

ADORATION AND SERVICE

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Pope Francis, during his audience with the 800 participants at the Assembly in May 2013, defined religious life as “an exodus of self in a way of adoration and service,” an idea that we have tried to deepen in this Bulletin as in the preceding one.

The Jesuit *Benjamin González Buelta* develops that beautiful metaphor with an article: *Adoration and Service: Two wings, One Momentum*. “Adoration consecrates the service and the service incarnates adoration.” It is contemplation that shapes in us a heart of service to God, our servant in History. “We must be attentive to the signs of the times and welcome in our heart God’s proposal to create with Him the newness He offers.”

Anxious Hearts and Wounded Lives: The Place of the New Sacred is the reflection offered to us by the Irish Dominican *Paul Murray* who begins his presentation with the barrier between the sacred and the profane that Jesus destroyed, thanks to His self-giving until death. With illustrative examples he tells how this new cult and new concept of the sacred was lived, or ceased to be lived in History. He concludes by saying: “What we once thought as hopeless and outside the law is now at the center. What was considered profane is now sacred. In Christ we are a holy temple.”

In her article *Renewing Prophetic Witness and Option for the Poor: An Invitation to African Religious Women to Stretch Out to the Peripheries of Life* the Camerounian *Gloria Wirba* appeals to African religious to place themselves at the service of the poor. This selfless service is the best way to announce the God of mercy in whom they believe.

We have added a brief reflection by *Fr. David Glenday*, Comboni missionary, on mercy as *Source of the Mission*. “Mercy is the furnace where the vase of the mission is fired.” It is a mercy that goes beyond forgiveness and which offers us the grace of belief and transformation.

To evoke the experience of unity between adoration and service we cite the eloquent words of Pope Francis to the Poor Clares during his visit to Assisi. In a spontaneous speech, unwritten, he clearly emphasized the contemplation of Jesus Christ that results in a great humanity while avoiding what he calls “an excess of spirituality.”

ADORATION AND SERVICE: TWO WINGS, ONE MOMENTUM

Fr. Benjamin Gonzalez Buelta, SJ

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Original in Spanish

1. Adoration and Service are Inseparable

At the Annunciation, Mary exclaims: “I am the *handmaid* of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me” (Lk 1:38). When she meets Elizabeth, Mary sings: “My spirit *exults* in God my Savior” (Lk 1:46). The fact of serving and praising, and adoring the Lord are two inseparable dimensions of the same mystery, of the encounter with the God who comes to transform the earth by dialoguing with us and who is revealed when He asks permission of Mary for His son to be incarnated within her to become “one among others” (Ph 2:7).

Adoration and service are two evangelical poles that can only co-exist in an endless dialogue. Like the two wings of a dove, they originate in the same body, receive blood from the same heart and fly in a concerted way towards the same fate. They interact with the winds of the air which tosses them and the force of gravity which pulls them towards the earth. They operate in unison to follow a fixed direction: sometimes to turn one descends and the other rises but they are always perfectly synchronized. There is not one wing to ascend towards the heights of the clear sky and the other to land in the dirt of the earth.

Adoration and service are linked. We are servants of God through small actions but He is our servant when He unfolds with wisdom the wonder of creation and gives breath, while respecting our autonomy, to the mystery of History. We contemplate and we adore God in hymns, in the gratuitous

silence of limited moments but God looks at each one from all eternity with an intimate love which never leaves us. Let us praise the greatness of God that nourishes ours.

From this experience, situated in the heart of our existence, we too are invited to contemplate with respect the dignity without limit of each human existence and to serve it with devotion, fervor and gratitude. This is how God is present to our senses in the lives that mature in harmony, in the wounded flesh and broken hearts. Adoration consecrates service and service incarnates adoration.

Let us adore God in the wonder and beauty that is creation, like St. Francis in the “*Canticle of Creatures*.” We adore Him in the Eucharist, in Holy Thursday’s abiding love to the extreme and on the cross, where God’s infinite love is concentrated in His self-sacrifice for us. In the prolongation of this mystery of the Incarnation, we contemplate and serve anyone and especially those crucified throughout History, the victims of violence, those who languish in the stagnation of structural poverty, those who are trapped in the networks of human trafficking, in the fight for drug control, the migrants who tremble in fear and hypothermia at the gates of the rich world, the women who are regularly subjected to beatings or chronic machismo and all who struggle in the existential peripheries of our time. Not only do we contemplate the poor as in a permanent good Friday of Jesus but also as manifestation of the resurrected One in simple lives, in communities who, by their commitment and their joy, defy the statistics and the logic of the powerful.

From the Son incarnate among us, we understand that adoration does not look towards a remote sky and that service does not happen before a distant God who will observe us like a Lord of the infinite distance of His transcendence. God accompanies us in the unfathomable proximity of our intimacy, because He never ceases to be the servant who assumes with us, the people and History, beginning from the most destructed places and the intimacy without witness of each person, without exception.

A middle aged Jesuit told me, while making the 30-day retreat of the Spiritual Exercises: “While meditating on the fact that I am created to praise, honor and serve God, I sensed that God was praising me, honoring me, and serving me. I felt invited to serve others in the same manner.”

“To adore and to serve: two attitudes that cannot be separated, but must always go hand in hand. Adoring the Lord and serving others, keeping nothing for oneself: this is the “self-emptying” of whoever exercises authority. May you live and always remember the centrality of Christ, the evangelical

identity of the consecrated life. Help your communities to live the “exodus” from the self on a journey of adoration and service, above all through the three pillars of your life” (Pope Francis, UISG Plenary Assembly, 2013).

2. Virtual Idols and Colonized Servants

We speak of adoration in a global culture characterized by an *interiority deficit*, where it becomes difficult to look inward to encounter God who arises in the silence, as the center of our being. In general, we are strongly confronted with the echo of countless seductive sensations that penetrate through our senses, traverse the interior and become rooted in the furrows always more open to our natural or artificial needs.

The *occultation of God* which spreads in affluent societies goes hand in hand with the emergence of many diffused mystics, often without neighbor or History, without institutions that sends them to reflect and discern. *How and whom to adore?* In need of transcendence that burns in the depth of the human heart, the God of Jesus has been replaced by “virtual idols.” Masked by image consultants and promoted by new technologies, they shine in the secular Olympus, seducing the eyes and stealing our credit cards. “*Whoever fashioned a God or cast an image without hope of gain?*” (Is 44:10). In the middle of the desert, lost, without horizon, we construct idols of gold that we can adore (Ex 32:1). Known people, “*celebrities,*” who amuse and entertain, seduce us by parading on the numerous red carpets of fame, power or money.

The service equally erodes in uncertain identities, with affective links and weak engagements “until time separates us.” *Narcissistic individualism* is protected by electronic passwords, where the person becomes self-centered, on his/her wellbeing and has difficulty being of service to others. The sense of human solidarity limits itself sometimes to “flash in the pan solidarity before a moving tragedy, before being replaced by another idea which diverts, without sufficient time to develop roots and create an awareness and stable commitment links.

“Brandnames” are the *new settlers* who work for their employers and who compete to take over in advertising screens, before our eyes, but also in us, with a rivalry of different interests that follow conflicting paths and fragments us from the inside. In pressing us to decide “now” without waiting, without losing the opportunity, they can shake *us to the core*, incapable of contemplative worship where service takes shape.

The Spirit works also in this culture and we have need of a special sensitivity to perceive and welcome the Spirit, especially when it is only a

bourgeoning idea. Many times, the sacred has migrated to the profane, and we can sometimes contemplate in social or artistic activities, signs of the Spirit which helps us to see sparkling dimensions of human life that haste and self-sufficiency do not permit us to ordinarily appreciate. There are no situations or person where God does not work or where He cannot be contemplated, adored and served.

In this cultural context, we discover admirable persons who listen to the voice of transcendence, which does not reach them intermittently, and from a distant heaven but from their inner being and from a look on the face of victims of social exclusion, the dejected ones. They are committed to “possible utopias,” they fight for “human rights” for all and serve in volunteer organizations without geographical, religious or cultural boundaries and without any hidden desire for recognition or proselytizing. They are there as one when they are abducted by armed groups or disappear in inaccessible areas.

In this lack of transcendence, many cloistered religious living a contemplative life are a “flame that burns without being consumed” in the middle of the desert of this century, even if few pause to contemplate this wonder of adoration as Moses who approached to contemplate the burning bush in the desert (Ex 3:3) or perceive the depth of such service, gratuitously offered, without possible payment, to whomever wishes to be enlightened. In this same time, many religious living an active life reveal the depth of their adoration in the gift of themselves, in a service that engages the whole person and all the demands of life on “the peripheries” of the world. The contemplative and active lives of religious are like two wings of the heart of God, within the Church, in service of the Kingdom of God.

3. Jesus, the Servant Son

The third chapter of Luke’s gospel presents the situation of the Hebrew people as absolutely closed (Lk 3:1-3). They were controlled by numerous threatening personalities of the Roman Empire and the Hebrew people: Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Annas, Caiaphas and the sons of Herod. Political and religious authorities controlled their future.

In this context, a rumor reaches Nazareth that John is announcing something new in Jordan. Jesus arrives from Galilee, He gathers the people, listens to their problems and their expectations and lets Himself be baptized to signify His reception of the prophet’s message that the one sent by God is near. When He is in prayer after being baptized, in union with the Father, His engagement is confirmed: “You are my beloved Son” (Lk 3:22). Sensing

Himself as beloved Son, He also feels as the servant of a new mission that changes His life as carpenter from Nazareth. Service can only be born of love. To choose service is always an alliance with God, our servant, and an adoration that is embodied in life.

Jesus offered Himself for the mission announced by John, but how is it to be achieved? It takes Him a long time for contemplation and discernment to have clarity about His way to serve. The Spirit leads Jesus to the desert to be tempted and experience in His psyche and His body the pressure of the expectations of the Jews synthesized in three temptations. The Jews have a preconceived idea of the Messiah and each group wants Him in a certain way.

Jesus is not going to *limit* His mission to give food to the people famished and crushed by poverty and taxes. The word of God is also needed to relieve the people and return them their dignity to produce what is necessary for the good of society. He will not *seduce* the people by a spectacular gesture by throwing himself from the heights of the temple but He will meet them in vulnerable situations, from whence people will emerge healed of their paralysis, of their blindness or their leprosy that kept them on the margins of life. Finally, He will not accept to *dominate* His people in the manner of the powerful of the time. At the end of the process, Jesus gives a radical response: “*You must worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone*” (Mt 1:10). It is a statement of uniting in His person the gift to the Father in a single project.

As much in baptism as in the desert, service appears to be united with adoration, in absolute gift to the Father, so that whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (Jn 14:9). To serve is the opposite of domination (control), to accept the command given us, in the measure offered, by those in power and toward whom we will be indebted if we receive them. Power is not given to appropriate life but to render it possible.

At the beginning of his passion, when Jesus sensed that the hostile forces were plotting His final departure, He performed a gesture of service which revealed His love “to the end” (Jn 13:1). Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, as was the custom of servants to invited guests. Washing the feet, this is His expression of being Master and Lord. He has promised us happiness if we participate with Him in this style of magistry and lordship (Jn 13:17). Peter refuses this service and does not let Jesus wash his feet. In doing this, he distances himself from Jesus; he locks himself in a proud self-sufficiency that does not know want, personal limits, the need to be helped by others at different moments in life.

In History, God asks for our help, in the depths of human suffering, so that in us His presence will have hands and a face for those who suffer. He relies on our mind and on our ability to accommodate His offer of new life that must be implemented, marked by the seal of our creativity.

4. Servants in God's World

The world is not “the place where God manifests Himself” as a scene where He appears from time to time, walking in the evening dusk as is stated so beautifully in Genesis but it is the manifestation of God, of His infinite creativity and His inexhaustible love because He works in the depth of reality (Jn 5 :17). When He contemplated creation, Teilhard de Chardin was saying to God: “*Not your Epiphany, Jesus, but your diaphany, the transparency of everything.*” This great mystic asked God for the grace to perceive His creative action of new life at the heart of all reality.

To adore God and praise Him, we should not only close our eyes for an intimate adoration, we must also open them to contemplate His work in each person, in creation and in History. The “mystique of closed eyes” when we are in an intimate relationship with God is just as important as the “mystique of open eyes” that dissolves with a contemplative glance, the shell of all reality and perceives in the depth, God our servant.

If in adoration of God we sometimes experience a dark night of the soul, in contemplation and in service to people, we can also cross some dark nights of History, where we are cleansed of any pretention of control on the mystery of God and His plan of salvation. In the world, we can contemplate the ceaseless work of the Spirit who offers the newness of God and encourages human creativity in all peripheries of the world: those of science in laboratories and in libraries, those of personal transformation in intimate processes and those of History in struggles so that human life grows turned towards the Kingdom of God.

When a temple or an image are not respected for what they are and signify, we speak of “desecration” and we make rites of “reparation” so that, in some way, to cleanse it and to recreate the true sense of the sacred. The first temple is the cosmos. Described in the Genesis account of creation (Gn 3:8), the most real image of God is that of each human body where the Spirit dwells. When we destroy the temple of creation with ecological degradation, or when we scar it with the barbed wire of injustice, when we exclude or mistreat a person, then we can talk about desecration and the need to restore that which we have broken.

5. In the Bowels of Adoration

When we adore the Lord, we seek a favorable space and we devote a time when our whole person focuses on the reception of the infinite love of God from whence we came, in which we exist and towards which we are going. We do not seek special light on darkness that we fear, nor are we trying to discern at a crossroads that worries us, but simply, we let ourselves be in God's love. It is a prayer of gratitude that does not seek to resolve any personal matter, or to obtain anything special. However, this form of prayer transforms us.

The first fruit of this prayer is personal integration since our whole person is unified. The body, mind and emotions come together in the decision to live fully in gratitude. In contemplative silence we place all the words, in this presence are contained all the encounters and this quietude animates all our activities.

When we feel God's love in us and in all creation, our view of reality changes, and is sustained by God's love which never ceases to reach the heart of our lives. More profound than the threats we instinctively flee from and the fascination of beauty on which we can place a possessive hand, we contemplate reality bathed by God and that allows us to reflect to the world, by our look, its best possibilities of dignity and hope.

The gratitude with which we enter in relationship with God heals our heart of ambiguities hidden in glamor and the false wisdom of our motivations and makes us enter into relationships more disinterested with reality, without using the people as objects of our seductive desire.

We penetrate deeper into the heart of God and God enters in us in an encounter that continues to grow in depth and in time. The heart of service originates in the heart of contemplation in God's manner, who is our servant in History.

6. "Devotion" Expresses Unification

We live adoration and service as two separate realities in time: the calm of adoration and the activity of service. But, if both are authentic, they advance towards each other to construct a single unified person, in harmony, giving a human quality which expresses and nourishes itself from the direct relationship with God as well as in the encounter with neighbor and all creation.

In his mystical experience, written in his Spiritual Journal, Ignatius Loyola feels that his relationship with God should not be of fear but of love

and he asks: “Give me loving humility and this in reverence and respect” (DE 178). This spiritual experience filled with joy deepens until he understands that humble love “*is the same for all creatures*” (DE 179). We are the same in our relationship with God and others and the truth of adoration leads us, reveals and manifests itself in the respect and the quality of our service.

This mystical experience of Ignatius helps us to understand his insistence that his companions seek God present in all things, in a manner of “finding no less devotion” in human relations as in prayer. Maybe the word devotion that in general we reserve for personal prayer or liturgy can indicate this synthesis between adoration and service in persons unified in their daily life.

“But the hour will come when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth: that is the kind of worshipper the Father wants” (Jn 4:23). Neither Mount Garizin nor the Temple of Jerusalem are exclusive places or labeled as better or worse than other religious places. Wherever we are, in whatever geographic area, what is most important is to adore God in spirit and in truth. Each step towards the encounter, each word or gesture to create a world according to the heart of God can be part of a liturgy inspired by the Spirit of truth, which has never been written in religious rites.

In adoration, we offer to God our time, our emotions, our capacity to make decisions and we surpass the internal resistance of the ego that turns on itself. In service, we offer God our activity. In adoration, we unite ourselves to the heart of God and in service, through our work, we unite ourselves to God’s action. In adoration, we lose ourselves in the mystery of God in the intimacy of an endless encounter and in service, we spend ourselves in the mystery of God in History. In both cases, we give ourselves. Collaborating with God in action gives consistency and historical verification to the gift of ourselves in adoration; similarly, the gift in adoration gives heart and interiority to our service. The gift of ourselves is a response to God who always loves us first.

7. Creating the Newness of God

God is Advent, love that always renews itself, both in the depth of the encounter with Him and in the newness that History offers. God proposes that we create something new with Him.

Gratitude and effectiveness are an evangelical pole that completes very well the pole of adoration and service. Christian love seeks to be effective in History, it helps people, it weighs on the transformation of structures that distort life and the institutions that under-pin them. But, so that love has an

evangelical effectiveness, it should be free. All that is not free issues invoices of recognition, of personal loyalty or of success at the height of our expectations. It can even issue invoices to ourselves, erode our self-esteem because our predictions are not proven or make us masters of novelty because we consider it “ours,” as if it carried our signature. In Luke’s gospel (10: 25-37), Jesus presents us the parable of the Good Samaritan who helps a Jew attacked and injured by the roadside. In an unusual gesture of solidarity that goes beyond the historical enmity between Jews and Samaritans, and even at the risk of his own personal safety, the Samaritan stops, tends the injured, lifts him on his own mount and takes him to an inn where he will be looked after. He opens a credit account so that the innkeeper will take care of him. The Samaritan loves with an effective love because it is free, he takes risks, he interrupts his journey and on his return, brings money to settle the expenses with a heart that does not issue invoices for anyone.

We never know what will be the newness of God at a given moment. We only know that it is fashioned in slow germination processes that hide in the secret of the earth (Mk 4: 26) or who appear in small buds of branches that have prepared new life under the bark of the dark winter months (Lk 21: 30). The silent times of God in History, where He appears to be doing nothing in front of the urgent problems, are the gestation times of His newness, in accordance to the rhythms of human processes. He protects by anonymity the fragility of beginnings, as a mother protects the embryo within her. The prophet Isaiah expresses this in a vivid manner by a maternal image of God, as if He carries the future in His womb: “From the beginning I have been silent; I have kept quiet, held myself in check. I groan like a woman in labor, I suffocate, I stifle” (Is 42:14). We must be attentive to the signs of the times and to the proposition of God in our heart to welcome and to create with Him the newness that He offers.

The freedom of contemplation and praise where we give God our time and our affectivity purifies our heart so that we will give our life to the service of the Kingdom of God without any accounting, without wanting to set a precise time limit for His intervention in History, without waiting for Him in the roads that we crossed according to the schedule of our programs. It is thus that adoration becomes a service and service expresses the adoration of God, our servant.

ANXIOUS HEARTS AND WOUNDED
LIVES
THE PLACE OF THE NEW SACRED

Fr. Paul Murray, O.P.

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If asked to choose one particular saying of Jesus which strikes me as the most remarkable, the most unexpected in the New Testament, I would find it hard to give an immediate answer. I say this because more than a few sayings, of course, at once suggest themselves. But, among them all, there is one statement which must, I imagine, have completely stunned the contemporaries of Jesus when they first heard it, a statement which may well have sounded not merely bold, but also subversive, especially given the enormous respect and awe felt by the Jewish people regarding the Sabbath and its obligations. The statement I have in mind is the following:

“Man was not made for the Sabbath. No—the Sabbath was made for man!” (Mark 2: 27)

Even today, after 20 centuries of Christianity, in the third millennium, this statement sounds fresh and revolutionary. At first hearing, it seems in fact to challenge the age-old distinction on which religion has traditionally been based, the distinction that is between the sacred and the profane. What, in fact, did Jesus intend by this remarkable statement? Is it possible that, within the Christian tradition, after many hundreds of years, we have not actually begun to take in its full implications?

There are other statements of Jesus which contain something of the same surprise. When speaking, for example, to his disciples about the blessings to come in heaven for those who feed the hungry in this life and

welcome strangers and clothe the naked and visit prisoners, etc., we might expect Jesus to say, “Do these things and, in time, you will inherit the kingdom prepared for you by my Father.” But this is not the message he communicates. Instead, astonishingly, he says: “I am in prison and you visit me, I am hungry and you give me food, I am naked and you clothe me.” The disciples of Jesus, when they first came to realize that the one making these statements was no mere mortal, but was in fact God come in the flesh, the All Holy Son of God, they must have been astounded. Holiness, in their understanding, belonged naturally to the realm of the sacred. How was it possible, then, that the one who was All-Holy could speak of himself as if belonging to the dereliction and dirt and drama of the profane world, the world of the sick and the wounded, of the starving and naked, of beggars, prisoners, and outsiders? Was the inherited notion of the sacred being somehow turned completely on its head? And, if that’s the case, how are we to understand this incredible reversal, this new sacred established by Jesus?

1 The New Temple, the New Sacred

Holiness, within the Jewish tradition, was always linked with the word “separation” and, in particular, with the notion of a radical divide between the sacred and the profane. Those who were pure were to be kept from the impure, the clean from the unclean, the righteous from sinners. The temple, being itself regarded as the most sacred place of all, was constructed on the fundamental principle of separation. First of all, it was separated from the city by its walls. Then, inside the walls of the temple, the Holy of Holies was established in a place set apart. And, as a further sign of separation, inside the Holy of Holies, the Mercy Seat of God was covered by a veil or curtain. That curtain was, of course, the ultimate symbol of separation. So almost nothing could be more momentous, with regard to the sacred, than what we are told in the Gospel of Matthew concerning the moment of Christ’s death, namely that “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mt 27:51).

What this means is that because of Christ’s sacrifice, because of his complete giving of himself to the point of death, there is now no longer any barrier between ourselves and what is most sacred. As Hebrews puts it:

By virtue of that one single offering he has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying ... In other words, brothers and sisters, through the blood of Jesus we have the right to enter the sanctuary, by a way which he has opened for us, a living opening through the curtain, that is to say, his body ... So as we go in, let us be sincere in heart and filled with faith (Heb 10:14, 19-21).

Christ died naked on the side of a hill, outside the temple, outside the city, achieving thereby the purification of the entire earth, making every mountain and valley, every river and ocean on earth a place of new blessing, a place suitable for prayer. By dying on the cross he became the priest not of one single people, nor of one exclusive religion, but the priest of the entire world. And so all of us now, as human beings, have access to what is most sacred because the new temple on earth, the true Holy of Holies, is nothing other than the body of Christ Jesus. "Destroy this temple," Jesus said, "and in three days I will raise it up ... he was speaking about the temple of his body" (Jn 2: 19).

The implications of this statement are enormous. And the early Christians were quick to seize on what exactly it indicated about their own lives as believers. Yes, the new temple is Christ, but it is also Christ's body, His Church, the community of the faithful. And that's why St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, has no hesitation in saying: "Do you not realize that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling within you?" (I Cor 6:19). God was manifestly at one with the wounded lives of those first Christians. And that fact was, of course, the revelation which knocked Paul to the ground at the moment of his own conversion. The voice he heard from heaven did not cry out: "Why are you persecuting the poor Christians", but rather "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" (Acts 9:4).

Already, during the life of Jesus, there were clear signs of his deliberate identification with those in great suffering. He was prepared, for example, to trespass the prohibitions laid down by Mosaic Law and, on one occasion, permitted the lame and the blind to come to him in the temple where he cured them, a thing unheard of. He also allowed a prostitute to touch him, and he himself reached out to touch handicapped people, and lepers, and even the dead. These were all signs of his amazing compassion. But they were also, I would suggest, beginning indications of a revelation that would come later regarding what we might call the hidden dignity and sacred character of the human person and of the human body. St. Paul gave expression to that new revelation in the passage already quoted from I Corinthians: "Do you not realize that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling within you?" (I Cor 6:19).

2 The Human Body as Sacred

To what extent, we need to ask, at this point, have we been able, over the centuries, to live up to the remarkable vision communicated to us here by St. Paul? Does there exist, in the tradition, abundant evidence of this vision being lived and understood by the lay-faithful of the Church, and by

the many religious men and women of the Church's past? And is the new sacred, therefore, something that immediately compels attention, something that stands out in the lived theology of our saints and poets, our monks and mystics, our artisans, labourers, painters, and theologians? Of course it's impossible here, in one single talk, to attempt anything like an adequate answer to this question. Let it suffice, then, if I draw attention to no more than a few texts on the subject from both past and present. And I trust you will permit me, at least initially, to rely on a number of Dominican texts.

St. Dominic himself, we are told by early witnesses, would keep long night vigils. According to one of the saint's contemporaries—Brother John of Bologna—after lengthy prayers, and after lying face down on the pavement of the Church, Dominic would rise, and perform two simple acts of homage. First, within the Church, he would “*visit* each altar in turn ... until midnight.” But then “he would go very quietly and *visit* the sleeping brethren; and, if necessary, he would cover them up.”¹ In Latin the same verb “*visitare*” is used for visiting the sacred altars and visiting the sleeping brethren. One has the distinct impression that Dominic's reverence for the individual altars in the Church is intimately related to his reverence and care for the sleeping brethren. It's almost as if Dominic is acknowledging, first of all, the presence of the sacred in the altars, and then—with no less reverence—acknowledging that same presence in his own brethren.²

I think we can say that, for the authentic disciples of Jesus, the human person—the human body—far from being regarded as belonging merely to the secular realm, or to a realm outside the sacred, is viewed as nothing less than the very temple of the sacred, the temple of God's Spirit. Not only, therefore, has the human spirit acquired a new dignity in Christ, the human body has also been made holy by the event of the Incarnation. This truth about the holiness of the body was vehemently denied by a powerful group of heretics at the time of St. Dominic. And Dominic, as a result, spent much of his preaching life passionately defending the two great pillars which support this truth, namely the dogma of Creation and the dogma of Incarnation.

One of the most important early texts concerning Dominic's life of prayer, a text entitled *The Nine Ways of Prayer*, gives an unusually important place to the role of the body. In the matter of prayer it was never enough, for Dominic, simply to focus the mind in meditation, and be somehow abstracted into a state of “mental prayer”. No, Dominic prays with all that he is, body and soul. He doesn't simply reverence the Lord in his spirit. He bows down physically before God's presence, allowing the members of his body to draw him or to lead him, as it were, into prayer. Thus, one moment we see him kneeling on the ground or sitting in a chair wholly absorbed in

meditation; another moment (in what is called the prayer of the hands) we see him lifting up his hands and arms in supplication; another moment, he is lying prostrate on the ground in humble adoration; and then again we see him, in a moment of extreme need, standing with his arms outstretched in the shape of a cross.

The body, therefore, is not to be excluded, *cannot* be excluded, from the life of prayer. And the same holds true for the senses and the imagination. Margaret Ebner, a Dominican mystic of the Middle Ages, hears God saying to her, on one occasion: “I am no robber of the senses, I am the enlightener of the senses!”³

Yves Congar, on the subject of the dignity of the human person, quotes a stunning phrase from the Orthodox saint, Nicolas Cabasilas. It reads: “Among all visible creatures, human nature alone can truly be an altar.”⁴ Congar himself, in his book, *The Mystery of the Temple*, makes bold to say: “Every Christian is entitled to the name of ‘saint’ and the title of ‘temple’.”⁵ These are extraordinary statements. What they proclaim is that ordinary human life is now in some way sacred, and the common, everyday details of that life no less sacred. But is this vision, this astonishing vision, one that is still shared today by believing Christians? How many, for example, would think to make statements such as the following?

When you stand at the kitchen stove, that is the centre, that is the altar. When you lie in your bed, your bed becomes the altar. When you wash a dish or pick up litter, you are the altar. You are always standing on holy ground. Any moment can be the moment. Any place can be the place.⁶

These remarkable words are taken from a homily by a preacher—an anonymous monk—of our own generation. But Christian preachers over the centuries have been happy to make comparable statements. Here, for example, is the Dominican, Blessed Johannes Tauler, a preacher of the 14th century. He declares: “There is no task so small, so insignificant or menial, that it is not a proof of God’s special grace.”⁷ And again: “One person knows how to spin, another how to make shoes; some people are good at practical things, which they perform to best advantage; others are not. All these graces are God-given, the work of His Spirit.”⁸ In similar vein, the great Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, writes: “To lift up the hands in prayer gives God glory, but a man with a dung fork in his hand, a woman with a slop pail, give him glory too.”⁹

3 A Key Question

At this point in our reflections we need to stop and ask ourselves a

question of great importance. If it is true, as all the texts I have quoted so far seem to suggest, that ordinary human life is indeed hallowed, and if the most basic, everyday details of our human existence are now to be regarded as sacred, and if, therefore, the inherited notion of what is sacred has been deliberately turned on its head by Jesus, what does that mean for the practice of religion? If we are to believe that all the earth is holy, and our human lives are holy, what need is there for the rites and rules of a separate religion? The one theologian of our time who dared to put this question to himself with great candour and great honesty was Joseph Ratzinger. Writing in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, reflecting on the new sense of the sacred achieved by Christ, he asks:

*Is the whole world not now God's sanctuary? Is sanctity not to be practiced by living one's daily life in the right way? Is our divine worship not a matter of being loving people in our daily life? ... Can the sacral be anything other than imitating Christ in the simple patience of daily life? Can there be any other holy time than the time for practicing love of neighbour, whenever and wherever the circumstances of our life demand it?*¹⁰

At the core of this list of questions there is one challenging question: In the light of the new teaching of Jesus, is there still a place for the practice of religion, or has religion been somehow superseded by what might be understood as the new sacred task—the new exclusive task—of simply loving one another?

Joseph Ratzinger, with quiet impressive wisdom points out that the answer we give to this question will surely be mistaken if we choose to ignore the crucial “not yet” of our Christian existence.¹¹ It is true: Christ has already in many ways exploded our familiar ways of thinking about the sacred. But the new understanding of the sacred doesn't mean that all of a sudden we have become, as if by magic, as holy as the angels, and that the New Heaven and the New Earth have arrived. No, if we are honest with ourselves, we will be willing to acknowledge what Ratzinger calls “the permanent limits of human existence in this world”.¹² But a radical change has taken place all the same. Things are not as they were before. Yes, the empirical conditions of life in this world still remain “in force”, but these conditions, Ratzinger insists, “have been burst open, and must be more and more burst open.”¹³ He writes:

[Christ] has already done what we have to do ... And now the challenge is to allow ourselves to be taken up into his being “for” the sake of other human beings, to let ourselves be embraced by his opened arms, which draw us to himself. He, the Holy One, hallows us with the holiness that

*none of us could ever have given ourselves.*¹⁴

We are living now in what Ratzinger calls an “in-between” time, “a mixture of the already and the not yet”.¹⁵ And it is the reality of the “not yet” which helps explain why we continue to need the visible and tangible sacraments of Christ’s presence in the Church, and why so many of the traditional forms of the sacred in religion have survived. Ratzinger writes: “The curtain of the Temple has been torn. Heaven has been opened up by the union of the man Jesus, and thus of all human existence, with the living God.”¹⁶ Then he asks, given that extraordinary event: “Do we still need sacred space, sacred time, mediating symbols?” And he answers: “Yes, we do need them ... We need them to give us the capacity to know the mystery of God.”¹⁷ It’s true, we can already dare to say that “we participate in the heavenly liturgy,” but this participation, Ratzinger reminds us, is always mediated to us “through earthly signs.”¹⁸

At this point I would like to make an observation about the event of the Last Supper which strikes me as relevant here. Jesus did not simply say to us and to His disciples on that occasion: “Love one another.” He said, and *did* something else as well. “He placed himself”, as De la Taille so accurately expresses it, “in the order of signs, in the order of symbols.”¹⁹ Having first taken up the bread and wine into His hands, and having pronounced over them the words “This is my body, this is my blood”, Jesus then said: “Do this in memory of me.” In other words, conscious of our human need for the tangible and the visible, and knowing how we live our lives in the hope and anguish of the not yet, Jesus asked us to perform a simple rite, a liturgy in His memory. Concerned that we should always, in this in-between time, have a palpable reassurance of His love, He humbly “placed himself in the order of signs.”

There is no doubt we are living now in the time of the new sacred. But we are not yet in heaven—God knows! In heaven there will be no need of any sanctuary, or altar, or temple, because Christ Himself will be that temple. But here on earth we need the temple, we need the visible Church, we need the sacraments of Christ’s presence, and we need the visible witness of religious men and women, living signs for our own anxious and bewildered generation—signs of transcendent hope.

And we also, let it be said here, and without hesitation, we also need liturgy. But our liturgy should be one formed in the light of the new sacred, and that means a liturgy at once beautiful and yet chastened, exalted and yet humble, a liturgy always contemplative at its core of the presence of Christ our High Priest, but also of Christ our humble brother and servant, Christ, the friend of the poor and the starving, the sick and the forgotten, the

downtrodden and the outsiders.

4 The New Sacred and the Poor

I have always been struck by a passage in the private diary of Blessed John XXIII. Sometime in March 1925, under the heading “Preparation for my episcopal ordination”, he wrote: “The bishop’s robes will always remind me of ‘the splendour of souls’ which they signify, the bishop’s real glory. God forbid that they should ever become a motive for vanity.”²⁰ I don’t know if Pope Francis was familiar with this passage, but I was reminded of it as soon as I heard the homily he gave at the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday. Here is part of what Francis said:

*The sacred robes of the High Priest are rich in symbolism. One such symbol is that the names of the children of Israel were engraved on the onyx stones mounted on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, the ancestor of our present-day chasuble ... This means that the priest celebrates by carrying on his shoulders the people entrusted to his care and bearing their names written in his heart. When we put on our simple chasuble it might well make us feel, upon our shoulders and in our hearts, the burdens and the faces of our faithful people.*²¹

Pope Francis then goes on to say that “the beauty of all these liturgical things ... is not so much about trappings and fine fabrics ... [but rather] about the glory of our God resplendent in his people.” And he continues:

*The precious oil which anoints the head of Aaron does more than simply lend fragrance to his person; it overflows down to “the edges”. The Lord will say this clearly: his anointing is meant for the poor, prisoners and the sick, for those who are sorrowing and alone ... We need to “go out”, then, in order to experience our own anointing, its power and its redemptive efficacy: to the “outskirts” where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight, and prisoners in thrall to many evil masters ... giving what little ointment we have to those who have nothing, nothing at all.*²²

Pope Francis is alerting us here most particularly to the fact that we can at times become so absorbed in the external trappings and rubrics of liturgy that we can forget what liturgy represents. We can forget the humble Lord and we can forget our neighbour in need. A Dominican friend of mine, while engaged in giving a retreat to a contemplative monastery in the States, was asked one morning to bring the Eucharist to a Sister who was seriously ill. The Sister had great difficulty in breathing and had been put on oxygen as result. Accompanying him into the room were two sisters carrying candles. At one point the candles were brought so close to the bed

and, therefore, to the oxygen container, he whispered that it might be dangerous, that there could be an accident, so one of the sisters immediately bent over the bed and, to his astonishment, turned off the oxygen! Not, I would suggest, the wisest move. When in doubt, blow out the candles, not the last breath of your dying sister!

Dominicans, I've discovered, are just as prone as anyone else to making these kind of mistakes, allowing ourselves on occasion to place a wholly exaggerated emphasis on some of the externals of liturgical practice and on the externals also of religious life. One story from the 15th century comes to mind in this context, and it always makes me blush when I think of it. It concerns a Dominican friar who found himself actively engaged in conversation one day with the remarkable lay woman saint, Catherine of Genoa.²³ The Dominican was foolish enough to suggest that, being himself a man who had renounced the world in favour of religion, in contrast to Catherine who was living in the world—“wedded to the world”—was the way he put it, he was better prepared than she was “for divine love”.²⁴ Catherine, though not in any sense a proud person, on hearing these words, was so shocked, she jumped at once to her feet and, with so much emotion, we're told that “her hair burst from the band that confined it, and fell dishevelled over her shoulders.”²⁵ Then she exclaimed: “[Father] if I believed that your habit would add one spark to my love for God, and I could obtain divine love in no other way, I would not hesitate to tear it from you!”²⁶

There was, of course, another great Italian saint who bore the name Catherine, the Dominican, Catherine of Siena of the 14th century. Catherine was a laywoman, but she always showed the deepest respect for religious men and women. That said, however, a number of times God the Father taught her in *The Dialogue* that people in religious life can sometimes use the very practice of religion to help them ignore the desperate needs of people around them. These religious can think themselves so perfect in the observance of all the rules and ceremonies, they are inclined to judge those others whose concern for the needy makes less observant of the ceremonies. The Father says to Catherine:

These people find all their pleasure in seeking their own spiritual consolation – so much so that often they see their neighbours in spiritual or temporal need and refuse to help them. Under pretence of virtue they say, “It would make me lose my spiritual peace and quiet, and I would not be able to say my Hours at the proper time.” Then if they do not enjoy consolation they think they have offended me. But they are deceived by their own spiritual pleasure, and they offend me more by not coming to the help of their neighbours’ need than if they had abandoned all their

*consolations.*²⁷

On the outside, these people, the Father goes on to explain, though apparently “coloured by the colour of the particular Order” to which they belong, are in fact held fast by the chain of “old customs”. They live always according to what pleases them, and are what nowadays we would call people of a legalistic mentality:

*More concerned about the [observances of the] ceremonies of the rule than the rule itself ... And often for want of light they are quick to fall into judging those who observe the rule more perfectly than they do, though they may be less perfect in all the ceremonies of which their judges are so observant.*²⁸

These statements from the *Dialogue* are not intended in any way to minimize the importance of all the ordinary religious observances of community life such as attendance at Choir, for example. But what these strong and vivid statements do make clear is that our observance of the rites and rules of religious life should never be used by us as an excuse for avoiding the most urgent and pressing needs of our neighbour. An authentic observance of the new sacred established by Christ means, first and last, a capacity to recognize the Lord in the breaking of the bread, but it means also a capacity to recognize him in our broken sister or brother.

One preacher in the Church’s tradition, one saint, who impresses me as having grasped in great depth the meaning of the new sacred is John Chrysostom. John was known by his contemporaries as “the golden-tongued”, and for good reason. There was no-one more challenging as a preacher in his generation. Let me read you now a brief extract from one of his most remarkable sermons:

Do you want to honour Christ’s body? Then do not scorn him in his nakedness, nor honour him here in the church with silken garments while neglecting him where he is cold and naked. For he who said: This is my body, and made it so by his words, also said: You saw me hungry and did not feed me, and inasmuch as you did not do it for one of these, the least of my brothers, you did not do it for me. What we do here in the church requires a pure heart, not special garments; what we do outside requires great dedication ... Of what use is it to weigh down Christ’s table with golden cups, when he himself is dying of hunger? First, fill him when he is hungry; then use the means you have left to adorn his table. Will you have a golden cup made but not give a cup of water? What is the use of providing the table with cloths woven of gold thread, and not providing Christ himself with the clothes he needs? ... What if you were to see him

clad in worn-out rags and stiff from the cold, and were to forget about clothing him and instead were to set up golden columns for him, saying that you were doing it in his honour? ... You provide silver chains for the lamps, but you cannot bear even to look at him as he lies chained in prison ... Do not, therefore, adorn the church and ignore your afflicted brother, for he is the most precious temple of all.²⁹

Lest there be misunderstanding it should be said at once that John Chrysostom is not against adorning the house of God in a way that is fitting and beautiful. He is not against having a golden cup, for example, on the altar, and he makes this point clear in the same homily. So it's not a question, then, of either/or, but rather of both/and.

When Malcolm Muggeridge visited Calcutta for the first time, he was enormously impressed by the work being done for the poor, and so later, when he returned home, he sent Mother Teresa a generous gift of money, presuming it would go straight to the poor. Mother Teresa wrote back, thanking him, and said that with the money they had at last been able to buy a golden chalice for the altar. Muggeridge was at first shocked, even scandalized, but then he remembered, in the Gospel, how Judas had complained about precious oil being spent on Christ, money that could have been sold and given to the poor. In practice, therefore, for the saints, it is never a question of either/or, either serving the poor or worshipping God, but of both/and—an unabbreviated Catholicism.

5 The New Sacred and the Shroud of Turin

If there is a new Chrysostom among us I suspect it may be Pope Francis. My knowledge of history is limited, but I am not aware of any previous Bishop of Rome as concerned as Francis to make lively the link between the worship of God in the sacred liturgy and the service of God in the poor. It was, I think, typical of Pope Francis that, recently, when he had occasion to speak about the Shroud of Turin, he remarked: "This disfigured Face resembles all those faces of men and women marred by a life that does not respect their dignity, by war and the violence that afflict the weakest."³⁰

The Shroud is now in Turin, as you know, but it was not always there. In the early 16th century it was in France, in the Sainte Chapelle at Chambéry. I mention this fact because the mother of St Francis de Sales—another Francis—visited this chapel when she was pregnant with Francis and, in the presence of the Shroud, dedicated her unborn child to God.³¹ Many years later, in 1613, by which time the Shroud had already been moved to Turin, Francis had occasion to show the Shroud to a large group of people in the

Cathedral, among them a Prince Cardinal. Sweat, he tells us in a letter, was pouring down his face. It must have been a very hot day, and he was probably nervous. At one point some of the sweat fell unto the Shroud itself which, as you can perhaps imagine, did not please the Cardinal. Francis writes: “The Prince Cardinal was annoyed that my sweat fell on to my Saviour’s Holy Shroud, but it entered my heart to say to him that Our Lord was not so particular, and that he had spilled his sweat and blood so as to unite them to ours.”³²

Francis is one of those saints who clearly grasped the implications of the new sacred. But, behind Francis there was another saint, a hidden saint, and that was his mother. It was she, it would seem, who was the first to initiate him into the knowledge of the new sacred, something she achieved more by action than words. Francis writes in the same letter: “Now another memory comes back to me. When my brothers were ill as children I have seen my mother wrap them in my father’s shirt, saying that a father’s sweat could heal his child.”³³

The statement is as unexpected and startling as it is profound. The mother of Francis de Sales was clearly convinced that, in the new life we now share in Christ, even the most humble and menial tasks are somehow graced and hallowed. What was once considered the profane world—the world of sick children and of hard-working fathers—has now become the place of the new sacred. All of us, in spite of our human limitations and failures, are now standing on holy ground. Our anxious hearts, our wounded lives, have been redeemed by grace. How amazing it is! How blessed we are! Any moment can be the moment; any place can be the place. What was once viewed as hopelessly lost and beyond the pale, is now the centre. What was judged profane is now the sacred. In Christ we are a holy temple.

1 “De Beato Dominico” XVII, in *Vitae Fratrum*, MOFPH, Vol I, ed., B. Reichert O.P. (Louvain 1846) p.79. My italics.

2 During one of Dominic’s long night vigils the story is told that the devil, disguised as one of the friars, succeeded by a clever trick in making the saint break the

solemn rule of silence. When this had been achieved, the devil cried out with great glee: “At last I have made you break the silence!” But Dominic, inspired by the freedom and dignity bestowed on him by the Christian gospel, replied: “*Ego super silentium sum*: I am above silence!” “De

- Beato Dominico" XV, in *Vitae Fratrum*, MOFPH, Vol I, p.78.
- 3 "The Revelations of Margaret Ebner," in *Margaret Ebner: Major Works*, ed., L.P. Hindsley (Mahwah 1993) p.100.
 - 4 Cited in Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple*, trans., R.F. Trevett (Westminster, Maryland 1962) p.203.
 - 5 *The Mystery of the Temple*, p.203.
 - 6 From a homily preached by a Benedictine monk on Passion Sunday; cited in Esther de Waal in "The Benedictine Charism Today", Talk at Illinois Benedictine College Community, 26 April 1995.
 - 7 Sermon 47, *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, trans., M. Shradly (Mahwah, New Jersey 1985) p.154.
 - 8 Ibid.
 - 9 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "On St Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises," in *A Hopkins Reader*, ed., J. Pick (New York 1966) p.396.
 - 10 Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans., J. Saward (San Francisco 2000) p.53.
 - 11 Ibid.
 - 12 Ibid.
 - 13 Ibid., p.54.
 - 14 Ibid., p.59.
 - 15 Ibid., p.54.
 - 16 Ibid., p.60.
 - 17 Ibid., p.61.
 - 18 Ibid., p.61.
 - 19 Maurice de la Taille, *The Mystery of Faith and Human Opinion, Contrasted and Defined* (London 1930) p.212.
 - 20 Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, trans., D. White (New York 2000) p.205.
 - 21 Pope Francis, *Homily for Chrism Mass, Holy Thursday 2013*.
 - 22 Ibid.
 - 23 See *The Life and Doctrine of Saint Catherine of Genoa*, (London 1997) p.23.
 - 24 Ibid.
 - 25 Ibid.
 - 26 Ibid.
 - 27 St Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 69, trans., S. Noffke, (New York 1980) pp.130-31.
 - 28 Ibid., 162, p.351.
 - 29 St John Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew's Gospel (Second Reading for the Office of Readings, Saturday, 21st Week in Ordinary Time), Homily 50, 3-4; PG 58, 508-509.
 - 30 Pope Francis, A sentence from a video message delivered by the Pope to mark an "extraordinary exposition" of the Holy Shroud at Turin ("I join all of you gathered before the Holy Shroud"). See Vatican Information Service, 30 March 2013.
 - 31 See Jean-Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of St Francis de Sales*, trans., J.S. (London 1910) p.306.
 - 32 St Francis de Sales, Letter to Mère de Chantal, 4 May 1614. See *Oeuvres completes*, vol 16, édition d'Annecy (Paris 1910) pp.177-78. .
 - 33 Ibid., p.178.

*RENEWING PROPHETIC WITNESS AND
OPTION FOR THE POOR:
AN INVITATION TO AFRICAN RELIGIOUS
WOMEN TO STRETCH OUT TO THE
PERIPHERIES OF LIFE*

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1.1 Introduction

The word of a prophet is the announcement of God's presence among His people here and now aimed at provoking their mentality and calling for conversion. In the Old Testament, prophetic witness arose as a charismatic criticism of the corrupt institutions and people's waywardness. Whenever the Israelites forgot or deviated from the Covenant, God sent prophets to protest and to invite them back. In this way, the particular function of prophets is the passionate and critical involvement in the lives of the people. They radically criticise their own society and call for an alternative consciousness contrary to that of the people and the culture.¹

Like the Israelites, Africans today need prophets to protest against the unjust social, economic and political institutions, to prick the consciences of the rich who oppress the poor, to yell against the appalling love for money and power and to invite their people to come back to the Lord with their whole hearts. This challenges religious women in this continent to assume their role as consecrated "mothers" to stand at the fore front in this mission. They are called upon to tell the oppressed to get up and walk, to be the voice of the voiceless, hope for the despaired and an eye opener to

those blinded by love for money and power.

The witness of life which Africans find more appealing and convincing today is charity towards the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, the sick, the fast increasing number of orphans and widows, victims of atrocious wars, HIV pandemic, natural disasters, etc. In the African culture, a woman is presented as the mother of humanity, dispenser and sustainer of life. She brings forth life, protects, defends and fosters it at times at the expense of her own very life.² In the same manner we are called upon through our “African womanhood” and religious consecration to be “givers,” protectors and promoters of life.

1.2 Woman as Giver, Protector and Promoter of Life in the African Culture

The role of the African woman as mother is centred on her responsibility as giver and protector of life, her task in the assurance of the continuity of culture and spirituality and her function as a link between God and humanity. Motherhood in the African culture and society is highly valued. It qualifies a woman as one who holds the underlining principles of the people’s philosophy, biology, ethics and religion, as well as a mutual gender, power and harmonious relations. In fact, a woman is referred to as the “tutor of the wondrous event” and the “protector of the miraculous event.”³ The wondrous event she brings is life; an overwhelming and startling event. She is the tutor to whom life has been confined to be catered for, nourished and cherished. This life has to be handed from generation to generation.

In the African culture, myths about the origin of mankind often put the woman at the centre. She is presented as someone placed by God, the Creator, in a strategic position for the specific function of sharing His creative process of life giving. She brings forth life, protects it, defends it and fosters it even at the expense of her very own life; hence, the African proverb that a woman, mother of life, should not be killed, because doing so means killing children and humanity itself.⁴ Some African myths speak of a primordial “mother” from whom mankind originated. For example, the Akposso of Togo hold that at the initial stage of creation, *Owolowu* (God) made a woman and bore with her the first child, the first human being.⁵ From this comes the entire human race. According to the Igbos of Nigeria, creation stories circle around the earth which is considered the great “mother goddess.” She is believed to be the dearest and nearest deity whose principal function is centred on fertility. According to these people life does not only emerge from the earth, but it is also sustained and protected by the earth. From the earth comes food and water which are vital elements for human

survival. This earth is personified as a woman.⁶ From her, mankind is believed to have emerged and through her is protected, cherished and sustained. In addition to this, the woman is the primary handler of the soil and in most cases the sole recycler of its resources.⁷ Hence where people suffer from sickness, injustice, oppression, poverty, etc., the woman has a decisive role to play.

1.3 Preferential Option for the Poor

Many female congregations in Africa have been founded for the main function of addressing one or other of the needs of the poor in this society. There are communities that live and work among the poor and the marginalised. Outstanding pages in the history of heroic evangelisation, dedication and solidarity are being written by African religious women in this field. Despite all this, we still do not share in a concrete and profound manner the poverty of our people. We are not seen as poor in the manner of the poor in our society. Hence, preferential option for the poor as a fundamental aspect of religious consecration, which is the central message of Pope Francis' pontificate, challenges us to adopt a simple and an austere way of life both as individuals and as communities and to assist our people in the struggle against poverty.

Option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of religious consecration. Those consecrated by the Father share the same mission of Christ who at the beginning of His ministry declared that He has been consecrated by the Spirit to preach the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to give sight to the blind, to set the down-trodden free, declare a year of favour from the Lord (cfr. Luke 4: 16-19). Serving the poor is an act of evangelisation and at the same time a seal of the Gospel's authenticity and a catalyst for permanent conversion in consecrated life.⁸ This mission of Christ finds resonance in our society and challenges the African religious woman today more than ever as she watches her children die of hunger, her young ones roaming the streets, her brothers and fathers carried away to war fronts from where they rarely return and hundreds crying behind prison bars where their voices are never heeded. Confronted with this bitter reality, this woman feels the urgency of opting for the poor who expect from her to be everything for all—*être tout pour tous*.⁹

Being or sharing with the poor may take the form of financial assistance, provision of services, lodging, health, talents and professional skills, but on the other hand much of this is non-material and non-financial. Simply listening and being with them is often very much appreciated by our people who believe that the worst form of poverty is loneliness. This listening

equally becomes a form of self-evangelisation. In their simplicity and material poverty, the poor have much to teach us about religious life. Thus, option for the poor is not just that priority attention is given them, but it also includes our acceptance of the message which they carry. They pedagogically help us to perceive the emptiness of a faith that is not the transforming and constructive force of a just society and they question the authenticity of our evangelical poverty. Practically, African religious women are challenged today by the poor they serve to bear a renewed and vigorous evangelical witness of self-denial and restraint, in a form of fraternal life inspired by simplicity, solidarity and hospitality.

1.4 Prophetic Witness

Prophetic witness results from the nature of following Christ and the dedication to mission. This requires a constant and passionate search for God's will, self-giving, unfailing communion with the Church, spiritual discernment and love for the truth. It also calls for the search for new ways of incarnating the Gospel message into human realities and cultures.¹⁰ In a society like Africa where the struggle for human survival confronts a sea of problems, crises and challenges and where the signs of God's presence and love seem constantly obscured by craving for material goods, convincing and authentic prophetic witness becomes an eminent necessity. As consecrated women, we are called upon urgently to bear witness with the boldness of a prophet who is unafraid of risking her life for the people.¹¹

In effect, Africa today needs prophets who do not only renounce and denounce the social, economic, cultural and political ills of this society, but who equally demonstrate with their lives another way of living that is rooted in Gospel values and who are ready to offer their lives for the Truth. Prophetic witness does not consist fundamentally in the proclamation of the Good News, but derives from a "persuasive power, from consistency between proclamation and life."¹² Thus, it is not based principally on doing something, but rather on being for Somebody and the readiness to reveal that Person to the society that is constantly blind or alienated from Him. Indeed, many people saw in Jesus, especially, Someone who had eminently recovered the prophetic dimension, who knew how to see precisely and to decide. He pointed out the errors of His society and denounced the contradictions of the ritualism and pharisaism that had invaded the religion of His time (cfr. Mathew 23: 1-39). Jesus made visible the lack of consistency between discourse and life. Indeed, His message was a source of liberation and internal consistency. He was above all, the truthful One who restored the primacy of God (cfr. Mathew 5-7).

Following the example of Jesus, African religious women are called upon to witness with their own lives and ways of looking at their society and of assessing reality. In a continent characterised by institutionalised injustice, political instability, violence, economic constraints and all forms of social ills, our mission of witness calls for faithful commitment to the construction of peace, justice, human rights and human promotion. We are invited to take a courageous and prophetic stand in the face of the atrocious corruption, embezzlement of public funds, arms trafficking, flight of currency, immeasurable exploitation by the Western world and the fast approaching secularism that is threatening this continent. As prophetic witnesses we must denounce and renounce not only the authors of social, political and economic ills, but also the cynic cultural structures that promote injustice and compromises justice and peace. It is not enough to denounce, but also important to dedicate ourselves to the construction of peace through various projects, groups and initiatives.

The role of the African woman becomes more prominent when life is concerned; whenever life is threatened, she feels deeply intimidated and stands on the forefront for its defence. African religious women are thus called upon to stand on the forefront to witness to the Gospel as the message of life and love. We need to demonstrate with our lives another way of living rooted in the Gospel values. This, at times could demand that we offer our lives for the Truth. Without authenticity of life, religious identity is lost and mission is thus transformed into a counter-witness. In fact, “the first form of evangelisation today is witness. People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories.”¹³ With our feminine sensibility and patience, we are invited to help our people to become aware of the need for God and to open their eyes to see the signs of sin and death present in our society. To do this we must become reliable witnesses, through a deep existential faith, personal contact with Christ, experience of God in virtue of whom we live, and people who are constantly in search of love, truth and justice.

Many religious in Africa, both missionaries and indigenous, in recent years have died a martyr’s death. While praying for missionaries during the Angelus message of Sunday 20th October, Pope Francis said: “We are especially close to all missionaries who quietly give their lives to spread the Gospel message.” In a special way he remembered an Italian missionary killed in Niger after more than 50 years of service: “Afra Martinelli who worked for many years in Nigeria, one day was killed in a robbery; everyone wept, Christians and Muslims. They really loved her! She announced the Gospel with her life, with the works, she accomplished a centre of instruction.

In this way she spread the flame of faith, she fought the good fight.” While some have been killed, others have been kidnapped, have suffered imprisonment and torture—all for the sake of the Gospel. It is to men and women of this calibre that the African Bishops payed special homage during the Synod in the following words: “How can we fail to mention all the victims in the recent history of our countries, the men and women brutally torn to pieces by the bullets of African and foreign dictators, whose only crime was to cry out for peace, for more justice and human dignity on behalf of their oppressed fellow citizens?”¹⁴

1.5 Conclusion

To incarnate the Gospel message into their socio-cultural reality, African religious women must rediscover their prophetic mission in the African Church and in the reality of their present society. This is a challenge to rediscover the prophetic role of our founders/foundresses, that is, rediscovering the activity of the Holy Spirit which animated them and which continues to be at work today. This entails going back to the roots; to the Gospel vocation of the Church. It equally means relating the socio-cultural conditions of our contemporary society with our charism¹⁵ which is a dynamic force to be interpreted according to various situations, time and space. The signs of the time must be read in the light of the Gospel.

African religious women are challenged to respond to the perennial questions which their people ask about this present life and the life to come, about the mystery of pain and suffering, about relationships, etc. As consecrated persons they are called to be a light in a society characterised by political instability, rampant conflicts and wars, sickness, death, etc. These are divine pleas which only souls accustomed to following God’s will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices that are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete life situation. Faced with the many and pressing problems that sometimes seem to compromise or even overwhelm them, consecrated women in Africa today cannot fail to feel the commitment to bear in their hearts and in their prayer the innumerable needs of their people.¹⁶

- ¹ Cfr. J. FUELLENBACH, *Church: Community for the Kingdom*, Logos Publication, Manilla 2001, p. 183.
- ² Cfr. J. S. MBITI, «The Role of Women in African Traditional Religion», in *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 22 (1988) p. 69-82.
- ³ For the African people life is highest value and the greatest wealth a person can acquire. It is the axis around which every other activity circles. Anything that puts life at stake is considered the worst evil. Every action, moral, religious or ethical is assessed in its capacity to promote or to demote life.
- ⁴ Cfr. J. S. MBITI, «The Role of Women in African Traditional Religion,» in *Cahiers des Religions Africaines* 22 (1988), pp. 69-82.
- ⁵ Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
- ⁶ Cfr. G. PARRINDER, *West African religion: A study of the beliefs and practices of the Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Igbo and Kindred Peoples*, Epworth Press, London 1961, p. 49.
- ⁷ Cfr. P. DENISE – C. SAPPYA, *Femmes d'Afrique dans une société en mutation*, Academia Press, Bruylant 2004, p. 65.
- ⁸ Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 82.
- ⁹ Cfr. S. SEMPORÉ, «Les Défis de la Vie Religieuse en Afrique: Eclairage Historique», in *Annales de l'Ecole Théologique Saint Cyprien*, Yaounde (Cameroon), 10 (2005), p. 249.
- ¹⁰ Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 84.
- ¹¹ Cfr. *Ibidem*, no. 85.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, no. 85.
- ¹³ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 42; PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41.
- ¹⁴ SYNOD OF BISHOPS, II SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR AFRICA, *Lineamenta*, no. 51.
- ¹⁵ Cfr. M. AZEVELLO, *Vocation for Mission: The challenge of religious life today*. Paulist Press, NewYork 1988, p. 142.
- ¹⁶ Cfr. *Vita Consecrata*, n. 73.

MUSIC TO THE FATHER'S EARS

Fr. David Glenday, MCCJ

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Original in English

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6: 36).

Back in the last quarter of the past century, the Church in the United Kingdom was blessed with a very fine leader in the person of Cardinal Basil Hume, a Benedictine monk who had been abbot of his community before being appointed archbishop of Westminster in 1976. Cardinal Hume passed away in June 1999, after having been diagnosed just two months earlier with abdominal cancer. He used those two months well, including arranging for his funeral—the people especially to be invited, the music he wanted the place where he wished to be buried in his Cathedral, the prayers and readings for his requiem Mass.

He also chose the homilist, his close friend Bishop John Crowley, and asked him particularly to explain his choice of Gospel for the Mass, which might have been thought unusual for a funeral—Jesus' parable of the pharisee and the publican in Luke 18: 9-14. "When I became an abbot—the Cardinal told his friend—and even more when I became archbishop and cardinal, I used to ask the Lord: make me a good abbot, let me be a good bishop, allow me to become a good cardinal. Yet now that I know I will very soon be meeting the Father face to face, I realise that this prayer, however sincere and beautiful in its way, is not the prayer He longs to hear from me. No, the prayer that is truly music to the Father's ears is another. It is this: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' Those, concluded the Cardinal, are the words I want on my lips as I go to the Father."

A Great Discovery

Cardinal Hume had made a great discovery. Right at the end of his life—a good and holy life—he had seen and he had experienced, that when we come really to know the Father’s mercy, we are experiencing the pinnacle, the centre, the heart, the masterpiece of his love. He had come to recognise that God’s forgiveness of us is not merely a “repair job”, a setting right of what has gone wrong, a return to the ways things were before we sinned.

No, when the Father forgives us, He creates us afresh and anew; He makes the desert flower; He leads us to a new and deeper experience of how He loves us, of how much He loves, of how infinitely precious we are in His sight. The experience of the Father’s mercy is always the place where a grace of growth and transformation is offered us; the place where we come to know, just a little more, the Father’s tender, creative and patient faithfulness to each one of us.

Another way of putting this would be: it is in our experience of the Father’s compassion and mercy that here and now we come to know the power of the Resurrection. It can surely be no accident that the Exultet, the great hymn of joy and praise that the Church sings on Easter night, is one mighty trumpet-blast of exultation in the wonderful mercy of God:

*Our birth would have been no gain,
had we not been redeemed.
O wonder of your humble care for us!
O love, O charity beyond all telling,
to ransom a slave you gave away your Son!
O truly necessary sin of Adam,
destroyed completely by the Death of Christ!
O happy fault
that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!*

Made Beautiful by Mercy

“Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Romans 5, 20): God’s mercy is *God’s* mercy and so is filled with a power that has no equal. It is of this mercy that Paul sings in the famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13: Love “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” Love is always.

There is a beautiful image that can perhaps help us here. An American

potter arrived in Japan on a visit, but when he opened his luggage he found that the ceramic vessels he had brought as gifts for his friends had broken during the journey. He threw them in the waste-basket, thinking that that was the end of the story. So very great was his surprise when, at the end of his trip, his host presented him with the same vessels—repaired with silver! Thus he discovered the Japanese tradition of “kintsugi”. He recounts: “I was rather astonished, as I’d thought that putting them in the waste-basket was the last I’d ever see of them. Mr. Kanzaki laughed, as he noticed my incredulity, and said: ‘Now, even better than when you brought them!’ Remarkable: gifting back to me the cups I’d brought as gifts...only now more valuable than they originally were.”

Actually, it seems, “kintsugi” in its finest form is repair with gold, so that brokenness makes the vessel far more precious than when it was “perfect”. This is the miracle of mercy: God’s love transforms our experience of sin and fragility into a new, deeper and more real encounter with Him. No need to hide our “cracks”: now, in fact, they are the most beautiful thing about us!

I Am a Mission

At this point, we can say something with great clarity: it is only a deep experience of the Father’s mercy that equips a person to engage in mission. Mercy is the furnace where the vessel of mission is fired; it is the engine-room where the power of mission is generated; it is the score from which the song of mission is sung.

Think, for example, of the call of Peter in Luke 5. Amazed and awed by the miraculous catch of fish, poor Peter takes fright and falls to his knees before Jesus, crying out: “Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” Note Jesus’ surprising response. He does not reply: Yes, Peter, I know you are a sinner, but I forgive you. No, he says: Do not be afraid. Do not fear your sins (Jesus does not deny that Peter is indeed a sinner!), do not fear your sinfulness, but rather focus on the potential that my merciful Father sees in you, on the plans my Father’s compassion has for you, on the people your own experience of mercy will allow you to touch, help, lead and heal.

The experience of the Father’s mercy is always a call; it is always a mission. Because of mercy, we can somehow comprehend and live out the beautiful words of Pope Francis in his letter on the joy of the Gospel: “My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an ‘extra’ or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying

my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing” (273).

Merciful Mission

Mission begins in mercy; mission proclaims mercy; and the method of mission is mercy. I am not sure if this could be better put than in these words from Pope Benedict’s second book on Jesus: “It is part of the mystery of God that he acts so *gently*, that he only *gradually* builds up his history within the great history of humankind; that he becomes man and so can be overlooked by his contemporaries and by the decisive forces within history; that he suffers and dies and that, having risen again, he chooses to come to humankind only through the faith of the disciples to whom he reveals himself; that he continues to knock *gently* at the doors of our hearts and *slowly* opens our eyes if we open our doors to him.” “And yet,” Pope Benedict continues, “is not this the truly divine way? Not to overwhelm with external power, but to give freedom, to offer and elicit love.”

The italics in this quote are mine. Note the adverbs: God acts “gently”, “gradually”, and “slowly”. These are the adverbs of a mission born of mercy. And this is the mission to which we are called, for the experience of being forgiven, when it is authentic, draws us to be forgiving, compassionate and patient. In our own little and always imperfect way, we begin to reflect, to enflesh, the Father’s mercy in all its gentle but irresistible power. And this is the only power which, in the end, will renew the face of the earth.

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE CLOISTERED NUNS

*Chapel of the Choir of the Basilica of Saint Clare, Assisi Friday, 4 October
2013*

Original in Italian

I thought that this meeting was going to be like the one we had twice before in the chapter hall in Castel Gandolfo: alone with the nuns. But I must confess to you that I do not have the courage to send away the cardinals. Let's do it this way.

Good. I thank you all very much for the welcome and the prayers for the Church. When a cloistered nun consecrates her entire life to the Lord, a transformation happens beyond our understanding. It would be natural to think that this nun becomes isolated, alone with the Absolute, alone with God: it is an ascetic and penitent life. But this is not the path of a Catholic or of a Christian cloistered nun. The path always leads to Jesus Christ, always! Jesus Christ is at the centre of your life, your penitence, your community life, your prayer and also of the universality of prayer. And on this path the opposite of what one might think, happens to an ascetic cloistered nun. When she takes this path of contemplating Jesus Christ, of prayer and penitence with Jesus Christ, she becomes extremely human. Cloistered nuns are called to have a great humanity, a humanity like that of the Mother Church; human, to understand everything about life, to be people who know how to understand human problems, how to forgive, how to supplicate the Lord on behalf of others. Your humanity. Your humanity takes this road, the Incarnation of the Word, the path of Jesus Christ. And what is the mark of such a human nun? Joy, joy, when there is joy! I am sad when I find nuns who are not joyful. Perhaps they smile, but with the smile of a flight attendant. And not with a smile of joy, like the one that comes from within. Always with Jesus Christ. Today at Mass speaking of the Crucifix, I said that Francis had contemplated this with open eyes, with open wounds and blood pouring out. And this is your contemplation: reality. The reality of Jesus Christ. Not abstract ideas, not abstract ideas because they dry up the mind. Contemplating the wounds of Jesus Christ!

He brought them to heaven and bears them! It is Jesus Christ's path of humanity: always with Jesus Christ, God-Man. Thus it is so beautiful when people go to the parlour of a monastery and ask for prayers and recount their problems. Perhaps the nun doesn't say anything extraordinary but a word that comes to her through contemplating Jesus Christ, because that nun, like the Church, is on the path of being an expert in humanity. And this is your path: not too spiritual! When paths are too spiritual... I think for example of the foundress of the monasteries of your competition St. Teresa. When a nun came to her, oh, with these things... she said to the cook: "Get her a steak!".

Always with Jesus Christ, always. The humanity of Jesus Christ! Because the Word became flesh, God became flesh for us and this gives you human sanctity that is great, beautiful, mature, the sanctity of a mother. And the Church wants this: mothers, mother, mother. Give life. When you pray, for example, for priests and seminarians, you have a maternal relationship with them. With prayer you help them to become good Shepherds of the People of God. Remember the story of St. Teresa's steak! It is important. And this is the first point: always with Jesus Christ, the wounds of Jesus Christ, the wounds of the Lord. Because it is true that, after the Resurrection, He had them and He carried them.

And the second thing I wanted to tell you quickly is about community life. Forgive and sustain each other because community life is not easy. The devil takes advantage of everything in order to divide us! He says: "I do not want to speak ill but..." and then the division begins. No, this is not good because it does not do anything but bring division. Build friendship between yourselves, family life, love among you. May the monastery not be a Purgatory but a family. There are and there will be problems but like in a family, with love, search for a solution with love; do not destroy this to resolve that; do not enter competitions. Build community life, because in the life of a community it is this way, like a family, and it is the very Holy Spirit who is in the middle of the community. I wanted to tell you these two things: always contemplate, always with Jesus: Jesus, God and Man. And community life always with a big heart. Let things go, do not brag, be patient with everything, smile from the heart. And a sign of this is joy. And I ask for you this joy which is born from true contemplation and from beautiful community life. Thank you! Thanks for the welcome. I beg you to pray for me please, don't forget! Before the Blessing, let's pray to Mary. [*Hail Mary*]

With gratitude: UISG said farewell at the end of March to Sr. Josune Arregui, CCV who has served as Executive Secretary since 2010. We are deeply grateful for the dedication, enthusiasm and insight that she brought to the role. We thank her for her very generous service and wish her well as she begins a new ministry in Madrid.

Talitha Kum: On 20 May 2014 a successful press conference was held in the Vatican announcing the worldwide awareness campaign “Play for Life, Denounce Trafficking” which will take place during the World Cup in Brazil: 12 June -13 July. This campaign is being promoted by the Talitha Kum networks of religious women and men. Pope Francis has spoken out strongly against this phenomenon calling human trafficking “an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ...a crime against humanity.” Fr. Lombardi, SJ presented the speakers: Cardinal Joao Braz de Aviz (Prefect, Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life); Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA (President of UISG); Mrs. Antoinette Hurtado, who was speaking on behalf of the US Ambassador to the Holy See, His Excellency Mr. Kenneth Hackett; Sr. Estrella Castalone, FMA (Coordinator of Talitha Kum) and Sr. Gabriella Bottani, SMC (Coordinator of the Um Grito Pela Vida Network in Brazil). Please encourage the members of your congregation to join the Talitha Kum partners in your part of the world and to support other anti-trafficking initiatives. See www.talithakum.info and support the campaign against trafficking at the World Cup organized by the sisters in Brazil (See their blog at <http://gritopelevida.blogspot.com.br/>).

Sexual Violence Against Women in Conflict (PSVI): This important area of concern has been highlighted at a Global Summit hosted by the British Foreign Minister William Hague and UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie. The statistics are shocking: 30,000 women were raped during the war in Bosnia, but only 30 have been brought to justice for their part in this reign of terror. There are equally disturbing reports from the Congo, South Sudan and almost every other war zone. In preparation for this conference, the BBC, in collaboration with Vatican Radio organized a special programme on PSVI. Three sisters, Sr. Elena Balati, CMS, Sr. Georgette Tshibangu, FMM and Sr. Munyerenkana Chiharhula Victoria, MSOLA, were invited to participate in the programme. They represented many sisters worldwide who work with victims of sexual violence during times of conflict.

Nigerian Conference of Women Religious (NCWR): Wonderful celebrations took place over three days (20 - 22 February) for the 50th

anniversary of the Conference. Thousands attended the Mass on 22 February which was celebrated at the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity in Onitsha. There was an outpouring of gratitude for the sisters past and present who have served the Church in Nigeria with such courage and fidelity. The theme of the celebrations—unity for love and service—is an expression of the desire of the Conference members to continue to collaborate for greater effectiveness in mission and ministry. Sr. Veronica Openibo, SHCJ, a member of the Executive Board, represented UISG at the celebrations.

The Conference of Religious of Canada: We congratulate the CRC on their 60th Anniversary. Their recent General Assembly held in Montreal from 29 May - 01 June, had as its theme: Beyond Frontiers, A Call to Transformation. With Fr. Anthony Gittins, CSpS as keynote speaker, the participants explored the challenge of cultural diversity in both congregational and ministry contexts. Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM (Executive Secretary of UISG) represented the two international unions of Superiors General at the conference.

Regina Mundi in Diaspora: When the Regina Mundi Pontifical Institute (Rome) closed in 2006 UISG looked for a new way of promoting the theological education of sisters in developing countries. In 2012 a yearly grant programme providing help with academic fees was introduced. Application forms are distributed with the UISG bulletin each autumn to member congregations. Recently the committee met and awarded grants to 98 applicants for 2014.

The Executive Committee: The meeting of the Executive which took place on 21 - 22 May covered a wide range of topics including ongoing planning for the 50th Anniversary of the setting up of the UISG and for the meeting of the Council of Delegates which will take place in Accra (Ghana) in November 2014. The Executive updated the Action Plan which emerged from the last Assembly. This has been posted on the UISG website. A study has begun on how best to strengthen and improve communications across the worldwide UISG network. This topic will be discussed at the meeting in Ghana.

Year of Consecrated Life:

Important dates to remember are:

- * Opening in Rome: Prayer Vigil on 29 November 2014 – First Sunday of Advent, 30 November 2014
- * Closing in Rome: Prayer Vigil on 01 February 2016 – World Day of Consecrated Life, 02 February 2016

Worldwide: A time for reflection and sharing during this period. Religious are encouraged to organize events at the local level.

Events in Rome:

- * Ecumenical Meeting of Consecrated Men and Women: 22-24 January 2015
 - * Workshop for Formators: 8-11 April 2015
 - * Workshop for Youth and Young Consecrated Persons: Rome, September 2015
 - * Week of World Unity for Consecrated Life in the Church: 24 January - 02 February 2016
- Theme: Following the Gospel into the Future

Meetings of the Council of 16 and the Council of 18: Meetings take place twice a year with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Many thanks to those who contributed reflections and suggestions on the topics under discussion for the May meetings: The revision of the document *Mutuae Relationes* (Council of 16) and the challenges and difficulties facing religious communities in missionary territories in the transition from mission “ad gentes” to one of “young churches” (Council of 18). Formation (both academic and practical) was seen to be key in the preparation for missionaries especially for remote and difficult areas. A fruitful discussion was held on *Mutuae Relationes* and the suggestions already received were passed to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life.

Website: Just a reminder that *Vidimus Dominum*—a joint initiative of both the UISG and USG—provides up-to-date information about many aspects of religious life throughout the world. It is available in four languages—Italian, French, Spanish and English. We are grateful to Sr. Nadia Bonaldo, FSP and her team of translators for keeping us informed about many interesting projects, activities and events.

Congratulations to UISG President, Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA who was recently appointed as a member of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Sr. Carmen, from Malta, is Superior General of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa. She obtained a degree in Arabic and Islamic studies at the PISAI (Rome) and has spent many years as a missionary in Mauritania, Algeria and Tunisia, working in different Muslim contexts. She spoke recently at the annual assembly organized by Catholic Religious Australia.