and Caribbean Church, with the close participation of the charism of religious life, decided to establish its own identity: it decided to incarnate that luminous vision of John XXIII, which had remained unfinished by the Council: “the Church is and wants to be the Church of the poor.”

Together with a historic cast of the monastic paradigms, the roaming paradigms, and the modern-apostolic movement among others, a new paradigm opened up: one of cultural insertion. *Puebla* would summarize the four tendencies of this new paradigm: the experience of God, the fraternal community, the preferential option for the poor, and the inclusion in the life of the particular church. The CLAR shone out: the mission of reinterpretation; the constitutive historicity of the religious project; the radical ecclesiastical nature of the religious life; the option for the poor and the inclusion; and the centrality of the prayerful reading of the Bible. Aspects that have not lost their force, even though we might need to re-read them in the context of a new paradigm not marked by a utopia.

4. The spirit that witnessed an epoch

It is not a secret that many religious resisted the Council and its opening to the modern world; and that others embraced the Council, but not Medellín. But, without a doubt, the true symbolic strength, not necessarily numerically, is constituted by those that embarked upon the “creative reception,” those that understood that one cannot embrace the Council without embracing the context in which one lives.

And it was more than an embrace of some lucid ideas: it changed the home of many religious (inclusion); the method of active theology (the critical reflection about the praxis); the language (liberation); the anthropology (structural sin); the mode of being in the world (enculturation); the options (the poor, the kingdom); the vision of the Church (Ecclesial-Based Communities); the same way of understanding God (God of life) from the historical figure of Jesus (the Liberator) and the Spirit (consoler of the poor); and Mary (mother of the poor); the radical importance of memory and

testimony (the martyrs). All were included below the unprecedented paradigm of the primacy of the praxis from the theological place of the poor.

It is a common error to detect these signs only within the religious sphere, when it has to do really with an epochal conclusion...

Far from sterile polarizations, it's about the Spirit that led an epoch on which the religious life – with the inevitable contradictions that any option entails — did not turn its back. The determined incomprehension — we have not said the sane and necessary critique — that existed on occasions concerning the entire process, emerged often from not having read the signs that visited this epoch. The particular touch of the religious life consisted in the just implication and distance that refines the senses to detect the rumor of the soft breeze, and from the religious life, to serve freely and joyfully as a channel to an authentic adventure of love.

If we trace the extra-ecclesial intellectual, artistic, and pedagogical world, we will discover an aromatic, spontaneous, and fecund presence of the religious life in the world. This is another particular note: the religious life developed where the signs of life arise, even outside of the ecclesial structures. The religious life adjusted its charismatic clock to the era that it had before its eyes, to participate in the dream of a new hour of utopias and dreams from the evangelical place of the poor following the example of Jesus Christ.

This direct and causal drawing near to the world of the poor in the light of the living Word of God in order to create a prophetic commitment of liberation, linked both North and South, not only to explain the story of the dialectics of misery, but also to promote the necessary way of evangelical solidarity from an international identification. The religious life of Latin American and the Caribbean developed in hundreds of religious worldwide, a common evangelical passion, whose bonds extend until today.

Our Order of Minor Brothers, to cite an example that is well-known to me, recognized the existence of a harmony between the Franciscan spirit and the new ecclesial Latin American awareness. We will not outline the route here, for lack of time, but I do not believe that I am exaggerating if I say that the awakening of the new paradigm of the Latin American religious life clearly helped our Order to coherently draw near to one of the most essential of its identifying traits: the option for the least of the land. This influence could surely be recognized in the reality of other religious orders and congregations present here. The religious life of Latin America and the Caribbean — which includes many religious that are not Latin-American by birth, but by spirit and bloodshed — served, with its lights and also its shadows, as a sort of shock therapy to the Church and to universal religious

life. With the preferential option for the poor, it produced a “Copernican grand revolution in the heart of the Church,” whose meaning “flowed beyond the ecclesial context of Latin American, into a concern of the universal Church.”

5. The extent of a movement of the spirit

Even if we refer only to the theological sphere, we would argue that the extent of its projection has been truly amazing. The interest in this theological movement overflowed outside of the Latin-American and Caribbean sphere. Not only were geographical frontiers crossed, but also political, racial, gender, cultural, religious, and intellectual ones. Very soon talk of theologies of liberation began – i.e. Theologies, in the plural - that showed the diffusive aspect of its projection, that embraced the black, Indian, and Asian theologies as well as the Jewish and Palestinian theologies, and even the feminist, queer, and ecological theologies, besides those of other religions. These are diverse perspectives as well as theologies of great disparity, but they share among them the common denominator of the exclusion understood as structural sin and the same effort towards liberation, in as much as they are illuminated by the critical and contextual rereading of the living Word of God. The theology of the religious life has accentuated some of these reasons, becoming sensitized before the diverse faces of poverty, giving needed relief to the silent or unheard voices, both social and ecclesial: the blacks, the indigenous, the women, the immigrants, the inter-religious, the creation...

However, above all, the most important witness is not the foundational texts, not even this important radius of transcendence that has diversified the blockades to the religious life, but the testimony of the martyrs. They reveal, through the horror of their blood, that it did not merely concern a thinking that is able to give reason to the Christian hope, but a faith that gave all, even to prophetically accepting to pay the price of their boldness, in the way of Jesus. A history that has produced martyrs cannot be forgotten. Without this persistent memory, justice – of yesterday and today - would cease to be actual, and would become invisible.

The documents of *Puebla* and *Santo Domingo* (1992) and *Aparecida* (2007) also exemplify the large process of ecclesial maturity triggered by the creative reception of the Second Vatican Council at Medellín. It is by this Latin American and Caribbean walk that Pope Benedict XVI has been led to recognize, as recently as in *Aparecida*, that in the Christological faith, the option for the poor is implicit. This is the most important and forceful characteristic that the Church has and that the religious life of Latin America contributes to the universal Church. It must continue being a dangerous memory of the lieutenants of the Crucified.

6. The decline of a paradigm

It is high time we recognize that we do not live any more in that context of euphoria that we have just remembered. As it seems, suddenly, each one of the terms of the paradigm of the praxis would have remained marked among flickering signs of interrogation. In the dominant paradigm, the greatest options are not denied; but that which was affirmed with determination is questioned, made relative, or simply ignored. It has cornered all that which has an aroma of social commitment, of inclusion, of utopia; although in fact one sees the number of the dispossessed in this world growing.

Each generation, as Lipovetsky has recalled, would like to recognize and encounter its identity in a great mythological figure. In light of the problems of our time, we will say that the promethean dream, in as much as it returns in each new effort; as Sísyphus slid to the floor with frustration, this generation seems to withdraw itself, like Narcissus curved down on his own desires. Once, “the promised future” would have the present of an entire generation sacrificed; today this “promised future” is reduced to some kind of tracking in the quicksand of the present moment. The “great Reason” whose flag would be raised on the flagpole of great stories, including the great story of liberation, seems to make way for the Dionysian daily passions and the small stories, too small to even wave through the open horizon. The historic force of the poor is observed now before the mirror repeatedly as a wearied question: What remains of the theology of liberation? Also one hears the question: What happens today with that impetus of Latin American and Caribbean religious men and women?

7. The looming of the causes of disenchantment

Without wishing to be exhaustive at the hour of unraveling the causes of the discouragement, it suddenly becomes obvious that the dream of liberation of the poor and the excluded did not have a happy awakening. So many doors closed in unison below the global direction of the market and of its legitimate friend, new liberalism! It has not been able but to deter confirmation of the defeat— even by electoral means—of the movement of national liberation at the end of the 20th Century to those that placed in it their firmest hope. The manifest booms of religious movements unlinked to the historical practice of transformation amidst the same poor, have given rise to doubts, perplexities and feverish rethinking. The extremely rapid vocational decline, also in Latin America and the Caribbean, has left many institutions with grand projects in hand, but without people available to accomplish them. And if to the forces described, we add those that operate politically and contradictorily at the very interior of the Church—always in

need of purification—we will surely have a more just understanding of the nature of the current disenchantment and frustrations.

If we concentrate only on the two utopias that mark our history – socialism and capitalism – we see how both, in practice, present themselves as absolute ends and sacrifice the utopia. A justice that needs to suppress freedom to develop is, above all, nonviable, because it supposes an idealized nature, foreign to the paradoxical complexity of the human being. In many places socialism turned intransigent, simplified and totalitarian, and therefore, assassinated its own utopias of justice and equality. Beyond its caricatured hindrances, the capitalist system has remained practically alone in the world scene, devouring the poor and the common house of all: nature. We speak of the end of history, in so far as existing neo-liberalism would already be the realization of the utopia. That which remains, is to situate oneself in the seats of consumerism from an individualist, consumerist, and non-solidarity minded course.

Whether we look to one side or the other, we can only see disenchantment prevailing. Let us be honest: this also happens in religious life. But we do not have to fall into this trap: “the disappearance of the utopia leads to stagnation in that the man himself is transformed into a thing.” As Paul Ricoeur reminds us, religious life is the quintessential enemy of the absurd and that its particular identity is that of being a prophet of a sense: “not through a desperate will, but because it recognizes that this sense has been attested to by the facts proclaimed in the Scriptures.”

8. Epochal change, conversion and return to the foundation

The unitary conception of the world favored by the Christian faith has been overcome (pre-modernity). The euphoric confidence in the rational man, able to dominate all the laws of the world that used to be absolutely in God’s hands, has been questioned (modernity). But also the utopian liberating euphoria of our Latin American and Caribbean continent has been left behind (the reverse of modernity). Another stage has begun in which crisis, disenchantment, and the emergence of other values govern (post-modernity). Post-modernity annuls precisely the utopian pretensions of Modernity, and also those of its reverse. The challenge is greater than that of yesterday: to be prophets of a sense, not amidst utopia, but amidst nonsense and disenchantment.

We find ourselves before a true change of epoch. The entire system in force until today is under question. Cries are heard, of different voices, not easily harmonized, which announce the birth of another epoch. This process of epochal change does not rebound in a clear and distinct form, because the

competition between distinct visions of the world that intend to prevail in the emerging epoch generates a sensation of crisis, of confusion, of darkness, and generalized uncertainty.

This paradigmatic change demands not only an attitude of simple renovation, but also a more profound and radical process. Some, in the search for an adequate term, spoke of re-foundation, of a new beginning starting from the fundamentals of revitalization. Whatever the best term would be in the future, what is certain is that from the perspective of belief, we have begun to perceive that we live inside a collectively great dark night; and just there, within it, one hears the invitation to a global rethinking of the truth of our existence and of our practices; one feels the need of a true conversion in our living of the faith. Does not the poet Ernesto Cardenal assure us that “the palpable pulp of life grows in the shadows?” Already before, Hölderlin had revealed that: “in the danger of the night grows that which saves us.”

9. From exodus to exile

Gustavo Gutiérrez has been the first to declare that: “We should rather interest ourselves more in the sufferings and anguish, the joys and the hopes of the people of today, and in the actual situation of evangelization as a task of the Church, than in the present and future of a determined theology” or of a model of religious life, we would add today. Joseph Comblin had warned that if a stage of history had ended, “we cannot strive to prolong it in an unconscious way.” Here there is a throbbing challenge of non-appropriation and confidence for religious life.

In fact, in a path that favors life (the first act) over theology (second act), one has begun to speak, not of exodus, but of exile; not so much as to simplify, but to exemplify the end of an age and the birth of another. Victor Codina has portrayed it well: “Today, we do not know who is the pharaoh, neither do we know what Red Sea one has to cross, neither do we have a land of promise or leader to guide us. We are rather below the paradigm of exile...and the exile was for Israel a time of purification, of conversion, and of spiritual deepening”.

The deportation to Babylon was for Israel, other than a hard test, an epoch fully creative, that bound all the people together—as can happen today—before a situation of developing new forms of defining their identity. The contrast between the old and the new has been converted into the characteristics of the exilic prophecy.

In tune with this feeling of exile, the religious life finds itself in a phase

of latency, that we can understand from three perspectives:

- a. As a time of purification that risks looking behind and assuming the errors of the past with a humble, critical spirit, in order to open itself with levity of spirit to the present.
- b. As recognition and wisdom of the central non-negotiable nucleuses of the faith, as essential luggage for the walk
- c. As an attentive and active listening before the newness of God that breaks into our present history (feminism, ecology, interreligious dialogue, systematic thinking, cyberspace, Latin- American multiculturalism, etc).

Today, as already shown by many religious men and women of the continent, requires at least three horizons of human and spiritual maturity:

- freedom and authenticity to take on the past with a look of thankfulness and conversion (memory)
- interiorizing and re-grounding in order to anchor us in the essential (mystic)
- creativity to describe the newness of God in our present, and to reformulate from that our style of life (prophecy)

This has to do with a radical rethinking of our following of Christ in our unprecedented present day that has revealed itself as a mystical-prophetic walk of a clearly poetic-mystic temper, more than sociological, that comes from the active contemplation of God, and that is our present paradox.

10. Health in the new signs of the times

Not long ago, I discovered some dazzling verses from the Sufi poet, Rumi: “Past and future hide God from our life; burn them with fire.” That is to say, that which reveals the Hidden One is the living present. Only the present has the strength of concentrating time. “The past and the future clarify themselves in the present; and the arrow of the future, far from orienting toward the indefinite tomorrow, points toward this ‘now’ in which all happens and all originates. The present is that reality that recapitulates the past and future and confers upon them truth and value.”

The farthest from the horizon of hope develops in directions that seem like opposites, but that end embracing in the cellars of bitterness and desperation: the attachment of the past and the obsession with the future (almost always the future of our past). The religious life intuits that it should pass already from the insistence in the sources that hint at a certain idol-like attachment to the past, but also from the pathological obsession with the

future that hides a lack of faith in divine wisdom. In both directions hope diminishes. It is curious, that hell is symbolically, according to Dante, the horizon where there is no capacity for hope: “They lose all hope that trespass here.” Here is the key: not to trespass the horizon of the present. In the measure in which we try to escape toward the past or the future, the religious life, and whichever life, will find itself at a dead end, slowly withering. One will have too much nostalgia or false idealism, but will lack the precious pearl: hope. What is nearer to the dynamics of hope is allowing the present to flow and assuming it with a spirit of discernment: *“Do not remember the past things, do not think in the old. Look, I will make something new, already it is bursting forth. Do you not see it?”*

Many religious men and women do not realize this, whether because fear and insecurities make them look back (outside the world), or because disenchantment has detained them in bitterness and even cynicism (neither in the world, nor outside of the world) or because they are too close to reality without the needed distance and discernment (in the world, being of the world). This blindness in relation to its own time, in its due depth, is translated into a very insignificant life that creates a surrounding emptiness and disenchantment instead of the evangelical alternative of hope. A life fearful of the newness of the world is not a properly believing life: “to frighten oneself of the new is to frighten oneself of God.”

To wander between these reactive modes of relating with the living present, one progressively tends to disfigure the values and sensibilities that belong to religious life.

Religious life has to be characterized by that wisdom that knows how to be in the world, in this world, without being of the world, that knows how to incarnate itself in this world without belonging to its idol-like schemes, but “belonging” only to God. The values that characterize the religious life will be seen promoted and elevated, will develop their sense (meaning and orientation) – and not sadly caricatured, manipulated, and distorted – only in the measure that they enter in connection with the God that makes Himself present in living history and in the Word. In the contact with the present in the light of the Word, the distinct aspects that give form to our religious life begin to interrelate amongst themselves, feed themselves mutually, dance in harmony because it is the same life that unites them. When the different aspects (prayer, fraternal life, formation, mission...) do not need to be interrelated, when they find themselves comfortable each one in its own trench, it is because surely we are far from the strength of life in the dynamic of the present. When life unites us, then we note- with all that we are- the presence of the newness of God, of the God always new.

The essential values of religious life become distorted because they lack the Value that gives them structure and movement, which immerses them in hope. A Value, not extrinsic, but present in the tide of history and that, when we discover it and welcome it, envelops us in the waves of life to carry us far, very far in the mission. To reflect with joy the participation in this movement of life must be our first announcement, as timid and provisional as it may be.

It is not the community projects, nor the planned pastoral models, but the nearness to reality in the light of the Word read in community that opens the way to us not only of the *what*, but also of the *how*, *when*, and *why* of life and the mission as the key of hope that distances us from the pseudo-mission: predetermined life, boring and repetitive, fearful and demonizing or superficially cackling and flashy.

Francis of Assisi had invited to celebrate festively: “Health in the new signs of heaven and of earth, that are grand and very excellent before God and that by many religious and other men are considered insignificant.”

To celebrate, one has to leave behind the securities and the grand designs of our sterile activism to allow ourselves to participate in the festival of daily life with its lights and shadows, as a wedding in which surely wine will lack, but in which God becomes present through the alert tenderness of a mother. To celebrate one must hang up the dress of sadness and embossed cynicism and allow oneself to be surprised by the infinite mystery of the other, without forgetting that it will never stop being contradictory. To celebrate, one has to stop the hurry that intoxicates oneself in a silly manner, so as to educate ourselves in a paused sip that gladdens the heart and permits us to carry even pain with dignity. To distinguish the good wine from the generic and pernicious substitutes, we need prolonged time and space to grow in the accumulation of experiences that precede all wisdom. And we have not said the most exquisite part of the toast: in the clinging of the glasses, one encounters and is encountered. The gazes embrace and burn. The tinkling of the cups in the life of St. Francis, and of many other mystics, is the achieved synthesis of heaven and earth, of immanence and transcendence, of faith and history, that is to say: is properly Christian.

John Paul II invited specifically the religious to “reproduce with courage the audacity, creativity, and sanctity of their founders as answers to the *signs of the times* that appear in the world of today” and to not limit us to reading the signs, but to contribute to “elaborate and carry to an end new projects of evangelization for current situations.”

It is the hour to rethink our identity and mission from the tacit recognition

of the fact that the one “who does not read the signs of the times runs the risk of settling, of repeating, of destroying the most profound dreams, of losing little by little the contagious joy of the faith.” We need the mystic-prophetic contact with the present because it is there where the Mystery allows us permanently to encounter Him: in the multi-cultural wealth threatened by globalization; in the announcement of the Resurrection that is heard in the voice of the women still impressively quieted; in the beauty of the creation that we insist on destroying; in the protagonism of the lay people that we continue treating as Christians of a second rank; in the awakening of the senses that we look upon in a dualistic manner even with suspicion; in the plural manifestation of the religious experience in front of the adoration of so many dogmatic idols...

11. To educate the senses

“God,” said Teilhard de Chardin, “is so extended and is so tangible as one atmosphere that immerses us... He envelops us, like his own world. What do you lack, then, so that we can embrace Him? Only one thing: see Him.” Teilhard proposes, with an urgency that has turned into an imperative, an “education of the eyes,” so that we are able to see God in all places: “in the most secret, in the most constant, in the most definitive of the world.”

In the mystic emphasis of Latin-American religious life, I feel the invitation to begin seeing, not only from a sociological standpoint, but also from a much more integral perspective, as when we were children and the world opened up to our admiration for the first time, without the restrictions that ideologies impose, be they conservative or liberal.

Maria Zambrano, so linked to the Caribbean islands, reveals the distinct levels of seeing that we need to develop: “Not all gazes are able to generate visions. Some never see purely because they are too immersed in the immediate; others becoming even more detached, get confused by illusions; others, arrive even to to the point of inventing characters, creatures. But there is the genial gaze of the one who, having arrived at a privileged place and having a center, *gazes from it creatively.*”

This is precisely the gaze that we desire to reach, a gaze that is able to see God in the crucified reality and, far from resigning before it, stakes upon it and helps to create a new world. Without marrying reality, nor fleeing from it, it sees more deeply, and from it, discovers itself created and co-creator, generator of transformed visions.

Ernst Bloch offers an illuminating key that emphasizes the nearness of reality as well, but enshrines itself with the help of the ear: “One has to listen

with an almost musical sense to the movement of reality and ask in what direction one must play the melody.”

It is clear that this opening of the different senses aspires to profound levels that end up reuniting themselves. Rumi, skilled in the mystical interpretation of the senses, affirmed: “when the hearing is penetrating, it turns into an eye; if not, the Word of God remains lost in the ear without arriving at the heart.”

We need not only the vision, not only an open-eyed mystique, but a mystique of all the senses to capture his benevolent presence. “God is like the irradiating sun that is pressing on all sides upon the human spirit, to make itself perceived: it is the living Word that is calling continually to the profound sensibility of all men to make itself felt. There, where a crack opens to the light, there where a heart perceives His voice in the darkness, God erupts with the impatience of love and inaugurates a dialogue that, benefiting from this openness, amplifies and delves deeper.”

To evangelize one has to begin by unleashing the senses, because it is not about a magical and sudden *epiphany*, but of the *ethereality* of the always-acting God who awaits the yes of our senses and of our freedom to communicate and carry us to unexpected places in our life and mission.

Paul Tillich assures that a religion that cannot say convincingly that “God is here” among us, turns, sooner or later, into a system of doctrinal norms or morals, of the conservative or liberal mark. And, sadly, the Good News would become a proclamation at the service of Saturday.

The religious man or woman is called to be a wise person: not because he knows much of God, but because he has tasted God with all his/her senses, with all his/her heart, with all his/her being, and does not keep the secret to himself/herself.

That which is actually urging for the religious life in the continent is not simply an ethic of liberation, that is already well injected into the continent, but an esthetic, a poetry of existence, a mystic of the open senses that contemplates reality in the light of the world and that sets forth, from this loving intimacy, upon a path always new.

The poet Maria Wine, along with many other women, have startled us, relating to us about a place marked by the stubborn hope:

Somewhere

There must be a ray of light

That dissipates the shadows of the future,

A hope that is not murdered

On the Track of Religious Life ...

*By disenchantment,
And a faith that does not immediately
Lose faith in itself.
Somewhere
There must be an innocent child
Whom the demons have not yet conquered,
A freshness of life that exhales no putrefaction
And a happiness that does not base itself
In the disgrace of others.
Somewhere
There must be an awakening
Of the sensitivity that warns of the danger
Of self annihilating games
A gravity that dares to take itself seriously
And a kindness whose roots are not
Simply evil held back.
Somewhere
There must be a beauty
That continues being beauty
A pure conscience
That does not hide an alienated crime
There must be a love of life
That does not speak with a lying tongue
And a freedom that is not based
In the oppression of others.*

I want to believe that there can exist this place. I want to believe that as the religious of the North, South, East, and West, we can be one of those small vital places where the elixir of hope is cultivated. I want to believe that we can “be humble and simple signs of the star that even still tickles in the night of the towns, attracting all towards the centrality of life.”



SPIRITUALITY OF THE CONSECRATION

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It is said that in our society, behind a veil of agnosticism, and distanced from all religion, there hides a deep yearning for the Absolute that formed us and brought us into being. A disillusion with globalized progress can be perceived. Hope, which spontaneously pours forth from every human heart, feels inhibited without knowing where to project itself.

What are we to do, as consecrated men and women, in the face of this critical situation?

We spend centuries contributing excellent services to humanity and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus’ Gospel. In these new circumstances, some of these services are provided by the State (though not in all countries) and, in a hedonistic and competitive culture, there are few who show any interest in hearing the Good News we would like to proclaim.

Furthermore, it is also becoming difficult for us to continue to manage our charitable institutions. A good portion of our members are advanced in age and retired from active apostolic service. A danger lurks: that of retiring to remember a glorious past that we consider already over.

But the challenge becomes ever more pressing: what are we consecrated to do today? In light of this situation, how are we to continue the “profound renewal of the world” (VC 25) that is asked of us?

This is what I understand I have been asked to reflect on: not only what it takes to live in today’s world animated by the spirituality of consecration, but also how this spirituality can help us to bring meaning to our world.

To do so, it is necessary to briefly remember what this consecration that defines us consists of, so that we can then identify its characteristic features and understand how they can bring beauty and meaning to our world.

1 Consecrated by God

Religious life is a specific form, amongst many within the Church, of following Jesus. Since the beginning, there have been those baptized who have felt invited “to not only welcome the Kingdom of God into their own life but to put their own existence at the service of this cause, leaving everything behind and closely imitating Jesus’ form of life” (VC 14).

We have experienced this call as an attraction - we call it a vocation - in which God has the initiative, and which is reciprocated by the person’s free will that translates into a form of community life, lived out in chastity, poverty and obedience for the sake of the Kingdom: a call and an answer. Yes, but is this consecration or is there something more?

The usage of the word “consecrate” confuses the issue. At times it is used in a judicial sense, for example as with the dedication of places or things (for example, a chalice or a temple) for an exclusive religious use. When it comes to people, “to consecrate” is frequently used analogously to committing oneself, as a human action that is directed to God.

In reality however, to consecrate something is to make it sacred; and who is able to consecrate something if not the Sacred One? On this basis we can say that a consecration is an action of God, the only Sacred one, who chooses certain people and establishes a new relationship with them so that they might carry out His mission, for the sake of humanity. We would say that on God’s part, to consecrate is to reserve, to take possession, to invade with His holiness and to send. It behooves the person to welcome God’s action, to let themselves be consecrated and possessed, to empty themselves and to consent. We, as religious men and women, do not *consecrate ourselves* to God: rather, *we are consecrated* by God for a mission.

The key element to a religious profession is not therefore the public commitment (the vows) that the person makes to live in community according to the determined charism, but the invocation that the entire community makes so that the Spirit will descend upon the person and prepare them for their mission, uniting their oblation to Christ’s offering.

There are two words with which we can express this mysterious transforming action of the Spirit: anointing and sending.

The *anointing* (in simple terms, the massage) is a penetrating action that impregnates, invigorates and loosens the limbs, that prepares and trains the person to be sent on a mission.

The *mandate* (sending) is the impulse that this anointing entails: to prolong God’s mercy, to make Jesus’ presence visible in the world, to point out “the infinite beauty that alone can totally satisfy the human heart” (VC 16).

This consecration that God works in religious men and women through the Spirit is the seal that distinguishes our identity. We cannot identify ourselves without this transformative character. “Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge” (2 Cor 1:21-22).

The Consecrated One par excellence is Jesus, He whom God “anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Act 10:38); He whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world (c.f. Jn 10:36). Jesus is the Christ, the quintessentially Anointed One. “His perfect oblation confers an element of consecration onto all the events of His earthly existence” (VC 22).

In the incarnation, Jesus initiated a process of consecration that culminated in His death and resurrection. His life was a continuous self-emptying and, without ceasing to be human, was permeated by the divine.

This was His most profound identity and this is why, when publicly presenting Himself in the synagogue at Nazareth, He applied to Himself the text from Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because *he anointed me* to preach the Gospel the poor. *He has sent me* to proclaim release to the captives...today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21).

2 The spirit that enlivens us

On the basis of this understanding of religious consecration, we can try to define the Christian spirituality that enlivens all of the consecrated in a religious family, and with which they are called to impregnate (or anoint) our world. These are the features that define this spirituality:

Belonging: commitment and rootedness

The *Amen* by which we acquiesce to God’s consecrating action, marks our innermost identity. It doesn’t just affect our lifestyle, or actions, or the direction in which we focus our energies; nor simply our religious practices. It is the profound core, the central essence of the person, which is affected and which is progressively transformed.

With baptism, our personal identity was already transformed into a Christian identity; with religious profession, the Christian identity is specified by the consecrated identity. God has marked us with His seal and the person is not able to define himself in any way other than by this consecration.

The other aspect of this identity is that of belonging. “It is not possible to respond to the question ‘Who am I?’ without including in the response, ‘Who do I belong to?’” Belonging implies a bond, which is not easy to accept in an individualistic culture. Before anything, these bonds refer to God, who has “reserved” us, not for a privilege of intimacy, but for a ministry at the

service of humanity. There is also the bond to the religious family through which this call has been confirmed, and in which we are committed to living this response.

Bond is the powerful term that defines us. If we are consecrated, we no longer belong to ourselves, and upon belonging to the only one who can define Himself as “I am”, we discover our original identity and our deepest liberty.

In a society in which God seems to be absent and unnecessary, this belonging, this strong connection of the consecrated with Him to whom they feel bound in a Mystery, which gives meaning and integrates all other bonds (national, family, work, etc.), raises a question that debilitates all of those affirmations that reduce the plane of human existence. The consecrated, by their very existence, proclaim that a supreme beauty has taken over their life and that faithfulness in Him who precedes them with a redeeming cross, does not prevent, but rather generates the profound happiness that we all yearn for.

Travelers and guides

We defined the vocation as an *attraction* that overtakes us as we let God invade our lives with His Spirit and make us ever more like Jesus. This transformation consists of allowing oneself to be formed, of a consent, which is only made possible by *fixing* one’s gaze upon Jesus and *walking* in His footsteps. “He must increase and I must decrease,” said John the Baptist.

However, the religious profession is dynamic: it is not a single event that automatically puts us in a “state of perfection”, but it is a free, human act that generates a lifelong process throughout which we make choices that strengthen it. The Spirit attracts, matures and configures us, and day to day He makes us more Christ-like, and we continue to be consecrated (anointed and sent). Saint Paul says, “may the God of peace Himself consecrate you entirely” (1 Thes 5:23). As our gaze focuses on Him, our life continues to be transformed. That is why missionary itinerancy does not uproot us, because our eyes are fixed on Jesus and it is this gaze which unites us.

This mysterious attraction, which grows to the extent that we allow it to take us over, is what gives strength and consistency to our lives. “We need to *gradually become fond of the Lord*,” said Saint Joaquin Verdruna, to express this human-divine process. “I do not know if His face was beautiful,” said Martin Descalzo, “I only know that my soul lives by the desire to contemplate Him.”

In a culture of the ephemeral and the disposable, and in a society disenchanted with progress, the consecrated, with the splendor of their gaze – a reflection of His gaze, can guide the many who seek meaning to this treasure that “has let itself be grasped” by us.

Fraternal and the wider communities

We know that our way of following Jesus is characterized by being a community, that our vocation is a con-vocation. Our lifestyle is nourished by the relationship with a Center that attracts us and is verified in fraternal and the wider relationships that derive from this Center. To be a brother or sister is a part of me, is the key to a spirituality of communion. “In community life, the Spirit’s energy that exists in one person contemporaneously passes to everyone,” said Saint Basil.

“Fraternal communion is the theological space in which one is able to experience the mystical presence of the Resurrected Lord” (VC 42). In community we listen to the Word; in community we discern His will through mediation and circumstances; in community, every day, we renew familial relationships as children of God.

We could say that belonging to God is verified in communal belonging. We know well that this belonging, which expresses the authenticity of our life, is demanding and commits us strongly, but I do not know if we sufficiently value the fact that this same belonging is a precious foundation that sustains and nourishes us. Fraternal life channels the energy of the consecrated and sustains their faithfulness.

In the face of the fierce individualism into which the search for autonomy in our society frequently falls, the community has an attractive strength that transforms it in its mission. We consecrated can present our concrete communities as a means for overcoming the inevitable day-to-day conflicts of living together, such as the alternative form of organizing our finances in a common purse that maintains us in sobriety and enables us to share with those who are in need, or the exercise of the autonomy of mature people who seek to love God in interdependence through the community and the structures established by us all.

Contemporary society and the Church itself both have an “urgent need” of these fraternal communities.

Open-eyed Mysticism

In its reference to the Sacred, consecration can be understood in very diverse ways according to the images of God that we might have. It is said that what makes a difference is not whether or not we believe in God, but in which God we believe. That is why, in talking about a spirituality of consecration, it becomes necessary to clarify that we are talking about Jesus’ God.

We believe that *Jesus is God*, but we also believe that *God is Jesus*, that He has spoken to us through the Son and that His words and actions are the revelation of God that Jesus came to bring us, together with the rectification

of other presumed ways of understanding religion.

We call it a “spirituality of the incarnation” in order to distance it from all spiritualism and to focus ourselves on a life guided by the same Spirit that nourished Jesus throughout His life, but it is the only Christian spirituality.

In being “anointed” and “set apart for”, consecration could be understood as a distancing from the world, but this is not true as we follow a God who decided to involve Himself in history. At Jesus’ baptism the heavens were torn open, and at His death the veil of the temple was torn apart. It is as if to say that Jesus abolishes the difference between the sacred and the profane. At the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel (1:26) He proclaims the arrival of the Emmanuel (the “God with us”), and the last verse says: “And know that I will be with you all of your days until the end of the world” (28:20).

If the spirituality of the incarnation takes root within us, our spirituality will inevitably become contemplative. Some have called it an “open-eyed mysticism”, which does not negate the “close-eyed mysticism” since nothing can substitute the personal relationship that feeds this gaze, but rather which underlines this last aspect. Faith enables us to break open the hard shell of reality and to discover the seed of life hidden in ambiguous situations, and thus to see how God acts within, at His own pace.

Fixing one’s gaze on the face of the Lord does not diminish the commitment to being human; on the contrary it enhances it, giving it the power to impact upon history and to liberate from that which disfigures (c.f. VC 75). An open-eyed mysticism should lead us to discover the deformed divine image in the many disfigured faces of our contemporaries, and to commit ourselves to the task of humanization and proclamation, so that these faces are transfigured.

In this way, grounded communities engaged in the task of humanization can make a large contribution to the new evangelization of those who have fallen from a ritualistic religion, but who may yet discover the Good News of a kingdom that is already among us.

3 To make of one’s life an offering

In “*Re-departing from Christ*” the Church has told us that religious consecration assumes a Eucharistic structure, and that participating in the Eucharist renews the interior oblation of one’s existence (c.f. RC 26).

The Eucharist is a unique opportunity that is given to us to make of our life an offering joined to that of Christ’s. In it, we are consecrated every day; in it, we receive the capacity and the mandate for the mission that we have received.

When Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me”, He left an open invitation

to the table to all those who are willing to make of their life an offering for the good of all. With all the other sacrifices of the Old Testament having been abolished, we are left with the “memorial” of that unique offering in which there is no more than only one priest, Jesus Christ, who gives Himself and who “made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father” (Rev 1:6).

That the Church has an instituted ministry to preside at this true worship does not detract from the truth of our priesthood, which we are invited to consciously and actively exercise together with Him. We should not go to Mass “like strangers and mute spectators”, as the Council says, but we should offer ourselves for the good of others, not only through the priest’s hands, but together with him (c.f. SC 48). We are asked then to be con-celebrants in the offering that, together with His Church, Christ makes to the Father.

We consecrated must approach this source as part of a people. We must make our own the living Word, we must sing of God’s faithfulness, and we must bring to the altar the sorrows and hopes of all peoples together with the mission of the community, and to place there our poor and simple consecrated lives. The Spirit will descend on all of this to unite it with the Body and Blood of Jesus, and we will thus offer it to the Father to give Him glory through Christ, with Christ and in Christ.

Our weak faith is supported and strengthened by the faith of the Church, and the Eucharist makes sense of the entire worship of our consecrated lives.

Conclusion

We are all convinced of the prophetic dimension of consecrated life, but in the current situation (one of unbelief, injustice, economic crisis, etc.) we can say that it is time to take prophecy to its extreme.

Before anything else, the religious vocation contributes to a “precious impulse” and a great coherence to the life of the *believers*, many of whom are disoriented, scandalized, and needing to recover the identity that their baptism marked them with.

For *non-believers* the religious vocation can be an existential proclaiming of the presence of this God whom they ignore, even though they look for Him in thousands of ways.

And in *all of us*, our presence can fuel the hope that the Kingdom be present. Hope is proclamation and anticipation; hope is also our mission.

“In this way, consecrated life becomes one of the concrete signs that the Trinity leaves in history so that men and women are able to discover the attraction and the nostalgia of the divine beauty.” (VC 20).

CELIBACY (IN CHASTITY) IN CONSECRATED LIFE IN AFRICA

Fr. Richard Kuuia Baawobr, M. Afr.

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Original in English

Some years ago, a Congolese Jesuit wrote a book on Celibacy from an African perspective and gave it the thought-provoking title: “*Célibat consacré pour une Afrique assoiffée de fécondité*”¹ (which could be freely translated as *Consecrated Celibacy for an Africa thirsty for Fecundity*). If there is a value that is most stressed throughout Africa, South of the Sahara (that I know better), it is that of physical life and giving life to others in order to ensure a future. Consecrated celibacy in Africa (and probably elsewhere for other reasons) therefore comes as an option that goes radically against that current. This poses challenges to many young men and women in their option for consecrated life. Do they accept celibacy as part and **parcel of a package** deal to be consecrated in which case the certain compromises will be sought, or do they **choose** it as a sign of something new and fulfilling (for self and for the world) ... the Kingdom of God. In my years as a member of a Missionary Institute and in my interaction with my brothers and members of other Congregations, I have come to realise that the **challenges** of living chastely one’s celibacy are real and not limited to one culture – the African culture, for example. Rather than being paralyzing they can actually be **occasions of growth** and a deepening of the commitment to God and to neighbour. I will mention briefly some pastoral (and administrative) dilemmas that as Religious Congregations of Societies

of Consecrated Life that we sometimes have to face. Any light/help we can offer each other will, according to me, be most appreciated.

I will base my sharing on four major points:

- Celibacy: A Package Deal-Call?
- Some Stepping Stones for Celibate Commitment in Africa
- Growing in One's Celibate Call in Africa (and elsewhere);
- Some Pastoral Dilemma: Challenges in Forming for and in Living celibacy.

Although my vision of celibacy will be from an African perspective coloured a lot by years of intercultural living, I believe that in the Counsels the unity of all consecrated persons around the Gospel is greater and more determining than the cultural divergences. I always keep in mind that the cultural divergences are called to be evangelised!

1. Celibacy: A Package-Deal? A Call!

Speaking from my experience, I will say that when many young men and women in their early years (as mass servants, etc scouts, etc.) in Africa choose to become priests or religious in response to what they believe to be God's call, they do not always realise what that will entail and the demands that go with it. I now recall the look in the face of the priest who was sounding us on what we wanted to become in the future once we grew up. I boldly said that I wanted to be a priest. He asked me if I was ready to live celibacy. I hardly understood what the word meant, but I said yes. What had attracted me to the priesthood in the first place and later on to the Missionary of Africa life was that the priests I saw were happy and available people. They were role models. I did not know anything about their Vows or Evangelical Counsels. I felt called to live like them and if in order to live that way I would have to become a priest, and a celibate for that matter, whatever it meant and entailed, I was happy and ready.

Of course with the years and later on in the secondary school, before I joined the Seminary at the age of 20, I had more explanation but it still remained at the rudimentary understanding, namely that priests do not marry, do not have children, etc. That was a negative understanding and it would take the years of initial formation to give it a positive content in terms of a call to live with Christ, totally committed to God and to neighbour without limitations and that it is a call that has to be renewed every day.

In the course of the initial formation, what has become clear to me (and I suppose to many others) is that we need to choose ourselves to live celibacy in chastity and this even in a context like Africa where the physical transmission of life is important.

2. Stepping stones for Commitment to Celibacy in Africa South of the Sahara

Although fecundity is highly valued in African culture, there are cases in which celibacy / temporary continence² is chosen or imposed and is expected of some people. This has to be respected by all concerned. This is what a study conducted by Matungulu in RD Congo in 1980-1981 revealed when he asked the asked these two questions:

- a) what are some of the things forbidden in connection with the transmission of life?
- b) why are these acts forbidden?

He discovered the following:

In many tribes, **a girl is expected to be a virgin at marriage** because that is a blessing for the one marrying her and for her parents, and it is a guarantee that she will be faithful to her sole husband.

During times of war or competitions: like in the Biblical times, men engaged in war are expected to abstain from sexual relationships so that they are fully given to their task and to ensure victory³.

During a **drought or other calamities:** men are supposed to abstain from all sexual relations in order to give a chance to nature to grow again and provide for the needs of the human family.

During mourning: couples are forbidden to have sexual relations. Men and women are thus separated and sleep apart for fear that the dead person might come to disturb those left behind.

To them I would add two further cases where temporary continence is expected. In some cases, **traditional priests** are expected to abstain from sexual relations before they make certain sacrifices.

During initiation rites: the initiation period is an in-between period⁴. In theological terms, we could speak of the “already” and the “not yet”. They are not yet adults but they are taught what they need to know in view of their preparation to live their responsibilities as young men and women and as adults. The potential is there, but sexual activity is not allowed and is severely punished . There is a strict separation between boys and girls during this period and while the former are taught by men, the latter are taught by women.

Such cases, according to Matungulu, reminds us that life is valued not just for its sake but because of what it means to the family, clan, tribe and

nation. It has to be welcomed and preserved. Consequently whatever endangers it at any particular moment is not accepted. **Long before the proclamation of the Gospel, our ancestors had realised that in and through continence, there was a vital power, a source of life and human growth.** Continence was rigorously practised at some moments of life. This is still practised in view of **safeguarding and strengthening the life that comes from God and through the ancestors.** The traditional Muntu who practises periodical continence does not do so out of love for continence itself but out of love for life.

That is where, according to me, as African, we have a stepping stone our commitment to celibacy. The life that we receive from God and that we seek to promote is fully shown Jesus' person, his message and his life-style. Celibacy is a way of saying to all in and through our persons that the Kingdom of God is here and that it is yet to come fully. In this "already and not yet" period, we accept to be signs of the Kingdom's values! Our commitment reminds us and others that there is more to life than physical life. In this way, we continue to give life although in a different way. This way is not any less real than that of the couple who has many children and many grand children and great great great grand children!

3. Growing in one's celibate call in Africa (and elsewhere)

In the years I spent in formation, either as a candidate or as an educator and now in leadership, I have come to the conviction that **celibacy as a call in consecrated life in the Latin rite has to be firmly rooted in the desire to be with and to imitate Christ, obedient, chaste and poor and at the same time it has to enable us to be totally available to our brothers and sisters.** I combine here the visions of **Matungulu Otene**⁵, a Congolese Jesuit, and of **Aylward Shorter**⁶, a Missionary of Africa anthropologist from Britain, who has worked for many years in Africa and has written extensively and a South African Dominican, **Albert Nolan**⁷.

3.1. Being with Christ chaste and celibate

Matungulu has rightly pointed out that in the Bantu world view as expressed in the languages of Eastern, Central and Southern Africa, **the concept "to have" is actually an extension of the concept of "to be"**. The word "to have" is actually expressed as "to be with"⁸. To say that "I am a priest" in Lingala, for example, I will say "*Nazali Nganga-Nzambe*" and to say I with a priest "*Nazali na Nganga-Nzambe*". This underlines that "to be" for the Muntu and for many Africans south of the Sahara is actually "to be with", to be in communion with things, other people the spirits and the

Supreme Being (God). Nowhere is it more true than in such places. As the common saying has it “no person is an island on its own”. We need each other.

The choice to respond to the call to consecrated life, is a call “to be with” Christ in a way that reflects what he lived. Among the Biblical passages that Matungulu points to underline this I wish to underline:

- Mc 3,13-14: the call and choice of the Apostles “*to be with him ...*” before being sent out;
- Mt 2820: the promise of the Risen Lord “*I am with you always...*”

Jesus lived chastely for others, poorly in order to share what he had and in total obedience in openness and total availability to the will of the Father. The self-emptying (*kenosis*) experience of Christ of which Paul speaks in Philippians 2 has to be taken into consideration. Shorter, in my opinion, makes a very valid point (to some extent) when he underlines the importance of a **cultural *kenosis*** in living the evangelical counsels in general and celibacy in particular. He writes the following:

“Celibacy involves a profound self-dedication that goes to the root of human personality, in as much as sexuality is inherent in our very identity. The chaste celibate men and women is a dedication, a self-offering, to God. God is the source of this freely chosen state of life, and the desires and frustrations of the celibate’s inmost being are the signs and means of deepening his/her relationship with God. Celibacy is a struggle in which the consecrated person’s inner resources are permanently challenged. It is a renunciation that leads to an ever growing availability and freedom”⁹.

There is a self-emptying in order to be filled more Christ. As we all know “a glass filled with vinegar has no room for honey!

According to Shorter, n:**poverty is the “root-vow”¹⁰** as obedience and chastity are entailed in the letting go of self in consecrated life. Celibacy is specifically the self-offering and self-dedication to God that has positive consequences for one’s life and for others. As he points out “***Celibacy is a kenosis, a ‘poverty’ from which others can be enriched. It is a form of cultural self-deprivation for a higher good – the practice of a universal, self-forgetting love***”¹¹.

Taking this further we can stress, with the South Africa Dominican, Albert Nolan¹², this positive nature of celibacy. It is **not an imitation of Christ’s not being married, but of Christ being totally available to God and to others and thus capable of loving all freely without wanting to possess the one he loves**. It is here that celibacy speaks loudly in Africa

(and elsewhere) as a sign of the life-giving values and life that God offers us in full in Jesus (Jn 10,10).

As Nolan puts it: “*Positively, it (celibacy) is a solemn promise to love everyone, to pursue a kind of love that includes all human being. The vow is a special kind of commitment to universal, unconditional, and inclusive love*”. He goes on to quote Joan Chittister “*Chastity is not about not loving. It is about learning to love well, to love grandly, to love with sweeping gestures.*”¹³.

This is the second element of our commitment to celibacy.

3.2. Being available to our Brothers and Sisters

Pope Benedict XVI in *Africa Munus* stressed how consecrated persons are called upon to give a credible witness to their call if they are to be agents of reconciliation, justice and peace in the Church Family of God in Africa. The living of celibacy, is one such way. The Holy Father writes:

*“Build up the Christian communities by your example, living in truth and joy your priestly commitments, celibacy in chastity and detachment from material possessions. When lived in maturity and peace, these signs, so consonant with the lifestyle of Jesus, express “total and exclusive gift of self to Christ, to the Church and to the kingdom of God”*¹⁴.

This witness is often termed a **prophetic witness**¹⁵ because like the prophets our lives **announce** that another world (reflecting the values of the God-with-us) is possible; that we are not always faithful to bringing it about (**denouncing** in God’s name); and that we are ready to soil our hands to bring it about (**commitment**) . As prophets, we speak in God’s name, not hiding the challenge to go beyond the commonly held values, in this case what some call a pan-sexism or instant sex culture¹⁶. This latter, is actually an exploitation of sex!

In this light it is important to foster **good supportive fraternal communities**¹⁷ where there is a deeper level of sharing than the programme of work. This is where the experience and desire for *koinonia* comes in. Like the first Christians, it is important to be attentive to the needs of the brother or sister with whom I share a common vocation in order to offer support to each other. To quote *Africa Munus* again, where Pope Benedict XVI quotes Blessed John Paul II’s spirituality of communion.

The ability to perceive the light of the mystery of the Trinity shining on the faces of brothers and sisters around us, to be attentive to “our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical

Body, and therefore as ‘those who are a part of me’, in order to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship”; the ability as well to recognize all that is positive in the other so as to welcome it and prize it as a gift that God gives me through that person, in a way that transcends by far the individual concerned, who thus becomes a channel of divine graces; and finally, the ability “to ‘make room’ for our brothers and sisters, bearing ‘each other’s burdens’ (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy.”

*In this way, men and women mature in faith and communion, demonstrating courage in the truth and in self-denial, enlightened by joy. Thus they bear **prophetic witness to a life consistent with their faith**. They have a model in Mary, Mother of the Church, who welcomed the word of God: by listening to that word, she was able to understand our needs and to intercede for us in her compassion. (Africae Munus, 35)*

The Holy Father indicates this as one of the paths to attaining reconciliation, justice and peace, but in my understanding, they also spell out very well the quality of communion that would be expected our communities if we are to help each other live our commitment to celibacy. As each person longs to love and to be loved and as we each believe that we have been called by God, supporting each other in living the call to celibacy is the first step in the prophetic witness. Such communities reach other but reach to others in also to each other.

4. Some Pastoral Dilemmas and Challenges in Forming for and in Living Celibacy

When things go wrong in the ministry, the initial formation programme is often blamed for it. The formation and the process are blamed for not having dealt enough with one or the other issue, or for having neglected it all together or dealt with it badly. Whatever the issue might be, we have to admit that much as the initial formation process might try, as human beings we remain mysteries even to ourselves and are constantly evolving in and through the different events of our lives and the influence of people and events upon us. I just mention three areas that maybe are only the tip of the iceberg of deeper issues that we need to address.

4.1. The Effects of Modernisation / Globalisation

Since Africa is not isolated from the rest of the world, we are constantly

influenced by what is happening elsewhere and there is an erosion of some of the cultural values that I have mentioned above. They are not necessarily always replaced by good or better values. Relativism is creeping in even in places that we would not suspect! The pure uncontaminated African culture does not exist anymore, not even in the farthest end of the bush! How do we take that modernisation / globalisation into consideration without losing what is helpful in living a celibate commitment today?

4.2. *The Influence of Information Technology*

With the advent of better developed Information Technology (email, internet, skype, etc.), it is not easy to maintain the quality and intensity of community life without it being threatened with interference from outside. It has happened in some cases that people “out there” know better of the joys and struggles of a brother or sister with whom we are living than we ourselves. We will never know everything, but when a greater part of the affective energy is spent in “virtual relationships”, it can have negative consequences for a community where we try to help each other.

4.3. *Irregular Canonical Situations*

Although Canon Law in the Latin Rite foresees sanctions including laicisation in some cases of sexual misconduct, there are instances when some people adamantly refuse to initiate the process in spite of reminders. Are expulsion from the Religious family and reduction to the lay state always the only ways out?

Towards a Conclusion

I have only shared some thoughts, incomplete, I must admit, about celibacy from my limited perspectives but fundamentally, if many of us still try to live celibacy in spite of the constant struggle, it is because it makes sense and gives life to us as children of God and as disciples of Jesus. It promotes life in more ways than we are aware. It is, in the words of Francis Moloney, a Salesian Bible scholar, our way of recognising, like Jesus,

*“the overwhelming presence of God’s Kingdom which keeps crowding in on us. In other words, our ongoing decision for chastity is intelligible as a decision which comes about with the context of a major religious experience, just as the decision for marriage comes about with the context of a major religious experience”*¹⁸ (of love).

This, according to Moloney, and I agree with him is what being a “eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19,12) and being

anxious about the affairs of the Lord” (1 Cor 7,32-35) to the point of choosing to live a celibate life.

Like Mary, our yes has to be renewed daily in attentive listening to God and to the neighbour.

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- ¹ Published in Kinshasa by Editions Saint Paul Afrique, ³1982; officially translated by Louis C. Plamondon as *Celibacy and the African Value of Fecundity*, (Spearhead, n°65), Eldoret, Gaba Publications, 1981.
- ² Otene Matungulu, *Être avec le Christ chaste, pauvre et obéissant. Essai d'une spiritualité bantu des vœux*, Kinshasa, Editions Saint Paul Afrique, 1983, p. 31-33.
- ³ Otene Matungulu, *Être avec le Christ*, 32.
- ⁴ Cf. A. Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture*, Nairobi, Pauline Publications Africa, 1998, pp. 35-40 who develops it in terms of celibacy and liminality.
- ⁵ Otene Matungulu, *Être avec le Christ*.
- ⁶ A. Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture*, Nairobi, Pauline Publications Africa, 1998.
- ⁷ Albert Nolan, *Hope in an Age of Despair and Other Talks and Writings* [Edited and Introduced by Stan Muyebe], New York, Orbis Books, 2009, pp. 112-119.
- ⁸ Otene Matungulu, *Être avec le Christ*, p. 7.
- ⁹ A. Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture*, p. 13.
- ¹⁰ A. Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture*, p. 13.
- ¹¹ A. Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture*, p. 42.
- ¹² Albert Nolan, *Hope in an Age of Despair and Other Talks and Writings* [Edited and Introduced by Stan Muyebe], New York, Orbis Books, 2009, pp. 112-119.
- ¹³ Albert Nolan, *Hope in an Age of Despair*, p. 114.
- ¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Africae Munus on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, « You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world » (Mt. 5: 13-14), n° 111.
- ¹⁵ A. Nolan (*Hope in an Age of Despair*) entitles his chapter on vow as “Consecrated Life as a Prophetic Witness. See also Francis J. Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets. A Biblical Model For Religious Life*, Bombay, St Paul Publications, 1980, pp. 85-117.
- ¹⁶ A. Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture*, p. 29.
- ¹⁷ Otene Matungulu, *Être avec le Christ*, p. 37-40; A. Shorter, *Celibacy and African Culture*, p. 46-47.
- ¹⁸ Francis J. Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets*, p. 116.

*SOME THOUGHTS ON THE JUSTICE
AND PEACE MINISTRY OF THE
CHURCH
IN THE SETTING OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD*

Fr. John Fuellenbach, SVD

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Original in English

The central message of Jesus: The Kingdom of God

There is a unanimous agreement today among all theologians and exegetes that the main topic and the central message of Jesus was the Kingdom of God. A brief look at the Gospels will immediately show that Jesus was driven (so to speak) by a vision, which he expressed in the following words: “*I came to throw fire on the earth and I want to see it burning*” (Luke 12:49). This vision contains two basic concepts or symbols. The first is the word **Abba**, the human expression, Jesus used for God whom he experiences so intensely that he called the Father's will his food. The second is the symbol: **Kingdom of God** which he defined as God's plan or vision for the whole of creation. Jesus himself used this ‘Kingdom’ symbol 92 times. Most of his parables are about his vision of the Kingdom that is coming to earth with him. The phrase *Kingdom of God*, therefore, contains in a nut shell all he wanted to bring and to communicate. We could say: in order to bring us God's Kingdom he came down to earth, he became one of us so that we could share with him the life of God's Kingdom for ever.

His vision which Saint Paul called the *the unfathomable mystery kept hidden through all the ages in God, the Creator of everything* (Eph ff. 3:3-11), is to be conceived as *both christo-centric and all embracing*.

First, Christo-centric means: in view of Christ everything was created, everything will be re-created and everything will find its fulfillment in him. The incarnation is the starting point and the endpoint of creation: in the words of Saint Paul:

He is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and everything invisible, ...all things were created through him and for him. He existed before all things and in him all things hold together, and he is the head of the Body, that is the Church. He is the Beginning, the first born from the dead, so that he should be supreme in every way; because God wanted all fullness to be found in him and through him to reconcile all things to him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, by making peace through his death on the cross. (Kol 1:15-20)

Secondly, *all-embracing*, meaning embracing everything ever created “in heaven and on earth”.

This symbol is therefore not just any vision. As many scholars have pointed out: it is the grandest vision the world has ever seen. This vision can replace the discredited ideologies of the past century. It is this vision [for] which Jesus lived, labored, suffered, and died. And it is this vision he entrusted to his disciples and the Church. It is this vision which discovers the central theme of the Bible. It is this vision which is the consummation of history—the accomplishment of God's own intention for his entire creation. “It is this vision which provides the most powerful symbol of hope” in the history of humankind. And it is this vision that provides the believer with a calling and a purpose that is higher than oneself. Indeed, it is a vision worthy to work for, to live for, to suffer for and even to die for.

Kingdom as belonging to this world as well as to the future world to come

Jesus did not envision the Kingdom that he preached as something that belongs totally and exclusively to the world to come. His Kingdom-vision leaves room for interpreting it as belonging to this world as well as for proclaiming a future that cannot be deduced from the circumstances of present history. The future, as the Bible understands it, is something qualitatively new. It lies beyond human planning and capability, something we can only allow to be given to us. While this symbol takes the world and human effort in history seriously, it does not surrender openness to a transcendent future in the fullness of God. Only God can ultimately guarantee the fulfillment of humankind's deepest aspirations. Yet, it is equally important

to realize: the Kingdom of God is incarnated in history, in human society and in the world. Although it is not purely and simply identical with the world, it is identifiable -in the world. We could also say that the Kingdom shows itself in society and is encountered in society, but this society is not the Kingdom. This aspect finds its expression in the only definition of the Kingdom which we find in Rom 14:17:

The Kingdom of God is a matter of justice, peace and joy in the holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).

With justice, peace and joy, Paul describes the content of the Kingdom of God, which he sees as already concretely present in the eschatological community. We might call these three characteristics the fundamental values of the Kingdom. Albert Schweitzer called Paul's definition -a Creed for all times. The phrase could be seen as a rule of faith or of Christian conduct.

After all, peace means primarily the opposite of war, the tranquillity of order, social order; justice means justice, the virtue proper to social relations; and joy, although it has an individual dimension to it, can mean a rejoicing precisely in the blessings brought by peace and justice. These are realities which are meant for this world already and not just something that will come at the end. It is because of the fact that God's Kingdom means the transformation of this earth into the fullness of the Kingdom still to come in the future, that it is the Church's obligation to stand up and promote the true values of the Kingdom already on earth. After all, it was this insight since Vatican Two that created the Justice and Peace commissions in the Catholic Church as an integral *Part of Evangelization*.

The *New Heaven and New Earth* are understood as being this world transformed, renewed, cleansed and made new. It is this old, sin-permeated, corrupt world, a world in which there is so much hatred, egoism, oppression, despair and suffering, that will be the object of transformation. It will become something totally new. Our world is the arena where God's ultimate plan for creation unfolds. The 'Kingdom of God' happens here, in the midst of human affairs. It is meant for this world here and now. It has happened already in our presence although the fulfillment is still to come. This aspect of the Kingdom as belonging to this world was expressed in Vatican Two most pointedly as follows:

Hence, while earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God. For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom,

and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father: a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace.(24) On this earth that Kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be brought into full flower (Gaudium and Spes 39).

Universal view of salvation (The view that emerged in Vatican II)

The view that emerged in Vatican II reaffirmed what the Early Fathers held, namely that this creation is the arena of God's redemptive plan. Creation was conceived in Christ, brought about by Christ and redeemed through Christ and will find its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. The incarnation of Jesus demonstrates salvation happens here and now, in our concrete world. Salvation is not out of this world but experienced in and for this world (Col 1:15-20). This is God's ultimate plan for the entire creation.

If we accept this view of God's plan for creation, our whole understanding of salvation will change. Being saved does not mean being taken out of this world and being transferred elsewhere. Being saved means remaining part of the whole of creation that has been transformed into the New Heaven and the New Earth. I will be saved because creation as a whole will be saved. My salvation is imbedded in the salvation of all human beings. Because my brothers and sisters will be saved, I will be saved since I am one with them. Strictly speaking, we cannot talk about individual salvation since we are tied with a thousand strings to each other and to creation as a whole. The salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ is universal in scope.

Church and Kingdom

Most important for any basis concerning justice and peace ministry is the fact, that the Kingdom of God present in history now is *not identical* with the Church but reaches beyond its borders since it is intended for the whole of creation. The alignment of these three important concepts is essential: Kingdom - world - Church. The Church is not an end in herself but is seen in the service of the Kingdom which aims at the transformation of creation. In the Word of Vatican Two: "In the Church the eternal plan of the Father is realized and manifested in Jesus Christ: to bring humanity to its eternal glory. Here the Church is seen in connection with the bringing about the secret hidden for ages in God (Col 1:16; see Eph 3:3-9; 1 Cor 2:6-10). Therefore, the Church has to be seen in this broad perspective of God's plan of salvation, which includes all human beings and creation as a whole (1 Tim 2:4; Rom 8:22 ff)."

The Kingdom present in the Church

Although the Kingdom may not be identified with the Church, that does not mean that the Kingdom is not present in her. The word Church may not appear often in Jesus' teaching but the very concept of the messianic community, intrinsically bound up with the Kingdom, implies the same thing as the concept of Church. It is, therefore, correct to say:

The Kingdom of God and the Church are two key New Testament concepts, both are crucial for the understanding of God's plan for humanity. They are central to the fulfillment of his redemptive purpose. While the Church cannot be identified with the Kingdom, for the latter is a larger and more comprehensive term, the two are nevertheless in such close correlation that they cannot be separated either (Kuzmic, Church and Kingdom, p. 49).

It is the Kingdom now that creates the Church and keeps her constantly in existence. Therefore, we can say that the Kingdom makes itself present in the Church in a particular way. "The Church is an initial realization or a proleptic anticipation of the plan of God for humankind; or in words of Vatican II, She becomes on earth the initial budding forth of the Kingdom (LG 5). Secondly, the Church is a means or sacrament through which the plan of God for the world realizes itself in history (LG 8; 48).

Kingdom Consciousness

The identity of the Church depends, therefore, ultimately on her Kingdom consciousness based on Scripture. Such consciousness includes the following five aspects:

1. Kingdom consciousness means living and working in the firm hope of the final triumph of God's reign. In the face of contrary evidence, Kingdom Christians hold on to the conviction that God will eventually swallow up all evil, hate, and injustice. It is their firm belief that the leaven of the Kingdom is already at work in the dough of creation, to use Jesus' own parable. This gives Christians an unworldly, audacious confidence that enables them to go right on doing what others say is impossible or futile.
2. Understanding God's Kingdom means that the line between sacred and secular does not exist in concrete reality. God's Kingdom means that all things are in the sphere of God's sovereignty and, therefore, are God's concern. All spheres of life are Kingdom foci.
3. Kingdom awareness means that ministry is much broader than Church

work. Christians who understand the meaning of God's reign know they are in the Kingdom business, not just Church business. They see all activity as ultimately having Kingdom significance.

4. In Kingdom perspective, concern of justice and concrete commitment to the Word of God are necessarily conjoined. An awareness of God's Kingdom, biblically understood, resolves the tension between these two vital concerns. Those committed to the Kingdom want to win people to personal faith in Jesus Christ, since the Kingdom is the ultimate longing of every human heart. They are also committed to peace, justice, at every level of society because the Kingdom includes all things in heaven and on earth (Eph 1:10) and the welfare of every person and everything God has made.

Those who dedicate themselves to the justice and peace ministry are not just human develop agents, they want to serve the mission of Christ and to bring Christ through their ministry closer to God's saving will for all.

5. The reality of the Kingdom of God can be experienced now through the Spirit who gives the believer the first fruits of the fullness of the Kingdom in the here and now. Kingdom people, particularly in their liturgy, anticipate the joy of the Kingdom. The JPM is biblically speaking a charism, that means, a gift given by the Holy Spirit to witness concretely to the Kingdom present. As such it ought to be appreciated by all members of the Church as a clear manifestations of the powerful presence of the Kingdom in the midst of their daily life (cf. Marcus Bork, Models of the Kingdom, pp. 154-155).

Final observations

A theological basis for a Justice and Peace ministry in the Church can easily be found in the Theology after Vatican Two. The often bewailed resistance to this ministry is more related to the integration of this faith dimension into our Christian Spirituality as an essential demand of our being disciples of Jesus and the implementation of this demand into the concrete situation in which we find ourselves. To stand up for justice and peace issues is not a picnic. It needs courage and dedication to a entrusted mission.

It should be expected that those who take up this ministry in their respective religious order or dioceses experience at times a lack of appreciation and interest in what they are doing and promoting. Change of spirituality is a long and often painful process. They should not let themselves be discouraged and be mindful (as was said earlier) that not success but being faithful to the

mission entrusted to them is what counts in the Kingdom of God. A constant process of consciousness building for the justice and peace issues might be exactly what most communities still need. To provide their communities by their mere presence with an opportunity to gradually becoming more alert to this constitutive aspect of the Christian mission in general might be exactly what is asked for in such communities. Under this aspect their ministry becomes a ministry of growth for the missionary spirituality of their community as well. They become - so to speak - missionaries to their own communities as well.

Our hope for the world to come is not based on purely human optimism but solely on the unshakable belief that Christ, the crucified one, is risen. Our hope is a hope against hope God will make the great vision, the Kingdom of God, come true as the prophet Isaiah 25:6-8 foretold it:

Here on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the Lord Almighty will spread a wondrous feast for everyone around the world—a delicious feast of good food, with clear, well-aged wine and choice beef. At that time he will remove the cloud of gloom, the pall of death that hangs over the earth; he will swallow up death forever. The Lord God will wipe away all tears and take away forever all insults and mockery against his land and people. The Lord has spoken—he will surely do it. In that day the people will proclaim, “This is our God, in whom we trust, for whom we waited. Now at last he is here.” What a day of rejoicing _

A Christian of today is someone who walks behind the crucified Lord singing the Easter Alleluia.

(Pope Benedict XVI.)

TESTIMONIES OF LIFE

“FE Y ALEGRÍA” IN PRISON

Sr. Maria Luisa Berzosa, F.I.

Coordinator of “Fe y Alegria” in Rome

Original in Spanish

The Movement for Popular Education and Social Promotion “Fe y Alegria” (Faith and Joy) was born in 1965 in a neighborhood of Caracas (Venezuela). It was founded by a Jesuit, Fr José Maria Vélaz, with the purpose of offering quality education to the poorest and most disadvantaged people in society.

Aided by a group of university professors and thanks to the generous collaboration of Abraham Reyes and his wife Patricia, who decided to donate half the house they were constructing for their eight children to Fe y Alegria, Fr Velaz was able to begin this work, which has spread throughout Latin America. Today it is present in 19 countries of South America, Chad (Africa) and in Italy – in Genoa, Milan and Rome – where it works for the Good of Latin American immigrants, who can study to obtain high school diplomas while working.

This work belongs to the Company of Jesus, which carries out its work in collaboration with many religious and lay organizations. All the countries are grouped in the International Federation of “Fe y Alegria” (FiyA) with the overall coordination of Fr Ignacio Suñol SJ and an Executive Committee. In addition, in each country there is a national director and a team which assists him.

The object of this work is education in every form and manner possible according to the expression of its founder: *“Fe y Alegria begins where the asphalt ends”*, as much in the periphery of the big cities as on the Bolivian plateau or in Andean locales, in the most inhospitable places, in very difficult conditions of climate and communication. There in those places the “FyA” schools are located with the logo that aptly expresses their commitment: a heart encompassing children...

In Rome in 2001 a school for immigrants was begun at the Gregorian University. Here classes leading to the high school diploma are held Thursday evenings and Sundays, their time free from work. The “*Diploma in Business and Management, with concentration in computer science*” is granted and qualifies the recipient for entrance into Italian universities as well as universities in the student’s country of origin.

Two years ago after having received a request from the Embassy of Ecuador, we decided to visit the men’s section of Rebibbia prison, where there was a numerous group of Latin Americans. We presented our plan of studies to the director, Dr. Carmelo Cantone, who granted permission for us to begin a school. Our students were to be prisoners held for “minor crimes”, almost all of which were connected to drugs and with sentences of 6 to 8 years and up. These inmates could be authorized to leave their cells to attend classes, naturally accompanied by guards. There were two persons with whom we were able to deal directly: Anna Luisa Giustiniani, Italian, head of education section and Cristobal Muñoz, cultural and linguistic go-between for Mexico.

We had at our disposal two afternoons per week: Monday and Wednesday, from 14:00 to 18:00. Then we began the search for teachers and for a person to act as coordinator for our school. Sofia Ibarra, a Mexican psychologist, became the coordinator and did excellent work. We soon found a group of teachers for the various subjects and they worked as volunteers with admirable dedication and generosity and created a veritable community between students and teachers.

During the course we all met together to celebrate the most important occasions throughout the year, such as Christmas, Easter and the end of the scholastic year, because during the summer months the school could not be continued because of a lack of personnel, a situation which made it impossible for the inmates to continue the various activities of the school.

These occasions favor a climate of warm welcome and our students speak with much spontaneity and tell the stories of their lives, stories that are always moving... and then we sing, laugh and celebrate together and this permits a greater closeness to better continue our work.

We also had occasion to get to know the guards who accompany our students. Little by little the bureaucracy connected to getting permission to enter and for other things, which is very long and complex, allowed us to feel “already in” as teachers and I can say our interest grew, and it was very encouraging to see how the students applied themselves, studied and became engrossed in each subject.

We continued to offer the same plan of studies, but the following year we reduced it to those subjects which we considered most important at the request of the students, because it was not possible for them to follow an intense, constant rhythm of study, requiring a major effort. It was not possible for various reasons: depression, changes in their legal situation, and other activities which sometimes took precedence over ours, etc. For this reason at the end of the course they received a certificate of attendance, but not the official diploma.

In the course that we are developing now, in addition to continuing to offer the agreed course of studies, we organized a Spanish course, because there were many requests for one. The course offers two levels – beginners and advanced – and is taken by people coming from Italy, Morocco, Egypt and Romania... Sofia has left the coordinator's task and hired Alessandro Lepre, an Italian who has a degree in Political Science and works quite well and is with the students and teachers every day.

This experience is turning out quite positively despite the many difficulties, not only bureaucratic, but also those from the lives of our students: family and judicial problems and their mood swings ... but perseverance and the generous dedication of the teachers has been praiseworthy. When we meet for our evaluation they always maintain that this work is worthwhile even if it were to involve only one single person. And with this thought they prepare their lessons and faithfully give their all every day.

We believe in the words of the Lord of the Gospel: “when I was in prison and you visited me” and when we arrive there and meet our prisoner-students, we feel that this “visit” is accompanied by Someone greater than us. And when we leave – and they remain – we have different feelings which keep our heart looking forward to our next meeting.

We have already created very affectionate bonds which permit us to continue the course embarked on, despite or thanks to the frequent difficulties, but love and generosity are stronger and we press on.