

*RELIGIOUS LIFE  
AS EXODUS*

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<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>AN EXODUS TO CENTER ONE'S LIFE ON JESUS AND HIS PROJECT</b> <i>Sr. Lucia Weiler, IDP</i>	<b>3</b>
<b>DIMINUTION, A TIME OF GRACE FOR LIVING IN FAITH</b> <i>Sr. M<sup>a</sup> Isabel Ardanza Mendilibar, CCV</i>	<b>15</b>
<b>ATTITUDES FOR LIVING WHILE CHANGING "START OFF NOW!" (LK 10)</b> <i>Sr. Josune Arregui, CCV</i>	<b>23</b>
<b>TO BEGIN ANEW</b> <b>THE CHALLENGE OF WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS LIFE IN BRAZIL TODAY</b> <i>Sr. Marian Ambrosio, IDP</i>	<b>30</b>
<b>36 HOURS JOURNEYING THROUGH SYRIA CONSTANT PRAYER AND ANXIETY</b> <i>Sr. Thérèse K., FMM</i>	<b>35</b>
<b>LIFE IN UISG</b>	<b>38</b>



## FOREWORD

In this time after the last Plenary Assembly (May 2013), we want to emphasize some thoughts that Pope Francis gave participants in the message that he delivered to them during the hearing on 8 May 2013. With this Bulletin we begin to reflect on his vision of Religious Life as exodus.

The Brazilian Biblical scholar *Sr. Lucia Weiler, IDP*, in the words of the Pope—**Religious life as exodus to center life in Jesus and his project**—presents an interesting reading of the various exoduses lived by religious, with an invitation to re-read the founding experience in light of them. The new exodus that is proposed to us today seeks to center our life on Jesus Christ and the Gospel. This can only be achieved in the heart of each person and outside structures that do not help us to move freely towards worship and service.

In her paper, “**Diminution, a Time of Grace for Living in Faith**” the theologian *Sr. Isabel Ardanza*, a Carmelite Sister of Charity of Vedruna, offers several points about the phenomenon of decreasing numbers that many congregations are presently experiencing, to help us to recognize this as a theological time “where God awaits us, calls us and sends us.” It is a time of grace to deepen our sense of mission and theological experience.

*Sr. Josune Arregui, CCV*, presents several “**Attitudes for Living While Changing**” in accord with Vatican II’s invitation: live life as a process beginning with an itinerant fidelity, be the memory of Jesus, have a positive view of our world and an openness and a dialogue with those who are different, surpass the fear of experimentation and live believing. Believers and pilgrims are one and the same.

The article “**To Begin Anew: The Challenge of Women’s Religious Life in Brazil Today**” is the presentation that *Sr. Marian Ambrosio, IDP*, made during the Plenary 2013. We present it here for the clarity and effectiveness in which she articulates the changes that religious are currently facing in many countries. It is a pascal exodus that can lead us to a new birth and to be prophetic signs of the active presence of God in the world.

“**36 Hours Journeying Through Syria**” recounts the experience of *Sr. Thérèse K., FMM*, missionary in Russia, when she returned to Syria, her native country, obstructed by a terrible war.

# AN EXODUS TO CENTER ONE'S LIFE ON JESUS AND HIS PROJECT

Sr. Lucia Weiler, IDP

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*Original in Portuguese*

*“Consecrated life means an exodus from yourself  
To center your life on Christ and on His Gospel.”<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Consecrated religious life has always been characterized by itinerancy in its various forms. It is to this characteristic and this attitude of journeying that we can connect the theme of Exodus, not only as an event but as a biblical paradigm, spirituality and inspiring icon for any journey. The Exodus challenges us to move away from all forms of slavery, to seek freedom, to worship the true and living God, and serve with joy and generosity.

Religious life has already experienced multiple exoduses. From a retrospective historical perspective, especially since Vatican II, we can note some collective exoduses: 1) **geographical**, moving from the center to the periphery, which has permitted to have a new angle of view from “the other side of history”; 2) **social**, which has led to a change in social position and to assume the ethics of the poor and the excluded, while strengthening our critical reading of reality and the pyramidal structure of society; 3) **spiritual**, which has made of religious life a new experience of God, where we learn to read events with the poor and marginalized, in light of the Word of God.

In this movement of renewal of the spirituality of the Exodus, the biblical book of Exodus has been read and reread with new hermeneutical keys in ecclesial life, in the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC), as well as in religious life in popular media. This triple exodus required a fourth which is still in

progress: a **cultural exodus**. In Latin America, many written works inspired or have documented the historical moment for the years 60 to 90. The main instigators were the CLAR and the CRB, in a reciprocal relationship, sometimes confrontational but always in dialogue, and the CNBB and CELAM.<sup>2</sup>

In the sequence of the four exoduses of religious life discussed here, that far from being over, are still ongoing, there is another one that I would call the **anthropological – Christological** exodus. I do not want to give the impression that it is an exodus of christocentricity, even if the title can suggest this. Our purpose is to “Center our life on Jesus Christ and His Gospel.” This is why the movement that characterizes this exodus has as its horizon the constant search for the Kingdom of God and His justice. This is the evangelical counsel proposed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Set your hearts on his kingdom first and on his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). This is the fundamental and founding option of the Christian life and, *a fortiori*, religious life for all times. It requires a permanent exodus: an exodus from self, from one’s selfishness, to center one’s life on the radical following of Jesus, putting His values into practice so that they become Good News, Gospel living for humanity. Religious life is therefore called to witness the maternal and paternal face of God, to be a sign of His Kingdom of love and justice that springs forth already, here and now, among us.

Just as in the Bible, exodus is an original constitutive experience of the people of God, handed down from generation to generation, so religious life is called to constantly reread its founding experience in the light of the challenges and the results of new exoduses.

We continue our reflection from three areas:

- \* The exodus as an experience of founding spirituality;
- \* The Christian rereading of the Exodus, in a paschal dynamic, beginning with the communities of the Beloved Disciple;
- \* A new exodus: centering our lives on Jesus Christ and his project, from the icon of the Bethany community (Jn 11:1-12:11).

## 1. The Exodus: an Experience of a Founding Spirituality

The experience of Israel, who left the hard bondage of Egypt to begin a “journey in search of freedom” from the desert to the Promised Land, is so significant that it is not only the founding creed of the Jews (Deut. 26: 1-11), but also a paradigm of Christian life.

This journey began with different Hebrew groups. What united the people was the desire to leave their oppressed conditions and their desire to live in freedom. These liberating practices, these pathways to freedom that we

call Exodus are the primary source of the religion of YHWH. In the biblical view, the experience of the Exodus is the foundation of the people of Israel. It is the origin of a lifestyle and an organization known as Jewish tribalism, a unique and revolutionary experience, not only sociological but also at the theological and spiritual levels.

Thus, in all the books of the Bible, this event, “Exodus”, was read, reread and celebrated from generation to generation, through the rite of the Passover. We could even say that the common thread that unites all the books of the Bible is Exodus. This liberation process has never left the memory of the people. The people continued to go through an oppression-liberation process by moving in new situations.

The first three chapters of the book of Exodus present us with the experience of a founding spirituality in the service of life. They all begin with statements against the current dominant system that institutionalizes the law of death. These are women and children—who unite in an illegal solidarity, civil disobedience, prophetic listening to the cry for life that flows from the oppressed. Midwives, Séphora and Phua, Moses’ mother, Jokebed, and her nurse, Miriam, are the first actresses of the Exodus (Ex 1:15–2:10). Together, supported by faith and the presence of the God of Life, they courageously face the oppressive power of Pharaoh and put their own lives in danger to save a life. “They listen to God where life cries,” because they know how to listen to life where God cries.

From the prayerful reading of Chapter 3, we can reconstruct certain elements in the spirituality of the Exodus. Here are the fundamental principles of the theology of the Exodus:

- \* First, we have the story of the detour or “return” that Moses makes to see the burning bush. The bush is a sign that symbolizes the powerful action of God’s Word. It is an action that draws people from their usual places and inducts them on a path, a process without the possibility of reversing. It is the spirituality of an itinerant. After the experience of the bush, Moses obeys the Word and no longer tends his father-in-law’s herd. Until his death, he remains at the head of the process of freedom, leading the people to the Promised Land, a place that he does not know.
- \* Secondly, God calls Moses because He has heard the cry of His people in Egypt. To God, every call is addressed in view of a mission, a service. Every human vocation is God’s answer to the cry of a person. Nobody is called because of personal merits or for her/his own self-realization. We are all called because someone cries out to God and God seeks, through a vocation, to respond to this cry.

- \* Thirdly, God reveals Himself in the vocational process. Every human vocation is an aspect of God's revelation. No vocation is repeated as such in the Bible. Each person has her/his specific vocation from an original call. God reveals Himself to Moses as YHWH or as God liberator, God with us. Through this name, God gives Moses the guarantee of His presence in the liberating process. More than guaranteeing the existence of God, the revelation of God's name wants to ensure the presence of YHWH in the midst of his people and in the process of liberation. Moses was able to get out of Egypt with the certainty that YHWH was with him and all the people who were preparing to leave.
- \* Fourthly, the liberation process concludes with the arrival of the people at the holy mountain, a place where they must adore God, and truly worship Him. God cannot accept the worship of slaves and the oppressed. Only free people, who express their freedom through acts of celebration, can truly worship God, regardless of the time and place. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman, worship in spirit and in truth. These are the worshipers whom the Father seeks.<sup>3</sup>

To summarize, we see that, alongside the desire to reach the Promised Land, where Israel can finally enjoy freedom and autonomy, there is the desire to "serve God." God, through Moses, gave the following order to Pharaoh, "Let my people go to offer me worship in the wilderness"(Ex 7:16). These words come four times throughout the narrative (Ex 7:26, 9:1, 9:13, 10:3).

What is envisaged is not only the conquest of the Promised Land but the opportunity to serve God as He wants to be served. Israel sets out, not to be a people like any other, but to serve God. The goal they want to achieve is the mountain of God, hitherto unknown, to worship and serve YHWH. The land dreamed about and expected by Israel will be the land destined for the service of the Lord, where the people who live there can live as God desires, in freedom and justice.

In the same sense, let us welcome the words of Pope Francis:

*"It is Christ who has called you to follow Him in the consecrated life and that means to continually perform an "exodus" from yourself to focus your life on Christ and His gospel, on the will of God, stripping you of your projects, to be able to say with St. Paul: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2: 20). This "exodus" from oneself means to put oneself on a path of worship and service."*<sup>4</sup>

These words invite us to reread the Exodus from a Christian perspective.

## 2. Christian Interpretation of Exodus: a Paschal Dynamic

Jesus fulfills the ultimate and definitive exodus: He passes from death to Life. This is the central part and the key to understanding all the biblical exoduses. Christian communities, who were born after the resurrection of Jesus, read and interpreted the Book of Exodus in the light of the paschal mystery, that is to say, with faith in Jesus Christ, dead and risen, the new Paschal Lamb (Rev 15:3). Through baptism, we live in the paschal dynamic of the new exodus (Rm 6:1-14). Jesus gives us a new law (Mt 5-7), feeds us a new manna (Jn 6:48-51) to support us along the way, as he supported the people in the desert (Ex 16:1-35). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ permanently seals the Alliance and opens a passage for the new people of God (Ex 19:5-6; 1P 2:9-10).<sup>5</sup>

The communities of the beloved disciple will best understand and will make a Christian interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus from the Exodus. We can read the Gospel of John as a single and similar story that takes place in the radicalism of the paschal dynamics. It is like a net that is attached to two supports, two hooks, at the beginning and at the end of the Gospel. This net is woven with two golden threads that permeate John's Gospel.

### *a) Two Hooks: LAMB OF GOD - WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?*

The first hook is the "Lamb of God" that the first disciples follow (Jn 1:36). At the end of the Gospel He is slain, the eve of Passover of the Jews. His bones are not broken but from His body gushes forth blood and water (Jn 19:31-37).<sup>6</sup>

The second hook, at the beginning and the end of the Gospel, is the question of Jesus that invites us to get started, to follow Him, in view of liberation: "*Who are you looking for?*" This question is addressed to the first disciples in a pre-paschal call (Jn 1:38) and to Mary Magdalene in a call and a post-paschal sending (Jn 20:15).

### *b) Two Threads: HOUR – A SERIES OF SIGNS*

The first thread that weaves little by little the story of the Gospel of St. John is "HOUR." In the first part, the prologue is as a prelude to the symphony that follows in the narrative. The drama of "the hour of Jesus" progresses gradually, is not yet arrived, looms during the dialogue with His mother who says during the wedding at Cana, that there is no more wine (Jn 2:4). The hour comes at the end of the Gospel, when His mother is at the foot of the cross, with her sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, Mary Magdalene and the Beloved disciple. It is the supreme hour of the Exodus of Jesus returning to the Father. When the hour came, Jesus said to his mother: "Woman, behold thy son!"

Then He said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!” And FROM THAT HOUR, the disciple took her to his home (Jn 19:25-27). This hour, this passage, this Passover, the Exodus towards the Father, became the memorial of His act of loving service (Jn 13:1) and the announcement of new life (Jn 20:16-17).

The second thread, which unfolds as a pedagogical program in the Gospel according to St John are the SIGNS. In Exodus, the “signs and wonders” are the grand confirmations of the presence of the liberating God among his people. The first sign has as a backdrop the wedding at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:1-11). The sign indicates a fundamental newness in prophecy: the end of the Old Covenant and the inauguration of the New Covenant. Six other signs of life and liberation follow that contrast with evidence of death. The last sign, which culminates this educational program of Jesus in the Johannine narrative, occurs in the Bethany community (Jn 11:1-12).

This sign is not only the culmination of the first part of the Gospel, but it is also the anticipation of the second part that begins with the concrete and symbolic gesture of the Washing of Feet (Jn 13:1-20). The Paschal event for Jesus is a passage, a gift of love to the end: the greatest sign and permanent memorial of His Life, Death and Resurrection.

The conclusion of the Gospel of John summarizes the purpose of this set of signs: “*There were many other signs that Jesus worked and the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through His name*” (Jn 20:30-31).<sup>7</sup>

### ***Comparison Between the Historical and Social Context of the Communities of the Beloved Disciple and Those of the Exodus Then and Now***

As in Exodus, the community of the beloved disciple is formed by different groups of Jews, Samaritans and Hellenists who know, only after the Paschal event and from it, that it is united and constituted as a community to follow Jesus. It recognizes that its foundation and its origin is the death, paradoxically glorious, of Jesus (Jn 11:52), as a work of love that gives itself into its ultimate consequences (Jn 13:1). The paschal logic that characterizes this community, makes it “believe in love” and in “the creative Word of God.” As sons and daughters of God, born of the Spirit (1 Jn 3:2-10), they are gathered and made sharers of the mystery of love and Trinitarian life. Jesus, as the Son who gives His life for love, also gives the Spirit (Jn 19:30) and the Father (20:17). Based on the theology of the gift, the core identity of the community is Trinitarian more than Christocentric.

This community of faith, constituted as such since its inception, expelled

from the Jewish synagogue, remains alive, vibrant and active in the world through the memory of Jesus, in the Spirit/Paraclete. The community status, which guarantees the presence of Jesus during the time of absence, is that of mutual love. The practice of the commandment of mutual love becomes the criterion for recognition of Jesus' disciples (Jn 13:34-35; 15:8). The will-commandment of Jesus is LOVE included in the dynamics of the New Covenant, as gift and commitment (Gabe and Aufgabe): "STAY IN MY LOVE" (Jn 15:9). Jesus gives His disciples the ability to experience love as his paschal heritage.<sup>8</sup> They are no longer servants, slaves but free servants, friends: "I shall not call you servants anymore... but I call you friends" (Jn 15:15).

The Johannine community passes from a blind servitude to the law and the Pharisaic tradition (Jn 9) to the joy and freedom of the sons and daughters of God. It is a painful process similar to that of a woman giving birth: "*A woman in childbirth suffers because her time has come, but when she has given birth to the child she forgets the suffering in her joy that a child has been born into the world.*" (Jn 16:21).

The polemical confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities illustrates well the reality of the process of liberation, which goes beyond simple faith in Jesus: "*To the Jews who believed in him Jesus said: If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free. They answered: We are descendants from Abraham and we have never been the slaves of any one; what do you mean: You will be made free?*" (Jn 8:31-33).

As descendants of Abraham, the Jews considered themselves free from any kind of slavery. Jesus challenges their misunderstanding and opens a new possibility of liberation: "If the Son makes you free you will be free indeed" (Jn 8:36). Jesus answers the Jews that the only source of freedom is the Son of God, incarnate in history and whose presence is perpetuated through the permanence of the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). The Johannine Jesus (Jn 8:31-59) shows that liberation is not completed and gained as an inherited privilege. It is more a process by which integration occurs between the divine and the human, between historical reality, here and now, and utopia characterized by future transcendence. This is the new Exodus, the new Promised Land.

To summarize, the communities of the beloved disciple see themselves as disciples who follow Jesus, "*the way, the truth and the life*" (Jn 14:6), in an ongoing exodus, but already "*liberated from the world*" (Jn 16:33). This is not an abstract liberation but a freedom rooted in the experience of the incarnate Son of God: "*If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free.*" (Jn 8:31-32).<sup>9</sup>

### **3. A New Exodus: Religious Life Centered on Jesus Christ and His Project**

We are in the line of the first communities of disciples of Jesus, as was the community of the beloved disciple. The voice of our pastor, Pope Francis, who spoke to the general superiors when gathered at the general assembly of the UISG in May 2013, extends to all religious, provoked and called to a new Exodus: *“The consecrated life means an exodus from yourselves to focus your lives on Christ and on His Gospel.”*

In this last part of our reflection, we hope to contemplate a pearl of the Gospel which reflects the title of my reflection: the community of Bethany (Jn 11:1-12:11). The choice of this icon is motivated by the fact that we find in this scene and in the exclamation of Martha and Mary a situation that is similar to that of religious life today: “If you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:21, 32).

The actors in this house/community of Bethany are Martha and Mary. Even if they are represented very differently in the Gospels of John and Luke (Lk 10:38-42), because of different contexts, we can read the two stories together. We meet Martha as deaconess and hostess and Mary as a woman who listens and who, in spreading the fragrance of solidarity, fills the house with love, the essence of the paschal life.

In the Johannine community, at the end of the first century, there hovered in the air and in the hearts of the disciples of Jesus a doubt about existential faith. It was not only about understanding whether there is life after death but to consider survival, the future of the community, that, in the figure of Lazarus, was dead. After four days, he already smells. That is why the introduction of the story describes the scene with plenty of questions about the disease or sleep and finally, the death of Lazarus (Jn 11: 1-16).

We can apply this same doubt to religious life in the current situation: Are we asleep? Or sick? Or have we declared our death and are we beginning to deteriorate already? How can we revive our founding charisms and journey on freely, while responding to the call of Jesus: “Come out!” This is a process that should occur throughout the commitment of all consecrated persons.

In contemplating this icon, we discover the leadership of two women in the community of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus. It seems that they perceive that the problem is not only the loss or death of their brother. The community is losing its centrality in following Jesus. The death of their brother and the community is the consequence of the loss of Jesus. Martha and Mary stand against this loss of common reference and purpose of the community, which is why they call Jesus to return. As soon as they meet Jesus, they express the

same regret in exclamatory form: “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died!” (Jn 11:21-32).

As spokespersons, they express the cry of the community which feels disoriented, in crisis faced with so many deaths and attributes that to the absence of Jesus. How can we believe in the living and active presence of Jesus during the time of His absence? That’s the challenge. Jesus formulates it thus: “I am the resurrection. He who believes in me will live even if he dies. Whoever believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (Jn 11:25-26).

The quick and immediate response of Martha contains the same formula of faith as that of Peter, head of the Apostolic Church:

*“Yes, Lord, I believe that thou art the Christ,  
The Son of God who was to come into the world” (Jn 11:27).*

But when it comes time to call Lazarus out of the tomb, Martha doubts again. This fact shows that faith is a process that must be translated into concrete practice of community involvement. For this brother to come back to life, beyond the presence of Jesus and His Word, there must be the active involvement and commitment of the community.

The Word of Jesus, giving thanks to the Father and calling Lazarus to come out is a part of the sign. The other part requires the commitment of the community to be involved in the action of “rolling the stone,” unbinding the bandages or links to let Lazarus walk freely.

At the beginning of the text of John (11:1-2), there is a scene that reminds one of the act of anointing of Jesus by Mary. The story is told only in John (12:1-11). These are contrasting or complementary scenes that will form the Hour of Jesus. That is why, in opposition to the bad smell (Chapter 11), we have the ointment poured by Mary, which aromatizes the whole house (Jn 12:3). Similarly, advancing in the reading of the Gospel, we find the washing of feet as a gesture of love - power - service (Jn 13:1-18), parallel to the gesture of the woman with the perfume.

Here, in the center of the Gospel (Jn 12:1-11), the community, regenerated in love, exudes a pleasant fragrance that is sensed throughout the house. This prepares Jesus for his Hour.<sup>10</sup> In this symbolic gesture of extreme love, Mary anoints Jesus for his supreme HOUR. The gift of His life is not only a symbolic gesture; it is an act of love taken to its ultimate consequences. From an ethical point of view, the attitude of Jesus who allows a woman, Mary of Bethany to perfume his body, to anoint his feet and dry them with her hair is very revolutionary (Jn 12:3).

Religious life is invited to take note, at the personal and community levels, of “stones” and “ropes” that prevent it from leaving its tombs and

walking freely. We are invited as Martha and Mary, to perceive the spaces where Jesus is absent, in other words, to see where an exodus of our selfishness and our self-importance is to be realized in order to center our life and mission on Jesus Christ and His Gospel. In addition, this exodus challenges us to look outside of ourselves: Where should we act, nimbly serve, so that life does not die ahead of time, so that we do not lose the fraternal relationship? We must discover and admit that in our relationships there may be the stench of death that alienates and disperses us. To change requires breaking bottles that contain or hold the fragrance of life. I know that when the good fragrance of life, of love will again fill the whole house, there will be reconciliation, a regrouping of the community and a centering on Jesus. It is an exodus of good fragrance of Jesus Christ that must, through us, spread around the world, as Paul says, *“Thanks be to God who makes us, in Christ, partners of His triumph and through us, is spreading knowledge of Himself, like a sweet smell, everywhere. We are Christ’s incense to God for all.”* (2 Cor 2:14-16). Finally, in the wealth and symbols of the biblical image, religious Life is invited to renew a clear option for the poor: Bethany, house of the poor!

The statement of Jesus: *“You have the poor with you always; you will not always have me.”* (Jn 12, 8) is a confirmation of the option for the poor described and prescribed by the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). A key important reading for the Johannine community is that true love involves the option for the poor which was the option of Jesus: *“If a man who was rich enough in this world’s goods saw that one of his brothers was in need, but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him?”* (1 Jn 3:17).<sup>11</sup>

The proposal of the Johannine community coincides with the invitation to religious life made by the Pope when he said emphatically: *“Live and remember always the centrality of Christ, the Evangelical identity of the consecrated life”*. With Martha and Mary, we learn to discern and to call on Jesus so as not to lose moments of sorority, fraternity. This is possible only if we renew our profession of faith in the one living God by worshiping and serving Him in our brothers and sisters.

*“An exodus that leads us to a path of worshiping the Lord and serving Him through our brothers and sisters. Worship and service: two attitudes that cannot be separated, but must always go hand in hand. Worship the Lord and serve others, keeping nothing for oneself: this is the ‘detachment’ of one who exercises authority.”* Evoking this new understanding of Exodus as **being centered on Jesus and His Gospel**, Pope Francis urges the Assembly with much wisdom:

*Help your communities to live the “exodus” of self by worshipping and*

*serving, primarily through the three axes of your existence.*

*Obedience as listening to the will of God in the inner movement of the Holy Spirit authenticated by the Church, accepting that obedience also passes through human mediation.*

*Poverty as overcoming all selfishness according to the Gospel that teaches to trust in God's providence.*

*And chastity as precious gift, that extends its freedom to God and to others, through tenderness, mercy, and Christ's closeness. The chastity of the Kingdom of God shows that affectivity has its place in matured freedom and becomes a sign of the world to come to make resplendent the primacy of God.<sup>12</sup>*

The evangelical counsels, thus interpreted, are educational means that renew the quality of religious life and help to live them in the radical following of Jesus.

## **For Further Reflection**

I do not pretend to conclude this reflection. By its very nature, the theme of Exodus creates an open space that invites us to contemplate the future, trusting in the promise of the God with us. He will continue to walk with us until the final Exodus. The biblical book of Exodus ends with the image of the cloud, symbol of the beneficent presence of God who accompanies His people step by step, generation after generation, throughout their journey (Ex 40:34-38).

A new Exodus to “focus one's life on Jesus Christ and His Gospel” implies a dynamic that must occur, before all, in silence and in everyone's heart. But it also involves a courageous and prophetic opening to leave structures that do not help us to walk in freedom, in view of worshipping and serving God in our brothers and sisters.

To conclude and continue our reflection, we welcome the invitation to reread our personal and congregational history in the dynamics of the Exodus:

What progress has God made with me/us and I/we with God?

How do we envision future paths of religious life and how do we want to continue to be open to God's surprises and new Exoduses?

Finally, here are the lyrics of a song by P. Zezinho to illustrate and seal this reflection on the way with God in countless exoduses that have already occurred in history.

*So far, Lord, you have brought us.  
And, no doubt, from today, further*

*He will lead us.  
He has always loved us,  
It's a long time since He called us,  
And without any doubt, He will not forsake us.*

*Since the beginning, the Lord is there.  
And, without any doubt, from today, further  
He will still be there.  
There is the pain and the cross  
But there was a lot of faith  
If there is need, He will help us.*

*From the beginning, He gave us this mission.  
And, without any doubt, from today, further  
He will ask us even more.  
His grace has called us.  
His love has sent us.  
Let us continue to seek His peace!*

We continue our journey with hope in the certainty of faith that YHWH, God with us, will continue to accompany us to the end: “And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.” (Mt 28: 20). God will be with us in our exoduses in our daily life and will walk with us to the end.

- 1 Address of Pope Francis to the UISG Assembly 8 May 2013.
- 2 Recall the project Word of Life, edited in 8 volumes in the collection “Coleção Tua Palavra é Vida” (1988 – 2002).
- 3 OROFINO, F.; BOHN GASS, I.; NEUENFELD, E.; WEILER, L. Exodo: Um caminho em busca da liberdade. São Leopoldo. CEBI, 2012
- 4 Address of Pope Francis to the UISG Assembly, 8 May 2013.
- 5 Biblical Team of the CRB. A formação do povo de Deus. São Paulo: Publications Loyola, CRB/1990, p. 48.
- 6 Note: The lamb, in Aramaic, can be translated as “servant” *doulos*. We could have here the same servant, the same slave as in the washing of the feet (Jn 13:1 ff) and in Deutero-Isaiah.
- 7 OROFINO, F.; BOHN GASS, I.; NEUENFELD, E.; WEILER, L. Exodo: Um caminho em busca

- da liberdade. São Leopoldo. CEBI, 2012, p. 45-46.
- 8 The *entolé* (command) of Jesus generates the freedom to live love from the heart and goes beyond the legalistic *nomos* (law).
- 9 Idem p. 47-48.
- 10 The biblical meaning of the fragrance is very strong in the rites of consecration and covenant (cf. Exodus 30:1-10; 22-38.) So that we can read in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16: “We are called to be the fragrance of Christ, the fragrance of the knowledge which is spreading everywhere.” We can be a fragrance of life which leads to life or the smell of death that leads to death.”
- 11 Cf. Horizonte inspirador de la CLAR 2012-2015
- 12 Address of Pope Francis to the UISG Assembly 8 May 2013.



# *DIMINUTION, A TIME OF GRACE FOR LIVING IN FAITH*

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*Original in Spanish*

## **1. Diminution, an Existential Experience**

**S**ince the time of the Council until today, great changes have taken place in the sociological view of religious life, especially in Western countries, in Europe and North America. It is readily apparent that most of our congregations are living a strong experience of decline, at both the institutional and personal levels.

Many among us are experiencing a decline connected to our age and the evolution of our life cycle. But this experience is exacerbated institutionally by the lack of new vocations, the decrease in number, the difficulty in meeting the specific charism challenges presented by the mission, the increase in average age with what that brings: sickness, less strength, a mismatch between assumed responsibilities and the strength to carry them out, difficult posts, to find a replacement for governmental tasks, excessive accumulation of work for some people who end up questioning the meaning of their work which makes it difficult to live other essential dimensions of religious life such as personal prayer and community life.

Therefore, we see that the diminishment is not only sociological but that it is an existential experience that often pairs up with fear, suffering, despair... that anticipates a sensation of death and causes to vacillate trust in life and even faith in God.

## **2. Different Perspectives on Reality**

Faced with this reality, some are trying to assume it because “it is our lot,” even if it hurts; but it is not uncommon that this also causes disorientation

and reactions of denial and departure, or that voluntary and Promethean attitudes develop by which we try to control the situation.

For many, even if this is not said openly, what we are living is an adversity. We regret the recent past where everything was different and where religious life seemed flourishing, gave vigorous responses in different missionary fields and enjoyed a strong ecclesial and social recognition.

This initial feeling is understandable because instinctively, human beings tend to associate God with experiences of fullness, abundance, strength and life while they are inclined to see Him absent from situations of diminution and pain.<sup>1</sup> However, biblical anthropology and Christian spirituality underline the importance of suffering for the maturation of faith.<sup>2</sup> In this perspective, it is possible to read the present circumstances as a *kairos*, a privileged time to perceive God's creative and saving action in history and to live following Jesus in a more radical manner. But that does not mean that it is necessarily easy and that the spiritual fruits are evident. Rather, it is a faith experience that can only be understood retrospectively, beginning with a gaze that perceives that what was given to us to live has been a great gift.

Through this brief reflection I would like to contribute to a theological perspective of our times. I would like to help change attitudes and posture so that we can live our reality as a graced experience.

### **3. Some Key Ideas to Assist Us to Live These Times in Faith**

Diminishment is a prevalent reality but it is possible to live it in different ways: with a sense of failure, disappointment and despair that paralyzes; with naivety and voluntarism while continuing to project ourselves as if nothing is happening; or else in inhibition or escapism that leads to "Run for your life" generally... But one must also welcome it from a *theological stance* where the Lord awaits us to call us and to entrust us with a mission, with a newness that we could never imagine.

But this experience is a gift of the Spirit that we can only ask for while preparing to receive it. I will present two keys that, I think, can help us today in this regard: a relationship with the Lord and the theological sense of mission.

#### ***3.1 Cultivating a Personal Relationship with the Lord***

A personal experience of diminishment is a big challenge for the spiritual journey, but when the personal dimension is set in the context of institutional decline, then the challenge reaches unsuspected levels that makes us seriously question the meaning at all levels.

The base principle of all human and spiritual maturity is the ability to take reality as it is, which is often not easy. Guardini<sup>3</sup> said that the realities that we perceive instinctively in faith and fruitfulness can be lived with meaning from themselves but that life in decline cannot be founded on itself, it must receive its sense from another foundational reality. The question we ask is: What can sustain us today? On what should our confidence rest?

Experience shows us that trust is based on interpersonal relationship and love. We have confidence only in those whom we know and we trust exclusively those whom we know love us.

This also applies to relationship with God, but in an absolute sense, because we can have absolute trust in God alone. This trust is based on an act of faith: “I believe in your love, I believe in you. This is why I trust you more than myself. I give you my life and I continue to trust you even if darkness falls because I have experienced your fidelity and your love.”

Theological life involves an affective relationship with the Lord which includes, of course, personal prayer, but is not limited to that; it consists in living only for Him in faith, hope and love so that the personal You occupies our hearts. But this does not just happen; it must be explicitly cultivated and cared for throughout our life.

As the gospel shows us in the case of the disciples, especially Peter’s experience or Mary Magdalen’s (Jn 20-21), when contradiction, suffering and darkness arrive, only a personal love relationship can sustain us and keep us beyond that which is reasonable or what we control, as Balthasar says: “Only love is credible.”<sup>4</sup>

This is a constant of the Christian spiritual life but I think that in these times it takes on a special importance. It is not possible to live as a grace the experience of diminishment that characterizes life today for most religious and which in general goes hand in hand with aging if we are not rooted in a theological stance. Without this personal experience we cannot imagine leadership in governing and in accompanying people marked by spiritual wisdom that is indispensable to discern the ways of the Lord in the situation—which should be more pronounced in future years—that is current in religious life.

Often, when we reflect on formation programs, we hold faith for granted and we stop at more specific aspects of religious life. How not to assume it among those who have consecrated their life to God? Yet, faith is fundamental to the beginning of religious life and to its continuous revitalization; nevertheless, one should never take it for granted. The most profound aspect of our vocation and our challenge, that of all Christians, is for us to turn always and again towards the Lord Jesus to become better Christians. For,

as it is written in the fourth Gospel, the radical sin which is never far away, then and now, in all forms of Christian life including religious life is that of unbelief.

Relationship with the Lord is the precious pearl which we should treat well today because our time and the big black clouds that we see on the horizon cannot be lived with meaning and a sense of mission except in the founding experience of a personal and affective history with Him.

### ***3.2 Deepening the Theological Sense of Mission***

Mission is a theological element of great importance in the Christian life. For apostolic religious life, it is the central axis around which evolves all other aspects of the consecrated life: prayer, community life, institutional organization, professional preparation...

The word *mission* means *sending* but, often, we focus on our response to being sent and not on the mission itself. The difference seems subtle, but that can be crucial in the spiritual process of theological maturation of mission.

If we put the spotlight on our response to God, we concretely situate the mission in the midst of all the activities that we do on behalf of others, according to the “charism of the congregation,” that is to say, the “missionary fields” that the Church entrusts to each congregation. And, from there, we identify the mission with the implementation of these “apostolic activities.”

The law of life is that our activity decreases gradually as we age. In this perspective of response to mission, we feel that the “mission” diminishes in our personal life. What remains is our volunteer activities, increasingly scarce, or the possibility to collaborate in the “mission” carried out by younger members, through small personal contributions to facilitate their task and finally, through support in prayer, to live the “sense of mission” even if we do not participate personally in the “mission.”

I believe that this conception of what is and assumed to be the mission is very simplistic. It is difficult, in this context, to live as mission the existential experiences of diminishment that accompany the final stages of life and, in particular, the current situation of our congregations. One must deepen the theological dimension so that the sense of mission widens and embraces all of life as the years pass, until the moment of the final yes. And, for that, we must fix our eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:2) because He is the model of all completed mission.

The Gospels show that Jesus is always united with the Father’s will thanks to a love relationship with Him. His obedience is a loving response to the love He feels from the Father and is a supreme expression of spiritual

liberty. The most profound desire that flows from this freedom is that of accomplishing at each instant what His “Abba” wants of Him.

Jesus sees himself as sent by the Father and He lives His life as a mission, depending on the Father’s will, to the point where “being in obedience” is His deepest identity: “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to accomplish his work” (Jn 4:34).

Jesus never expresses the will of the Father in a personal project but He lives listening to what God has prepared for Him. That is why, in the early years of His public life, Jesus lived His mission in performing the Messianic works of caring, teaching, healing, welcoming, forgiving, giving food to the poor... in all of Galilee, because the Father’s will was to establish the Kingdom through His person and activity. But, as Israel did not accept the Kingdom as God offered it, Jesus, obedient to the Father, had to take on their refusal and suffer the passion and death. In this final stage, He does nothing, He lets himself be led “like a sheep to the slaughter” (Is 53:7) and He abandons in “Abba’s” hands the fulfillment of His messianic mission, with the certainty that it is He who brings about the Kingdom, both through action and through the passion of Jesus, which, paradoxically will be the pinnacle of His mission.

If Jesus had likened His mission to a project—establish the Kingdom through the accomplishment of messianic works—it would have ended with a resounding failure. But if His mission is to obey the Father, then His passion and death are the ultimate expression of His filial obedience and therefore the fulfillment of His mission. Through Jesus, the Father has finally been able to bring His work of salvation to the end and the resurrection will be the revelation of the Kingdom in its fullness.

Jesus has always lived by identifying with the Father’s will and in an absolute submission to Him but it isn’t true of His disciples. We must go through a long maturing and conversion process, not without conflicts so that obedience to God can be a response of love born of freedom.

Usually, in the first stages of adult life, the “mission” is a little “to our measure,” with a significant narcissistic component. Experience tells us that for many years, we confuse the mission with our plans and projects that we justify as the will of God that we are confident to accomplish. By our mission, we project our own expectations with a good dose of “ownership.” Even in the most worthwhile projects, there is a lot of desire for self-realization and self-indulgence. That is noticeable because we “pay the price” of our dedication even if it is very subtle. We give ourselves “generously” but when reality does not match our expectations or when the results are not up to our hopes, we feel frustrated or in crisis. It is normal in the first stages

of the spiritual life, that the mission as project has a large specific weight; what doesn't go is when we get bogged down in that phase throughout our life.

We experience, sometimes for quite a long time, a conflict between our interests and the will of God, because integration implies a broader process. Our freedom must ripen through a personal relationship with God and experience His love and forgiveness. Obedience to God will then become a "loving obedience" which arises from the depths of our heart.

But the conversion that that implies requires a personal transformation that often occurs through unexpected situations and experiences that impose themselves on us. For example, the existential experience of diminishment leaves us without projects but fortunately, this "forces" us to deepen at the existential level the theological sense of mission.

The Christian life always has as its ultimate horizon obedience to the Father's will, but, normally, we must discern what God wants because it is not evident. However, there are times when reality imposes itself on us and where God's will is obvious. Then, it's up to us to accept it in faith and consent. It's not the time to act but to let things be.

We learn that the mission is not measured in what we do even it is "evangelical" but in loving obedience to the Father's will. As good and important a task may be, if it is not what the Lord asks of me now, it is not my mission. The mission is to allow God to do what He wants through me, from a free yes to His will. That is why, at its peak, it is reduced to an act of faith and an Amen to His will, like Jesus on the cross. Faith, obedience and mission thus form an indissoluble unity.

When in the life of a person or a Christian institution arrives the experience of diminishment, obedience to the will takes a particular form, that of *consent*: a supreme exercise of love and Christian liberty which consists in saying yes, freely, to what is imposed on us, because we receive it from the One whom we know loves us and desires only our well-being.

The words of Jesus to Peter in the Gospel of John enlighten us to live our time with the sense of mission: "*When you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go*" (Jn 21:18). Jesus adds: *You follow me*. We are struck by the fact that it is the first time in the Gospels that we find a personal call to follow Jesus and it is commanding: *You follow me*. For, in the image of Jesus, it is the time of the real mission. It's when one can do nothing, if not to extend arms and allow to be led that the disciple arrives at

the summit of her/his mission. It is the hour of configuration with Jesus in his Easter, that of becoming another Christ.

Only God knows what the world needs today and He brings it through those who, free and confident, live in listening and loving obedience to His will. However, the awareness of being in the process of accomplishing a mission, in welcoming and living this time of theological stance, brings new meaning that changes substantially the way of living. It also helps to face the decisions that seem necessary or those that reality imposes, even if all this happens in the dark night of faith.

#### **4. The Diminution Experience, a Theological Place for Religious Life**

Our current situation does not prevent us from living our mission today in following Jesus, but is, instead, a theological place where the Lord awaits us, calls us, and sends us; not because of diminution but precisely through it.

We do not yet fully grasp the grace contained in this time of diminishment but we can have intuition about some of its fruits.

Throughout its history faith has founded religious life but it is evident that today we must cling to it as our salvation. The situation that we are currently living “obliges us” not only to “have faith” but to “live by faith,” which is an immense grace.

How many texts of the Word, that have always been there, now take on a new light and become rocks on which we can base our life with incredible realism!

*Do not abandon us whom you have made. (Ps 138:8)*

*To me, poor wretch, come quickly, Lord. My helper, my savior, my God, come and do not delay! (Ps 40:17)*

*You are my shepherd. Though I pass through a gloomy valley, I fear no harm; beside me your rod and your staff are there, to hearten me. (Ps 23: 4)*

*I, Yahweh, have said and done this. (Ez 37:14)*

*My grace is sufficient for you. My power is at its best in weakness. (2 Co 12:9)*

This grace filled time “forces” us also to understand in a radical way a sense of mission, beyond our plans and our projects; it pushes us to deepen our paschal sense.

What does the Lord want of religious life today? On principle, we do

not know. It is not to start with our ideas and desires and to project on them the will of God. Our mission today is defined not only by world reality to which we are sent but also ours. And it is not intended only for those who can continue to work but to everyone in their concrete situation. That is why we must place ourselves in the sovereignty and novelty of being sent by the Lord and to listen to Him. This requires embracing heartily our current reality as a “theological way” from which God calls us and sends us today. This is the only way we can be “useful instruments” in His hands so that He can accomplish what He desires and what He knows the world needs.

Some time ago, great optimism reigned in our society. All believed in the possibility of infinite progress. But today, our world is plunged into the night. Help is needed to overcome situations of depression that can become generalized and to instill a confidence that helps to make sense in obscurity. Witnesses of God are needed who have the experience of living in faith in the midst of diminishment.

It is possible that God, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attracted so many congregations to meet the social needs of the time, is now in need of women and men, vulnerable and mostly older, but who, based in Him, accept with confidence the reality given them to live, by engaging in creating links of solidarity and fraternal love within and outside of their congregations.

Maybe the world needs to see this and it is possible that today the Lord wants to use us and our situation. But for this, congregations should strive to care for the theological life of their members.

<sup>1</sup> “The experiences of innocent suffering and injustice are a much stronger existential argument against belief in God than all arguments based on... any type of philosophical reasoning.” W KASPER, *El Dios de Jesucristo*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1985, 188.

<sup>2</sup> The suffering... will come to be a theological place of true religion in... refuting some of the false images of God by being, on the contrary, the rock on which to build the image of the true face

of God...”. J. R. BUSTO SAIZ, *El sufrimiento ¿Roca del ateísmo o ámbito de la revelación divina?*, Madrid, UPC, 1998, 47.

<sup>3</sup> R. GUARDINI, *La aceptación de sí mismo. Las edades de la vida*. Madrid, Ed. Guadarrama, 1962, 126.

<sup>4</sup> H. U. von BALTHASAR, *Sólo el amor es digno de fe*, Traduction de Á. CORDOVILLA, Sígueme, Salamanca 2004.

# ATTITUDES FOR LIVING WHILE CHANGING

“START OFF NOW!” (LK 10)

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**V**atican II has represented not only what has been called an *aggiornamento* or an updating of a historic moment, but it caused religious life to take on an attitude of permanent change. We could say that it promised a renewal that is not yet achieved, not because it is incomplete but that it makes us discover that living while changing is a fidelity requirement of our life style.

At the spirituality level, we have moved from the *imitation* of Christ to *following* Jesus, a much more evangelical and dynamic concept. To follow is to *walk behind*, in this case the Lord Jesus, without knowing where that road will lead us.

When Jesus announced His passion for the first time, Peter put his hands on His shoulder, led Him aside to reprimand Him and to dissuade Him but Jesus turns around so all will hear Him and He tells Peter: “*Get behind me*, because the way you think is not God’s way” (Mk 8:33). Behind, that is the place of the disciple. Behind, an itinerant Rabbi who travelled through villages in Israel and who, at that moment, was marching towards Jerusalem.

To follow Jesus implies continual movement and change. The dedication of all religious of all times has remained in that creative and innovative stance and demands certain attitudes that I will try to develop.

## ***1. Approaching Life as a Process***

It is an existential and spontaneous attitude during the first years of life when we feel incomplete. Meanwhile, after the passing of youth and a time for research and cautious attempts, another trend—also natural—tends to predominate: that of settling in, because we are well as we are or because we think that we can achieve nothing else or because we do not have sufficient energy to continue to search or struggle.

However, the attitude of the walker leads one to constantly aim for “a small step forward” as a person or as a community, because we believe to become in some respect in a “state of perfection,” because we believe that another world, another person, another religious life is possible and because we believe that it is the Lord Jesus who leads History.

This attitude persists only if one has a passionate goal because it is the goal which causes one to move forward. Those who are without hope, ask for nothing, do not dream, lack perspective and energy to overcome difficulties and to progress; they sit by the roadside to complain and beg or else to defend their position and rejoice in it.

It is true that dreams are insufficient and that one has to plan one’s steps on the road. Personal and communal projects are not effective unless, given reality, they succeed in finding the road to follow each year in the direction of the goal. In our case, it is the community’s role, united around Jesus and energized by His mission, by His invitation to be His presence in the world.

We cannot deny that the postmodern mentality invades us, kills our utopias, clouds our dreams; we throw in the towel and we hang on to our acquisitions as advantages and to gain some small satisfactions for the present moment. I believe that it is the equivalent of abandoning religious life while remaining inside its walls. These are data that do not appear in the statistics but that seriously erode communities.

When, however, we remember our charismatic origins, we are surprised by the boldness of the Spirit through our Founders/Foundresses, capable to make a qualitative leap in society and in the Church of their time. In penetrating reality, the charismatic fire that animated them suggested new responses to suffering humanity in the social situation that was theirs.

Even today, these charisms, if still alive, can evoke a new potential to provide answers to questions today, evidently different from those of yesterday. It is not to be the exact copy of the first brothers or sisters but to be the heirs of a living charism that is a gift to the Church. The Council urges us to look to our origins and to imbibe, not to go back in time but to move forward.

Restructuring or converging processes in which numerous congregations are

currently engaged can be looked upon as simply a sensible and stable reorganization of the forces or to give rise to a new age of charismatic transformation. Some pretend to simplify the organization, others look to get people out of their inertness and to renew in them a sense of utopia.

## 2. *Itinerant Fidelity*

In pre-conciliar religious life, fidelity was closely linked to the maintenance of traditions and repeating habits. The observance of the rule was a major virtue in the novitiate and to persevere in that was to be faithful. Thus, year after year, the new wine of passion for Jesus, embodied in an innovative charism within oneself remained prisoner in wineskins incapable of keeping it.

Still today, we try to keep what is essential and perhaps unconsciously, to retain some security; we reproduce forms that, at other times, may have been valid but which make us less faithful and intelligible to contemporary society.

Fidelity consists in keeping the “eyes fixed on Jesus” which, as we said, makes us itinerant. Sometimes, closeness to the one we follow can prevent us from seeing the horizon and rob us of the security of being in control. “We do not know where He leads us, said Edith Stein, we only know that it is He who is leading.” Only the fascination for Jesus can keep us in this ongoing dynamic and allow us to let Him hold the reins in confidence.

Itinerant loyalty goes beyond a willingness to change course. Because it is not to live in improvisation; it requires some learning, lifelong formation, and consequently, a change in mentality, a *metanoia*, a conversion. Itinerancy is also adapting oneself to new lifestyles while remaining in the same house or in being open to new forms of mission. “Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put on the New Self that has been created in God’s way in the goodness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:23).

## 3. *Being Memory of Jesus*

Post conciliar religious life has discovered, like the Church, that it exists for others and not for itself. To follow Jesus means sharing His life’s project which is none other than the Kingdom of God.

In this mission for all Christians, religious life, according to the Council, has a significant charism. Although if often, we, the religious, are identified by our charitable actions, our first mission is specific and is to be a sign of being the memory of Jesus.

“It falls *specifically* on consecrated persons to contribute to evangelization before all by the testimony of a life given totally to God and to our brothers... to become, in some way, an extension of His humanity” (VC 76).

We can simplify by saying that our mission is to be a sign as follows: Jesus

resurrected is alive and present in the world but we do not see Him. The Church confers on us the mission to serve Him as a bridge, to render Him visible by our community life style, rooted in the vows, so that people feel attracted by the Kingdom. And we have to do it all “by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of surprising the world” (VC 20).

This sign has a dual function in the Church: to bring the leaven of evangelical radicalism through an alternative lifestyle—countercultural to the present culture—and renew the Church with courage and creativity. In all of history, I think we can say with humility that, in general, religious life has been a source of testimony and renewal, in brief, meaningful. Can we say the same thing today? Do we consider this in our current discernment?

As it has revived its evangelical identity and has followed the invitation of the Council to know the situation of today’s world to better evangelize in meeting its aspirations (PC 2), religious life has realized the inadequacy of its way of being and lifestyle. Admittedly, we spoke a language that people did not understand and that we are called to be signs but not incomprehensible hieroglyphics.

Thus we stripped ourselves of our obsolete finery and we learned new languages of communication and presence. We went from identification by our clothing, our structures or missions (an identity from *exterior towards interior* by which people recognized us) to attempting to identify us by our specific evangelical lifestyle (an identity from *interior towards exterior*, more diffused if you like but at the same time stronger and more convincing). It is useless to change if we do not make sense.

We must be clearly aware that our specific mission is to be *the memory of Jesus*, even if we devote our energies to other worthy tasks destined to build His Kingdom. If we consider that the message by the testimony of the Gospel is our first mission, we will try to learn the language of those around us to know what they seek and to listen to their stories of life in order to express intelligibly the beauty of the Good News that we carry and we’ve been fortunate to receive. Then will come the proximity, the dialogue and the service but our lifestyle, personal and communal, must always be our first message, much like the ambassadors of news who invite one to learn more or to not care about.

#### **4. A Positive Look on the World**

Religious life defined and envisioned like a *fuga mundi*, placed us in an attitude of defense before a perverse world and full of threats. The Pope has warned us about false prophets “who see in modern times corruption and ruin” and invited us to approach with a more deep and merciful regard “the new conditions and life forms introduced in the world.” He also warned us not to be naive—“simple as doves and wise as serpents” says the Gospel—but to discern the signs of the times and not to make generalized judgments. “Our world is full of contradictions and

faults but it is God's creation" the message of the last Synod reminds us fifty years later. This positive view when it is nourished by the spirituality of the Incarnation becomes contemplative. "There are all kinds of flowers around for those who want to look," said the artist Matisse.

It is often only in a second time, that we discover that the Kingdom of God is near. It takes faith to break the hard husk of reality, to discover it hides a germ of life and let us be touched by this grace. I wonder how we read today's world as religious. To what do we owe such pessimism and discouragement?

The post conciliar Christology and the experiences of reality have taught us to have a kind and grateful look. It is not a triumphant and glorious look but a humble one, which goes beyond a dry realism because it experienced the power of God. This is what St. Paul is saying: "We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems, but never killed; always, wherever we may be, we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body. Indeed while we are still alive, we are consigned to our death every day, for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus, too, may be openly shown. So death is at work in us, but life is in you" (2 Cor 4:8-11).

### ***5. Opening and Dialoguing With Those Who are Different***

The step that follows a positive outlook is the proximity and the dialogue with the world, the other in its difference, with the various religious congregations, sinners, enemies.... The spirituality of the Incarnation has brought religious life to be like the leaven in the dough, to what we have called the evangelical stance of preferential option for the poor. It is in this school that many communities, especially religious, engaged in peripheral areas or in multi-religious or intercultural projects have learned to discern well. Because of the rapidly changing world and through their contact with the poor, simple and creative in finding solutions to their problems, religious have been able to constantly learn a new form of presence.

It is true that integration is a double edged sword in that it can seep into our lives currents of secularization and change us into tasteless salt but we speak here of *evangelical* insertion that takes root in the mission of Jesus and is always accompanied by discernment as a means of keeping our lamps lit at the time of decision making. The integration involves risks (like the *fuga mundi*) but "if we close the doors so that error does not enter we will find ourselves without truth."

The attitude of dialogue involves believing in the other, to trust the other and have the humility to learn from the poor, children, other religions, because nobody is completely wrong and that in the dialogue there is always an exchange of gifts. "The presence of the poor in our communities is mysteriously powerful: it changes people more than talk, it teaches loyalty, makes one understand the fragility of life, it calls to prayer, and, actually, in fact, leads to Christ" (Synod Message 12).

## 6. *The Risk of Experiencing*

Looking kindly and communicating with those who are different are necessary prerequisite steps but what makes us different in life is not the ideas or training (which is essential) but lived experiences. Nobody welcomes the *concept* of tasting wine; you must drink it, feel it in your mouth to experience it.

One has to experience changes knowing that entering into a new and uncertain situation always involves risk taking. The risk has an attractive and suggestive side but it is also associated with some fear that should be overcome. Fear of the unknown, of failure, of the “bazaar,” losing control (for people with leadership roles). For some, it is not easy to take this uncertainty which makes one prefer the security of the known, of what has worked well so far. The message of the last Synod affirms: “It is our duty, therefore, to overcome fear through faith, discouragement by hope, indifference by love” (5).

We’re not talking about disjointed experiences but rooted in a perspective. In the post-conciliar period it was in the field of initial formation that the need for change became more evident and we began these *experiments*, some a little strange but others that opened new paths such as formation communities in popular neighborhoods, apostolic experiences on other continents, inter-congregational projects of life and mission, etc.

After a few years, some began to say: “This is it! The time of experimenting is over!” and they wanted to regulate and paralyze life again. Of course, we will always need in life some structures to unify us, especially for community life, but as temporary support of the charism that is deployed in the events of history and in new life settings. It is the experience, along with a humble assessment in the light of the Word, which teaches us to live while renewing ourselves.

## Conclusion

### 7. *Living While Believing, Living While Changing*

In each of the attitudes for change described above, we alluded to faith in Jesus Christ because religious life cannot be understood or lived without it, but I would like in my conclusion to focus on faith itself, not so much as an attitude but as the engine of an unrestrained maturity process and a fullness that God has drawn for each one of us and our groups.

Believers and walkers are one and the same as Abraham, our father in faith, shows us. Living while believing is to live while changing. We are the clay, the Lord is the potter and we do not know the kind of vase He molds with our soil.

The renewal of vows has always been a healthy tradition in religious life to which today we can give a new meaning. To renew is not to repeat a formula or to anchor oneself in inaction. To renew is to make anew the way of *sequela Christi*.

To renew is to listen again to the call of Jesus through the world today and discern in community how we can be carriers of our original charism.

Renewing vows is to renew one's faith—to believe in the Other and in the other—in a situation that may be very different from that of our first profession. This path, the Pope said at the opening of the Year of Faith, can be likened to a pilgrimage in the deserts of the contemporary world, which is why one must take only what is essential: the Gospel and the faith of the Church.

TO BEGIN ANEW  
THE CHALLENGE OF WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS LIFE  
IN BRAZIL TODAY

Sr. Marian Ambrosio, IDP

*This Conference was presented by Sr. Marian Ambrosio, former President of the National Conference of Religious of Brazil, at the UISG Plenary Assembly in Rome, 3-7 May 2013.*

*Original in Portuguese*

**I**n communion with all religious of Brazil, I thank you for the invitation to share testimony on some aspects of the present experience of women religious today in Brazil. We highlight the word TODAY because today is the sacred moment that Divine Providence allows us to take on the *kairos*!

We are all heirs of the past, responsible for dealing with the emergencies of *today* for the purpose of building the future.

Women's religious life in mission in Brazil has inherited a past that has been noteworthy, fruitful and happy, whose experience is very closely linked to the options taken by the church of Latin America after Vatican II. The two Conferences, Medellin and Puebla, contributed greatly to the appropriation by our people and our cultures of Vatican II—Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979). From the time of "**Medellin,**" two attitudes took flesh in our choices: *leaving our works, we learned to analyse the reality that surrounds us; and we learned to name our love—it is the poor.* From the time of "**Puebla,**" we consolidated the fundamental choice which registered forever the preferential and evangelical option for those excluded from the right to live with dignity. Based on that choice, women religious of Brazil were never the same again. As with divided waters, we can now situate ourselves in "before" and "after" Medellin and Puebla. Following Jesus came to mean taking courageous steps to find the social, cultural and geographic place where the impoverished dwelt, with solid transformational plans rooted in a prayerful reading of the Word of God and in the spirituality made flesh in the lives of our poor. So emerged the first characteristic of a protagonism that moved into the peripheries and at the socio-

political margins of the last five decades. We were at the forefront of the leadership for the socio-political struggle for the eradication of hunger and extreme poverty, for the rights of women, of children, of those suffering discrimination, the landless, the homeless and those without rights.

In order to understand the second protagonism of women religious, it is important to underscore as well that this vocational itinerancy accompanied the option of the leadership of the institutional Church of Brazil (the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil) in favour of the impoverished populations and the marginalized cultures. The prophetic voices of people such as Dom Helder Camara, Dom Aloisio Lorscheider, Dom Luciano Mendes de Almeida find immediate and creative response in the preferential projects of our own congregations. In the face of the challenges posed by the vastness of the Brazilian territory, as well as by the lack of priests at the time, women religious came to occupy a significant “ecclesial space,” taking significant **protagonism** in the pastoral organization of the communities and in the areas on the frontiers of the mission.

Briefly summarizing, we can assert that this **double protagonism**—both social and ecclesial—is the heritage of earlier times that women religious in Brazil are learning to let go of today! In the face of the immense challenges the Brazilian reality continues to present, I will give you some important aspects: the socio-economic and the ecclesial situations have changed enormously... Social projects are now the characteristic of the Brazilian government; pastoral projects are today the mark of the Brazilian episcopacy and clergy.

With a certain perplexity, the women religious of Brazil see themselves in the mirror of life and recognize the face of their crisis: **Who are we? What social and ecclesial place do we occupy today? What significance do we hold today for the church and for the world?**

- \* The first question puts before us a question of identity: we feel the urgency to define the vocational nucleus of religious life;
- \* The second question puts before us the question of our place of mission: we feel the urgency to make a transition from an understanding of a social-ecclesial place to that of an experience of **a theological-place symbolic of religious life;**
- \* The third question situates before us the urgency of going beyond the building of projects based on our competencies and preferences for “doing” and to incarnate the **symbolical-mystical-prophetic value of Religious Life for “being.”**

The challenge is only one: to begin anew! Not to “correct the past” because the historical experience is the same. Not to invent a future without roots because

the future belongs to God. Simply, begin anew—*today*—to search out the most profound meaning of our vocation; to define religious life *today* in its call as disciples of Jesus and disciples of His Kingdom; and, as disciples, to deepen today the content of the nucleus of identity and to create for *today* a language to describe it with and for the new generations of religious.

Perhaps the most visible challenge to women's religious life in Brazil could be defined as the awareness of our **“non-place”** in society and in the church. We are no longer the best teachers, the best nurses, the best social workers, the best pastoral agents or the best philanthropists... This is the protagonism we are now letting go of. This “safe house” that we inhabited until now no longer confers any **legitimacy** on us. **This is our rich, fruitful and precious opportunity...** because the “non-place” is the biblical place of the prophets. Outside of the palace, of the forum and of the temple, the prophets lend their voices and their lives to the God of Life!

We do not want, in any way, to ignore the past. There is no disappointment or frustration. The theological root for the fundamental option for the poor, the biblical root of our preferential option for the poor is our strength! There is disenchantment, mainly because, even knowing the urgency of the conversion to this deeper meaning, we continue comfortably, insisting and repeating that we occupy the role of substitute for which we no longer know ourselves to be called: on the one hand, substitutes for the State, doing what the State can't or won't do; or substituting for the clergy, doing what the clergy does not want to or cannot do.

The past that we do not want to extinguish or diminish, strengthens our option for the poor, for the places of missionary and apostolic frontiers. The past teaches us, therefore, to define our place as a **“theological place”** where religious life is recognized by its being, for being disciples of Jesus, for its passion, for the establishment of the Kingdom of Jesus here and now.

As with a paschal exodus, we are learning to die to models, so that we may be born again, with evangelical audacity, in the way that God desired for us through the inspiration of our founders.

Here I must make a parenthesis: in Brazil, there are religious who follow in the example of the Good Samaritan and who do carry out the responsibilities of the State and of the clergy, not as substitutes, but as an option of communities to the missionary frontiers, to the places where Jesus is not proclaimed, where our sisters and brothers continue to be excluded from the experience of Christian faith. There, we are women of the dawn, present from the earliest hour, we will continue for a long time to come.

Here, before the superiors general of our Congregations,

- 1) Let us remember: **A fundamental principle:** Without taking into consideration this point of departure—listening to this reality that we experience today—and without making the definitive choice for “beginning anew,” there really is no future for a real vocational promotion or the development of formation programs. That would be the equivalent of putting a new patch in an old garment.
- 2) Let us remember: **A fundamental place:** Religious life follows Jesus, taking on His project. We are for the Kingdom, and the fundamental and existential tension that exists between Church and Kingdom also exists in our mission choices... and in the exercise of our dialogue with the Bishops of our dioceses. We are for the Kingdom!
- 3) Let us remember: **A fundamental choice:** Let us not be afraid to save, in the first place, the persons with vocations, leaving for a second moment the salvation of the structures that support the institutions which we direct. It is not worth the effort to save an institution and then find that we do not have the resources for its future... It is time now to identify vocations for the Kingdom!
- 4) Let us remember: **A fundamental project:** Young women with a vocation who come to us identify themselves with the primary reason for our existence and not with a list of possibilities or institutional needs. It is a concern to see that, instead of inviting young people to insert themselves in a charismatic central project of the institute, we try to accommodate ourselves to improvisations that respond to the pressing needs of young people without any sign of belonging or without a choice that is matured in a true missionary experience in favour of the Kingdom.
- 5) Let us remember: **A fundamental relationship:** A *religious community* is, without a doubt, the first place to be considered with love and in view of love. Tired of going from model to model, today we are challenged to go beyond models and to understand community life as the locus of theological experience rooted in the certainty that God is communion. Our leadership must be exercised with authority that is favouring self-actuators, building up self-actuating persons, cultivating circularity and inclusiveness, in true communion of life and mission...
- 6) Let us remember: **A fundamental witness:** Much more than our words, it will be through our very selves, by our being, by our acting, by our communication, by our presence, by our choices, through our courage in proposing changes that we will be the first instrument of the process of the desire to “begin anew.”

At this historical moment, we are called to be a prophetic sign of the **active presence of God in the world. At the moment when the foundational charism can be touched and experienced through our being, then all of our doing will**

**become meaningful.** At times of great reforms, religious life gave all that it could of itself: it reformulated constitutions, houses, communities, structures. At moments of great transformation, religious life turns to its greatest gift, to its essence, its primary reason for existence: **God**. We are not worthy of that grace, of that gift. We are chosen by the free love of God. We are no better and no worse than the rest: we are *different*. We could say that we are *radical*, that we are going directly to the roots. We grow in the direction of the deep, through deep encounters with God.

If we agree that this is the place of origin of religious life, then we could say that we are at the moment of a return from exile, with homesickness for the “holy land” that belongs to God, and which God entrusts to us to occupy in God’s name. Our natural place is not the banks of the rivers of Babylon, and our natural attitude is not to weep over the projects that were once ours; our dream is to return, wearing pilgrim’s clothes, singing psalms of the journey of prophets of God, rooted in the experience of the past, in the struggle for more justice and hope of life for the world of today.

For the big question about our identity, the answer is simple: our identity is Jesus Christ. We are the evangelical memory for the people of God, who also dream of returning from exile. And, because the Gospel is good news, we are a source of hope for the world. And for the big question about the mysticism of religious life, the answer is also simple: we live the Christian mystery with such intensity that God’s part always prevails over our human activity, no matter how apostolic it may be. God does more, God does first and God does always. The world which, as we have already seen, no longer looks to us as teachers, today needs us as witnesses. At this time of the new evangelization, we evangelize by the witness of our faith. There are many teachers speaking about God. Let us be disciples, let us be disciples...

## **TESTIMONIES OF LIFE**

### *36 HOURS JOURNEYING THROUGH SYRIA CONSTANT PRAYER AND ANXIETY*

Sr. Thérèse K., FMM

*Sr. Thérèse K. is a Syrian Franciscan Missionary of Mary (FMM) on mission in Russia. She was on home leave in Damascus, staying with her family, when Sr. Narelle, Provincial of the Middle East, asked her to help out for a month in the community of Aleppo. This article relates what happened on her journey to Aleppo, thus giving the reader an insight into a war zone and the life of people living there.*

*Original in English*

**O**ne Wednesday, at eight o'clock in the morning, I set out for Aleppo which is situated some 330 km from Damascus. Usually it takes four hours to reach Aleppo by Pullman bus, but given the situation we are now in, it takes at least ten hours. To my great surprise, the people on the bus, on the right and on the left, in front of us and behind us, were praying continually with the Koran or a Muslim rosary in their hands. It goes without saying that I too did the same, as did the FMMs, the members of my family and our friends in Damascus.

The first hours of our journey went by quite calmly even though we risked passing through areas where there were snipers. There were endless stops for the verification "in worthy and due form" of identity cards and frauds. From time to time the travellers received telephone calls from their families who were worried about them. Of course, Sr. Narelle, the Sisters in Damascus and my family made just as many calls.

It really troubled me to see all the damage and destruction along our route, especially the damage on the international highway and in the cities of Homs and Hama. After seven hours of travelling, as a result of those communications between families, a rumour began to spread that the entrance to Aleppo was blocked and that there was fighting. It seems that this is normal, it is what happens from time to time; you just wait for the fighting to stop to continue your journey. At the usual stop to take some refreshments, the driver told us to take our time

and really eat well as we were not in a hurry to leave since we did not know how long we would have to wait at the entrance to Aleppo.

When the barricade of the Syrian army was over, we entered villages held by the “almoussalahin” (armed groups). They motioned to us to cover our heads. All the women were prepared for that, despite the openly expressed discontent. I was happy when I saw that we were just 30 km from Aleppo; it was 5:30 p.m., so I would be at our Sisters’ house around six o’clock. But no, ten km later, at Zraibe, there were dozens of Pullman buses, small buses and cars waiting; the entrance to Aleppo was closed because of the fighting.

Unfortunately there was no longer any possibility of a connection, so I could not communicate with our Sisters or my family to reassure them. At nightfall, no one was able to make a move, even though the fighting had stopped. We had to spend the night in the Pullman and set out again at dawn.

There were many gestures of solidarity and sharing among the passengers: some who had a special telephone connection offered to use it to reassure relatives; others went off to buy some bread and distributed it; others offered Arab cakes, dates and drinks from their provisions. People in the village offered their hospitality; some passengers accepted it and it seems they were well received.

The night was very noisy because circulation was restricted to the armed groups—trucks, water tanks, etc. At dawn, around 5 o’clock, the buses started off. What good luck! Soon we would be in Aleppo. Two km further on, another barricade; we had to go back. The fighting continued which sounded very loud to us; there was even firing of guns quite near to where we were.

Since we had lost all hope of entering Aleppo by the international highway, which was to remain closed until Monday at least, we had to make a decision. The “almoussahalin” offered us two suggestions: to take a so-called safe route (4 more hours on the road) which would bring us to the area in Aleppo occupied by the “almoussahalin”; afterwards each one would find his/her own way to cross over to the region controlled by the Syrian army, or return to Damascus. The driver did not want to risk travelling on unfamiliar roads. Some passengers who lived in these regions took a minibus to continue their journey; the others chose to return to Damascus.

At 10 o’clock in the morning we set out on our way back to Damascus which we would reach by 8 p.m. We had more adventures, but we were less anxious. Since the atmosphere was more relaxed, relationships began to develop among the passengers. A woman near me asked: “*What is the meaning of the ring on your finger?*” When we went to eat, I sat at table with the ... family who helped me to contact the Sisters. And then the woman asked me: “*Are you a nun?*” Among

the passengers, we finally had the courage to exchange phone numbers.

At the entrance to Damascus, we received the order not to look to the right or left, and not to make any gestures; the bus went very fast, fearing snipers. The prayers and the kind gestures continued: The ... family immediately telephoned the Sisters to say we had arrived. When I reached home, I learned that a Mass was celebrated for me at 6 o'clock in my sister's parish that I might return safely to Damascus. *Let us give thanks to the Lord! Eternal is His merciful love!*

## LIFE IN UISG

\* **Talithakum:** During the last quarter of 2013, the following activities were sponsored by Talithakum, the UISG project against trafficking in human beings:

- **Rome:** Members of UISG participated in a Seminar on the theme “*Trafficking in human beings: modern slavery*”, organized by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences of the Vatican. In the final statement of the seminar account one reads: “*The Holy See encourages male religious Orders to work alongside female religious to alleviate the immediate suffering and long-term social exclusion of trafficked persons.*”
- **Brazil:** Two hundred fifty Latin American religious women gathered in Brasilia last November to prepare the campaign against trafficking, “*A cry for life*”, coordinated by the Brazilian Network on the occasion of the Football World Cup 2014.
- **Thailand:** A first course in legal education, coordinated by Sister Estrella Castalone, UISG (Rome), was offered with the aim to learn more thoroughly the law and to protect the rights of victims of trafficking. Forty-five religious women belonging to the three networks of Talithakum Asia participated.
- **Europe:** In Slovakia, the European Renate Network conducted a seminar to deepen knowledge of the social doctrines of the Church.
- The Network of Religious against Trafficking in **New Zealand** joined Talithakum in January 2014. With this addition, the total number of Networks coordinated by UISG is 23 and includes about 800 religious women who work in this field in more than 76 countries.

\* In **Busan** (South Korea), the X<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Assembly of the World Council of Churches was held from 30 October to 8 November 2013. The Assembly was attended by about 300 Christians and delegations from 345 churches. The Executive Secretaries of the two Unions (UISG and USG) were invited by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity to attend as members of the Vatican delegation.

The meeting of this wide variety of cultures and religious faith was enriching. All are believers in Jesus. All preach the Word. All are committed to peace and justice in a common path towards unity. For the first time an Anglican woman, Agnes Abuom, Kenyan, was elected as Moderator for the next seven years.

- \* **“Living fruitfully leadership as service”** was the theme that brought together 75 members of the **Constellation of Rome**, on 9 and 10 January 2014. The Constellation of Rome consists of superiors general of international congregations who have their headquarters in Rome. The thinking of the group was articulated in three topics: *how to make leadership a fruitful ecclesial mission; leadership as a shared mission with councilors; and making canonical visitations life giving*. Group discussions and sharing by facilitators enabled the communication and sharing of profound wisdom together with useful practical aspects of leadership. A dialogue with Msgr. Carballo, Secretary of CICLSAL, was held before the final Liturgy, which helped to deepen the hope for a Church-Communion, open and welcoming to everyone.
  
- \* **“Pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization”** is the theme of the **Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod** convened for October 2014. UISG received an invitation to present a summary of responses given by superiors general in the preparatory questionnaire. With little time available, we extended the invitation to international congregations headquartered in Rome and, with the help of a team, we have prepared a summary of the responses which has been sent to Msgr. Baldiseri, Secretary General. At the same time we asked if, for such an event, some of the many religious who work in the field of family support could be present for the Synod.
  
- \* **The Conference of Religious of Nigeria** has just concluded the celebration of the 50th anniversary of its founding. A number of activities were organized for this occasion. Sister Verónica Openibo, SHCJ, of Nigerian origin, member of the Executive Council of UISG, participated as a representative of the Union in the solemn conclusion that took place from 20 to 23 February 2014.
  
- \* The Executive Committee recently began to reflect on preparations for the celebration of the **50th anniversary of the UISG** on 8 December 2015. Pope Francis, after his meeting with members of the USG (Union of Superiors General), announced that the year 2015 will be the Year of Consecrated Life. The coincidence is not surprising, because the two events refer to Vatican II (the publication of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* and the birth of the UISG, the day of the closing of the Council). The 50th anniversary of the UISG will begin on 8 December 2015 and will end with the Plenary Assembly in 2016. We have begun to plan for the celebration of this anniversary with a “contest of ideas” launched with Constellations worldwide and here in Rome. At a later date, we will

share information about the program.

- \* The next **Council of Delegates** of the UISG, the “organ of discernment, deliberation, decision and action” of the Union, that meets every year and a half, will be held in Accra, Ghana, from 28 November to 3 December 2014. The Council of Delegates is formed by the members of the Executive Board and Delegates elected by the Constellations. In addition to discussions on issues concerning the Union and the knowledge of religious life in the African continent, the Council of Delegates will continue to deepen the theme of evangelical leadership proposed to the Plenary Assembly in May 2013.
- \* **Sister Patricia Murray**, IBVM, has been appointed Executive Secretary of UISG, replacing Sister Josune Arregui, ccv, who completes her nearly four years of service in that role at the end of March. Sister Patricia, from Ireland, has been the Executive Director of Solidarity with South Sudan and will assume her new responsibilities at the beginning of April.