

NEW HORIZONS

UISG BULLETIN

NUMBER 156, 2014

FOREWORD	2
SHARED WORDS TO RENEW RELIGIOUS LIFE <i>Fr. Jean-Claude Lavigne, OP</i>	3
THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN LATIN AMERICA <i>Carlos del Valle, SVD</i>	12
THE CHALLENGE OF BEING AN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS WOMAN TODAY <i>Sr. Kenyuyfoon Gloria Wirba, TSSF</i>	19
SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIPS: A GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE <i>Fr. Joy Kachappilly</i>	27
LIFE IN UISG	34

FOREWORD

This Bulletin presents Religious Life as a possible life choice for disciples of Jesus, according to Pope Francis: ... *The true joy of those who are called consists in believing and experiencing that the Lord, is faithful, and that with him we can walk, be disciples and witnesses of God's love, open our hearts to great ideals, to great things* (**Message of Pope Francis for the 51st World Day of Prayer for Vocations, 11 May 2014**).

In the first article, *Shared Words to Renew Religious Life*, **Jean-Claude Lavigne** introduces us to ways of “speaking about” (thinking) religious life. In the face of negative, catastrophic and pessimistic views, his objective is to show that religious life is a choice of life that is attractive and joyous... that it is worth abandoning all else. The questioning continues... We end up being what we think and say about ourselves. We are called to live happily and to be witnesses to joy and to transmit this to a world filled with despair. The heart and the works of religious life should be filled with words of admiration, wisdom, reflection, and especially the evangelical Word, the Word of Jesus, close friend who is present in our daily life.

Carlos del Valle shows us how religious in Latin America are finding new ways to be credible witnesses that engage and empower when faced with the challenges of the world. The author speaks of “*being responsible for, to carry the weight, to support one's burdens and those of others.*” A spirituality that is centred on Christ and life according to the Gospel encourages creativity and innovation and permits living an authentic communion, to be a home that welcomes, integrates and “deinstalls” religious life.

Gloria Wirba talks about the vitality of religious life for women in Africa and specific challenges within this continent: to find and assert its identity; to bring the love of Jesus and to defend life; to be formed to be faithful religious without ceasing to be African women; to embody the land, the culture and the African society to be signs of hope among the people.

The article by **Joy Kachappilly** introduces the theme of interfaith friendship according to Ghandi—open-minded and flexible, an anxious seeker of truth. As in a house, with walls that give security and rooting, and windows opened to admit varied cultural winds that enrich, religions bring people closer together in their ideal of faith and perfection... This would be worthwhile, in these times of conflict, of hatred and violence against peace in the name of God, to immerse oneself in a path of encounter.

SHARED WORDS TO RENEW RELIGIOUS LIFE

Fr. Jean-Claude Lavigne, OP

The Dominican, Jean Claude Lavigne, former Director General of “Economy and Humanism”, is currently assistant to the Provincial Prior of the Dominicans in France. He has a diversified experience of religious life (small mixed community with people with disabilities, convents in France and Africa, as superior or formator...). He lectures on various ecclesial movements, facilitates Chapters and preaches retreats in many monasteries and religious communities.

This article was published in *Consecrated Life*, No. 2, April-May-June 2013.

Original in French

Religious life is on the decline according to litanies of an announced death. That has already happened many times since Vatican II, but we are surprised: “the corpse still breathes” and is renewing itself. Sociologists have made efforts to describe what they call the crisis of religious life that manifests itself in an aging membership in Europe (which is not true in other parts of the world) and by a decrease in the number of young members (here also the continental differences play a role). The arguments given are numerous and pertinent, but the reality of contemporary religious communities reveal other defects which often revolve today around a dichotomy that is visible or legible, within congregations and communities, but also among them. This observation has no depth: if the visible is misunderstood, caricatured or a reference for the uninitiated few, to what does it serve? Is the essential to be noticed or to give witness to the Gospel? If what we are doing is not related to Christ for our contemporaries who no longer know how to interpret how we live, if we silence the One who is the source of our life, we are no longer legible. The issue seems to be beyond this observation as heard in a report. The matter must be explored in its varied dimensions to be renewed.

A discussion on...

The ways we speak of religious life are numerous and vary according to the speakers, their experience, their spiritual tradition and each congregation's customs. These discussions about religious life aimed at our contemporaries are also marked by the fact that we are addressing either some believers (somewhat numerous) or other occasional believers, either non-practicing or indifferent people, often uninformed about religious life. This diversity is real, but, from the differences, it is possible to identify some major points. The attempt to delineate reality is important, not for the rhetoric or for a vocational marketing ploy, but because such discussions also show our true identity. We become, for a large part, what is being said of us; what P. Ricoeur evokes about the narrative identity.¹

Critical discussions breed critical religious: and who would want to join a group of permanent critics? The talk of the conquerors who see themselves invested with a mission to save Christianity of certain values or habits in a decadent and consumer oriented or insignificant world leads to an escalation of radicalism that is very exclusionary. To speak as "young and trendy for trendy youth" leads to insignificance... One could easily multiply the analyses.²

Discussions about lost anchorage

In a manner more transversal, one can locate three metalanguages about religious life that indicate important elements but painful today to say that it is a happy and pertinent choice for our times. To talk about religious life, we will more often speak about *works* or even of the informal presence in places and associations. Thus, even though we invoke the useless service, we will develop a discourse beginning with what is fact, what has social utility and what creates links. We will use the vocabulary of mission, of social action more or less professional... Even though most religious are retired and have set their mind to no longer be active as before, this discourse actually resides across the notion of presence, of proximity and of connections to maintain or entertain. This approach is an efficacious one which manifests itself in multiple ways. It is not denying relevancy because it speaks of the dignity of persons in relationships, of justice and friendships or of the transmission of the faith, but it points to a value system that does not anchor itself easily in modernity. Religious are no longer as concretely visible as in the past, even though they often inspire lay men and women who have replaced them, and whose actions are no longer suitable for religious: they are unrecognizable and concern all believers, even militant humanists. They no longer attract large numbers of young religious who

did not wait to join a religious group in order to work in society.

The *rhetoric of radicality*—one no longer dares talk about perfection—is used also to speak of religious life, but this radicality is rarely thought of by our contemporaries who instead expect to see radicality in the form of intense poverty and solidarity. Religious life will be for those ‘radicals’ a break from the values of a decadent or inconsistent world, a complete reversal of values, a rejection of modern-day practices and a strong affirmation of identity... Can it be a sign to situate oneself against modernity? Is it not rather a counter-cultural sign—that of a special life style reserved for the select few: the strongest, the most absolute, the purists... Who can be attracted to this kind of life if they are not part of the elite and not among the “strongest” or if they do not pretend to be a model for others? To whom can this discourse be addressed for an ordinary relationship and what effect will it produce? What is described here is actually a view of religious life as an achievement. Such an option is not condemnable in itself and can call for a certain challenge to a lukewarm Christianity, but it reveals itself as fragile and illusory in the long run and humanly violent because one must always reject what modernity proposes and therefore, the experiences offered by ordinary relationships with our contemporaries.

We can also seek to describe religious life from a *formal perspective* that, in the end, is not always fully and perfectly lived, which renders one culpable or hypocritical and always makes us depressed. Such a discussion often rests on the vows which appear to be of little relevance or convincing against the ideas of the life of our contemporaries including those who seek to be believers. The vows are presented as renouncements (sometimes also as sacrifices) or, at least, sufferings to be endured when giving oneself to God. Prayer and the common life, more or less fraternal, should be added to this formal approach to explain the project—the purpose—of religious life. The theme of oblation that echoes from this type of presentation is developed as an answer (a counter-gift which balances the equation) to a God given gift. Such a presentation places a relationship with God as “accountable” that leaves little room for the gift of Love and in a theorization of violence, rarely happy and against human nature. This formal approach describes the possibilities for encountering Christ, but does not really communicate the meaning of religious life. In addition, when reasoning according to an established model or ideal, it does not take into consideration the diversity of the interpretations of that ideal, nor how it is lived and what is the reality of religious life in all its weaknesses, its challenges, and its highlights.

Or discourses that open up a future

Encountering religious, while considering what is actually lived by them, opens up other ways of saying what religious life is like that can be mobilized.³ This does not have as a goal to recruit novices—a bad strategy to avoid—but simply to question public opinion, be it dispirited by reality or too sure of itself and of its criticism of the happiness realized.⁴ Being religious, is it other than to invite, in the name of Christ and His Church, questions in a world of affirmation, especially if the affirmation concerns the impossibility of being happy believers? Religious seem to me to be, first of all, people who question the world as it is, thus creating space where the freedom of the questioner is awakened to the possibility of encountering Christ and can be expanded.

Of the three metalanguages that are difficult to pursue, we can contrast them with three others, holders of questions that can kindle the choice of welcoming Christ who gives life to people and the institutions they have established. The *art of living*, a style as C. Theobald⁵ would say, is one possible discourse: not only a spirituality for the elderly or when retired, even though we can talk about such a spirituality,⁶ but to speak a language that suggests a “way to be happy” at any age. Religious life is a way to live as a Christian, exemplified by the life of Jesus, not as a model, but as the One whom we meet and who accompanies us. The elements of this way of life are related to change (to progress) and to continuous new beginnings, with confidence in the Redemption opened by the Cross, friendship with God and with others, the desire for life liberated by the Resurrection. At the heart of this way of life, prayer in all its forms is the source and this is what the world expects from religious—that we guide them to the Source, even though it may only flow in the nights.⁷ Religious are fundamentally men and women of prayer, contemplatives—whether apostolic or not—that is to say, people who do not tire of expecting God and to welcome Him when He manifests Himself, who become little by little aware of God’s gratuitous companionship and who thus, dare to present Him the world’s sufferings and to receive in return His peace to pass on to others. It is a style of life to share God, a work of the Spirit who puts everything in relationship and that rules of congregations facilitate and objectify.

Religious life can also be described from the point of view of *disparity* that consists in freeing a space within oneself and in the world as it is. It is less in evoking an illusory and insignificant break from the world than to implement the “inside-outside” perspective that characterizes Christians,⁸ men and women whose life is never disturbed by an encounter with the Risen Christ. The space is not a gap but a distance taken because of what

is an obstacle to the life in order to approach the source of fertility and the One who is the Life, but also the Way and the Truth. It is to leave space within oneself for the emergence of God. The fertile gap is activated through attitudes, values, availability to another, time management, relationship with the body and to death... This is the function of the vows and the constitutions of each religious institution. Religious life, as it opens a space, is a way to become available to receive an abundant life, an overabundance, and to reinvest one's God given gifts in every day life. The focus is then on the required distance because of what societies affirm to be the sole voices of salvation and happiness to receive from God a way of being and to return it joyously: It is to place religious life in a prophetic attitude which is simultaneously challenging, certifying and welcoming for the benefit of our time and everyone. The Song of Songs opens up a third option: that of religious life as a *love story*. There is no need to make a transfer from a human love affair that has not been avowed but to lead a life that takes pleasure in an encounter with God and is organized around it. To speak of love seems outdated and can appear inaudible to those who do not believe it is possible to be loved and to love, who only see the need to be suspicious. The Song of Songs, evidently, was not written to speak of religious life but it can resound in an astounding manner in our lives as religious. It speaks of our longings for God and our desires to live intensely with Him, of a search between our hearts and the Beloved, of our restlessness in waiting, of our impetuositities, our rebirths, our enthusiasms and our unrestrained love affairs... It describes the spiritual life as the one that religious, through the rules and regulations of institutions which are tools that crystalize the experience of searchers of God according to the intuitions of founders, try to render possible and fertile. The regulated life of religious—a way among others to be Christians—is at the service of that enamored encounter according to St. John of the Cross.⁹ Where it wants to be different, there is the peril of insignificance or a change of goal.

Other accounts could be explored to explain religious life but what is important is that we research together ways to explain the life that permits us to live more intensely the life that we embraced, to venture interiorly¹⁰ where God has welcomed us. That research is fundamental for us for our self-identity, our identity as religious, and also to give hope at this time. God speaks today and proposes a fertile journey.

A discourse between...

If what we say about religious life makes us live in a particular way, it will also engender a particular way of talking among ourselves. This

shared word is the key to the future of religious life. The common life of religious is not only the sharing of goods, time and actions; it is speaking as one voice. But this aspect is more difficult than we dare admit and silent communities¹¹ are numerous.

Talking with another

The story of the Tower of Babel (Gn 11) can serve to analyze our reflection. The intervention of God, a liberation and not sanction, cuts through our inadequate language that seeks only to make a name for oneself by only speaking of “bricks and mortar”, believing that through such construction, one could become equal to God or even higher than God. God, in destroying such language that serves only one purpose and is self-serving, invites us to take a risk to speak on another level, to seek to talk about lived experiences, to be sometimes misunderstood and to find new voices to exchange with radically different ones. Thus, God opens up the necessity for dialogue where formerly there was only a collective monologue; God invites us to discover the value of shared ideas and the unknown. The dialogue is not easy but it opens to richness in relationship with the other instead of our own human development. It no longer involves trying to replace God, but to dare to communicate on a different level, where one learns to communicate with God. In coming into the world, Jesus spoke our human language and shared with everyone, without exclusion, the way to conversion and salvation and God’s love for everyone.

Of course we do speak to one another in religious life. There are many occasions for compassionate words, but the command to speak often outweighs a common search for what is well and good, for what is evangelical. To engage in the shared word is something other than enhancing the chatter that is nothing else but the fear of silence that must be quickly filled. Monks and nuns are called like other religious to share the essential word, the one that has the taste of the gospel, but in more specific times which therefore requires a different level of thought.

This sharing is in contrast to the former manner of speaking as in the XIXth century, still present in many congregations, with fear and anxiety based on unforgiven (and unspoken) ancient hurts, with the intrusion of spoken words from a few who seek power and recognition. It is also in contradiction with the cult of televised news that avoids facing the tragedies of life but which provides the anecdotes that are talked about during meals and thus permits one not to get involved in a discussion.

Talking to become

Shared talk is a birthing process for oneself and for the community because through the spoken word we become a subject, singular and in relationship. The word reveals, in fragility and often in ambiguity, our interior life; it unveils what is invisible and constitutes us as humans. It cuts through our inhibitions and our fears, while revealing our hopes, our desires... It causes us to be present and to wait at the same time. Our identity, in the complexity of its being, thus emerges gradually and its religious dimension is formalized. Exchanging, entering into conversation is therefore other than an occupation: it is an engendering process. Religious life through shared dialogue assists us in our humanization and in our divine filiation.

The spoken word creates a friendly relationship while taking a risk¹² in listening to the joys and sorrows of the other, which is what transforms us, but also, permits us to reveal ourselves. The links that bind the words provide substance to the relationship, to mutual hospitality, to an encounter. The shared word stimulates and comforts both in our humanity in search of identity as well as in our journey to Christ; in that it is indispensable for perseverance in religious life in both low and high moments. The shared word changes the common life to a fraternal life. It lends some truth to our belief of being brothers and sisters in religious life. The spoken word is thus a measure of our fraternity and a means to make it progress; it is thus a means of compassion and of witness to what the Spirit can do: it enables us to speak about what we could legitimately ignore or “politely” avoid. If it is essential to religious life, it is not easy. Saint James, in his epistle, talked about the ambivalence of language (3: 5) capable of good but also of killing. The words exchanged may fall, injuries may result, and misunderstandings may rupture the existing fraternity, taking greater risks given that our communities are increasingly multicultural. Perhaps, the fact that one may be caught by killing words is at the source of the fear that renders us mute but this obstacle can be overrun: This is the Utopia of the regulated common life, or at least, we believe that the Spirit of Jesus can help us to dare to go beyond.

The words of Jesus about forgiveness are there to goad us (Mt 6: 14; Mk 11: 25; Lk 6: 37) or the exhortations of St. Paul (Ep 4: 32; Col 3: 13...). Words of pardon are a true bond of fraternity. This does not happen from a unanimous decision arrived at without disagreement but by the forgiveness pre-offered in the name of Christ. The pardon does not erase what caused the conflict or violence but expressing it—the spoken word—is an affirmation—the sacrament of language¹³—and it cannot be a reason to

abandon the fraternal relationship. Thus, forgiveness, although difficult, is at the centre of religious life following Jesus' pardon of those who crucified him and remembering the words of St. John: no one can say they love Christ if they do not love their brother/sister.

Styles of Words for Life

These reflections on shared words as an important practice in religious life invite us to look for ways to better converse in religious life so as to be in a school of fraternity and dare to share this with our contemporaries: this is our mission. Three types of speech could be worked on to convey the style of life of religious. The first type is that of *admiration*. It is not naivety or willfulness to only see what is good (according to our own subjective ideas). It is to share what is developing, what is being born and comes to end the disagreements in our personal and collective lives, political and economical. It is healing for what is unexpressed and comes to break the untested logic and practices. To care for what is evolving, to express it and to celebrate it is an attitude to develop in religious life in echoing Easter morning when death was conquered. In this, religious are guards, on the lookout (Jer 1:11) and have a responsibility to the world (Hab 2).

The second type of word is *intelligence* that we need to develop to be faithful to religious life. This word is necessary in a world that has cut itself off from Christian culture: we are questioned on multiple points and our contemporaries do not expect of us ready made answers but tools and perspectives to progress in their questioning. We must therefore, develop intelligent speech, a shared study of the Bible and theology, comprehension of our implications, reflection on the shortcomings of the present culture¹⁴... Sharing our readings, our questions, our information and our analysis is no longer reserved for a few specialized intellectuals; it is an urgency so that religious life can be of service in our time. The third type is the *evangelical word* which should be our usual place. Its goal is to remember Jesus and his life among us, the Christ whose eyes were always on the suffering of others,¹⁵ the Savior who appears in our silences and our prayers. This more difficult language evolves from sharing the presence of God in our experience and our responsibility to carry the memory of God in a world that ignores Him. It is a word that comes from our faith identity and which is in search of the truth and thus love, modest yet brilliant. It is a tall order: to dare to say that we live because of a Love which engages us despite our limitations. This word is mutual preaching, sharing the gospels, spiritual sharing and exchange of confidences where God is the actor... These are just a few ideas to stimulate us to become speakers so that finally God is said to be

among us for He is our vitality, and around us, not as experts or teachers, but as His friends. To speak to God and to speak of God is to unveil religious life as a project to live in friendship with God.

¹ P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre Inizio modulo*, Seuil, 1990.

² Cfr. Jean-Claude Lavigne, "Novices? What novices?" In Bulletin of the UISG No. 150, 2012.

³ See J. C. Lavigne, *Pour qu'ils aient la vie en abondance*, Cerf, 2010. This book tries especially to clarify what can be a religious life when conceived as different.

⁴ See J. C. Lavigne, *Voici je viens*, Bayard, 2012 who seeks to suggest a process of discernment and discuss religious life according to the theme of the Song of Songs.

⁵ See Christoph Theobald, *Le christianisme comme style*, Cerf, 2007 (2 vols.).

⁶ Because it is relevant to the only social group expansion in Europe: the third age and the following "ages": 4th and 5th ages. The number of centenarians in religious life is on the rise.

⁷ See Symposium UISG "Mysticism and Prophecy", 2010, whose theme focused on a verse of the poem of John of the Cross.

⁸ Jn 15:19; Jn 17:14-16.

⁹ John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*.

¹⁰ Song of Songs 2:10.

¹¹ The silence is not silence but violence against the word.

¹² See the beautiful book by F. Chirpaz, *Parole risqué*, Klincksieck 1989.

¹³ G. Agamben, *Le sacrement de langage. Archéologie du serment*, Vrin, 2009.

¹⁴ This is one of the talks to the Bernardines in Paris given by Benedict XVI who presented religious life as a cultural laboratory (2008).

¹⁵ J. B. Metz "Memoria passionis." A challenging memory in a pluralistic society, Cerf, 2009.

THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN LATIN AMERICA

Carlos del Valle, SVD

Rev. Carlos del Valle, Missionary of the Divine Word, holds a doctorate in moral theology. Since 1983 he has worked in Chile where he was Director of the journal Witness. In June 2013, he was named Rector of Saint Peter's College, Rome.

Original in Spanish

Religious life in Latin America is experiencing a revitalization process in letting itself be refounded today within the matrix of the people's lives. It is there that it is nourished by desires, ideals, dreams... that reinforce its identity as a sign:

- * Faced with secularism, with indifference, and with superficiality, religious life is the proof that men and women, nostalgic for profoundness, can be fashioned by a search for God.
- * Faced with individualism and solitude... Religious life seeks to be the heart of fraternal life: witnesses and artisans, patient builders of an imperfect communion.
- * Faced with consumerism... Religious life is a breath of simplicity and interior freedom, an austerity of life to liberate itself from egoistic imperialism, without softening the rough edges of radicalism.
- * Before the stranglehold of power and domination... Religious life reflects a desire for self-sacrifice in humility, without exchanging service for prestige. Faced with utilitarianism... religious life is charmed by gratitude, the fragrance that flowed abundantly at Bethany.
- * In cold and distant relationships... It is an effort to live in sincerity and reconciliation that renders religious more human, more joyous and lovers of life.

A concern of religious life is: "What must one do to do God's work?" (Jn 6:28). Saint Exupery says: "*In life, there are no solutions. There are only forces at work: you have to create them and then solutions will come.*" We aim to turn these forces to be clear signs and meet the social

and ecclesiastical challenges of our times.

1. “The 21st Century will be mystical or it will not be human”:

The mystical... the deepest sense of life is the gateway to God's horizon.

Religious life is in crisis but we do not feel concerned. We live with distractions; with urgencies that anesthetize us, tasks that give us satisfaction and safeguards that tranquilize us...we vegetate between indifference and routine. We are settled in our loyalties. But to what are we faithful? To the past or to what God wants of us today? To be faithful to the past, the practices and the customs are sufficient. To be faithful to the present, creativity is needed. The primary virtue of the mystic is to be creative; not to be faithful to the routine.

We want to position ourselves as men and women of God in society. But... like Elijah (1 Kings 19: 1-4), we seek refuge in our caves; our traditions, our routine, our truths, our customs, our securities. The angel (the people, society) says to you: Get out of your cave, your customs, your convictions, your learned truths... and face up to people's needs. As Jesus...in the mission, He positioned Himself not so much by what He had learned than by the needs of the people He met.

Come the storm, the earthquake, the fire... Our activism, highlighting ourselves, that which makes up grow and gives us prestige, what transforms us to officials of the sacred and not witnesses to Jesus... We do a lot of things... We could even believe that religious life combines efficiency and professional excellence... And evangelical excellence? The question should be asked differently: Do we transmit the Gospel in all that we do?

Our institutions, the social status we enjoy, the moral leadership we exercise, the character in which I take refuge, that of being a sacred elite which leads me to believe that I am different... All this distances us from those who have little, who know little and can do little. The power, clericalism, the abuse within the Church and our beliefs that exclude and snub those who are different... The Lord is not there.

A light breeze... Something new is happening in religious life on this continent: A language (desire) for coherence, for things made with love, nourished by prayer... a sophisticated language. There is a desire for spirituality and work in the contemplative dimension. There is an interest for being among the people, at the service of the least ones. The Spirit is awakening us to the grace of the mission and of mission as dialogue. We

see appearing a more humble religious life, of a deep spiritual quality, more God-centred, more missionary, simpler institutions, moved by the Spirit and charisms, with new forms of communities opened to lay people; a religious life that is changing thanks to the stories of the life it provokes, at the beauty of its features—compassionate, joyous—and focused on those who suffer.

We hope more and more for a change. In messages and conventions, the motto is: *We want something else*. We are tired of the lack of honesty and transparency in the different public spheres and secret private meetings. Our religious life is charged with good will, a thirst for honesty and coherence, a hunger for life, a desire for God. Many religious, day after day, proclaim the Gospel by their life and state that the Church and religious life should not be identified with the power in society.

We want to live as fraternal-disciples and missionary-witnesses. If a missionary is not a witness, he/she is deceived. We can move to a different continent but if we are not a witness of Jesus Christ, the mission takes on the semblance of a safari. If we are not rooted in the experience of God, we have nothing to say to our contemporaries. We will feel out of place, incapable of responding to the challenges that society launches at the Church today. The fundamental question is: Do we have the spiritual strength necessary to face the challenges of today's society?

With the Council, we undertook the renewal of religious life while searching for apostolic effectiveness. Today, we do it from spiritual premises, by focusing on the logic of giving, more than that of personal heroism. Life has more need of passionate people than of saviors. The problem of religious life is that of spirituality: to have or not have an experience of God. It is the answer to the personal and institutional crisis—the sin... the spiritual anaemia. When one loses the passion for Jesus and His kingdom, there remains only religiosity. From there, it is a *light* life: formal and routine prayers, a community life that is contented to live and let live, the mission as work to be done, preferences, deadlines... When the virus of anaemia attacks us, we become like old wineskins, without vision and without creativity. The new wine of testimony turns sour. Our limitations end with our consent by paralyzing our hopes.

2."The 21st century will be in favour of the excluded or it will not be Christian":

Animated by a charismatic and prophetic mission

An identity crisis always comes from a limited experience of God and

a lack of missionary orientation. What identity do we want to reinforce today? A corporate identity, that is founded on a community in mission at the service of people broken by violence, on the margins of well-being?

Religious are called for everything and we sometimes stop doing what we should be doing. This presents a double danger: that of becoming officials of the sacred and specialists in general, with a watered down identity. It is easier to work in pre-existing pastoral platforms than to inaugurate a new frontier missionary presence. In the first case, it suffices to be a good administrator. In the second instance, it takes creativity and daring. This is how we can make sense of the realities of our life and our mission. We will be able to name them and value them, giving them an evangelical orientation and meaning in the Church and society. Some examples:

- Consecrated life... More life and more consecrated
- Will of God... Fraternal relationships
- My Congregation... Enlarge our tents for lay people
- My brothers/sisters... Fall in love again with your vocation
- Religious... Volunteer full time
- Life's project and mission... The others, the life of those who suffer
- Brothers/sisters, Priests... Disciples in formation
- Spirituality... a gift, an encounter
- Community... an open door, intercultural
- Religious... with a spiritual force, forged in the depths
- Missionaries... Witnesses—there are too many officials
- Mission... charismatic and prophetic
- Challenges of reality... Discerning the will of God
- Places for religious... The desert, on the periphery, the frontier
- Heritage... Viewed from the bottom.

Religious life in our continent is challenged by the prophetic and charismatic inspirations of these expressions that it tries to imitate. Thus, the atmosphere in the Church and towards the Church could change: through service and giving, by moving from clerical/hierarchical to fraternal/discipleship. It is in opening up that we discover our identity as religious. What convinces one today is not one's words or actions, one's preaching or management, but the connections between one's life and that of others: "to be responsible for, to carry the weight, to support" one's burdens and those of others.

Our identity, our charism, our spirituality... It is not only in searching in the tradition of our congregation that we find them. It is also in the charismatic and prophetic mission that we are incarnating. The salt and yeast know what they are and how they contribute when mixed in the dough, by being lost and consumed to give it taste and to make it rise. The meaning of our vocation is to seek God beyond the sphere of the sacred: on the boundaries where those who lead a difficult life and in places where life and exclusion are almost synonymous. What is most important is the suffering of the people. Christian love is there when one concentrates entirely on the suffering of the weakest and when we seek to release everyone from pain.

Religious spread life and love freely in the midst of marginalized environments. Communities on the periphery are the spearhead of prophetic and mystical religious life in Latin America. It is a significant service... that can become a reference. Religious life has returned to its breeding ground. The encounter with the poor is its territory par excellence. It is the tribunal of the poor that adjudicates our mission. It is easy to meet the excluded—what is difficult is to follow-up on the encounter and to make it the compass of one's life and mission.

Let us make of the prophetic mission a conviction, an act of faith more than an idea. Ideas cause one to reflect. Convictions live on. The spirituality of the one who lives by his/her convictions is our strength. We always look up but beginning from the bottom because our heart is on the side of the excluded. With them and from them we live the Gospel. Our mission...we remain close to God's Word which helps us to be on the side of the poor and nourishes our consecration.

3. "The 21st Century of Christianity will be ecumenical and intercultural or it will not be ecclesial."

It could be the dawn of mini Christianities, monocultural, without evangelical foundation and without witness of communion, but not be the Church of Jesus.

A charism lives to the extent that it is renewed. If we want to be faithful to the charism of our founders, we must change the life of our institute and change our life. We are called to a creative fidelity: to be faithful to our roots, faithful to renewal so as not to live in the past and stifle the Spirit in the routine.

We must look forward and engage ourselves for the future. Let us be touched by the momentum that comes from the new. Before speaking His

Word, God is manifested in events. The God of the Bible is the God of life and history. A large part of the Old Testament that we call God's Word was transmitted to Israel by neighbouring peoples and religions. Through them, they received from God.

Our world has become plural. Cities are places of diversity and are multicultural. If anything defines them, it is variety, differences, and tolerance. The spirituality of communion leads us down the path of interculturalism and invites religious life to become a Christian life on the frontiers. Our communities should respond to the blessings and the challenges of interculturalism, interiorly and exteriorly, in its life and mission. "In the 21st century the face of the new fraternity/sorority will be intercultural or it will not be" says Diana de Vallescar. The present and the future of consecrated life will pass through the prophetism of interculturalism.

To be builders and witnesses of religious life in the 21st century, one must engage in an intercultural dialogue. It is not easy to change from an "I" to a "You" that is culturally different, and even more so to an "Us" of interculturalism. We live with a complete list of relationships and friendships. We open our doors and invite to our table (time, friendship, property, interest) those who expel demons because they are like us. We are threatened by a narrowness of mind, by culturally closed relationships and experiences. This limits us, makes us repetitious, trapped in our habits and unable to open up to something new. The fact of having to open up the space of our relationships and let in people at the margins, who will eventually bring changes to our entire way of life, makes us lose our security. When people who are different arrive, we lose our securities as they do not allow us to remain in our inconsistencies. They help us to shorten the distance between what we are and what we say. It is like salt on a wound—it is painful but salutary and prevents us from wallowing in mediocrity.

Religious life will be significant today if it assumes the cultural differences of individuals and groups in life and in mission. The prophetic voices imply building bridges and opening roads in both directions to create a culture of dialogue and inclusion. A monologue makes us aware of ourselves. A dialogue opens us to reality and transforms us in it and through it. An intercultural encounter is a fruitful experience. The different person enriches me, helps me to pass from indifference to dialogue so we come to know each other. She helps me to live in "togetherness", without competition; to be humble because everyone needs humility to live together or arrogance to be competitive. Imagine what our congregations will look like when they will allow themselves to be touched by other non-Western cultures.

Intercultural dialogue... the coming of the Spirit in the daily lives of our communities makes of interculturalism a way of being, a lifestyle, a place to meet the Lord. But interculturalism should not be lived without a conversion—personal, missionary, and institutional. The adventure of meeting between cultures is for us both an interior and exterior voyage. It pushes us to release our securities, our certitudes and the sphere of what is known and familiar. It is to cultivate our spirituality with wisdom and prophetic courage, believing that the best is yet to come for religious life in our continent.

Attention to diversity will cause a new spirituality to emerge, an authentic communion. It will be a factor for renewal and creativity, of a transformation that will make us move from centralism to pluralism, a dogmatic style for another dialogic process, from excess of identity and self-sufficiency to self-criticism and to innovation. It will oblige us to get out of our habits and routines that generate immobility; to push us to abandon convenient structures that paralyse, and to abandon the rigidity of certain traditions that are empty and meaningless. Interculturalism in communities today supposes to give life to the Gospel and to render religious life credible.

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING AN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS WOMAN TODAY

Sr. Kenyuyfoon Gloria Wirba, TSSF

Sr Gloria Wirba belongs to the Congregation of the Tertiary Sisters of St Francis of Assisi, Cameroon Province. She is holder of a Masters Degree in Religious Sciences, Licentiate and Doctorate Degrees in Missiology from the Pontifical Urban University of Rome and a Licentiate Degree in Theology of Consecrated Life from the Lateran University of Rome.

Original in English

1.0 Introduction

In a culture still imprisoned by certain traditions, taboos and practices which often render, particularly women and children victims of enormous pain and suffering, African religious women today seek various ways of proclaiming the Gospel to their people as the Good News; a message of life. Consecration through the profession of the evangelical counsels inspires a way of living which has a glaring or eloquent social impact on the African society. When lived fully and authentically, these evangelical values become a great challenge to this society dominated by craving for material goods, liberty and affection. In fact, today African religious women through the profession and life according to the evangelical counsels are invited to stand as eloquent witnesses of the Kingdom of God which is the principal longing of the human heart. This message is not only to be communicated in words, but fundamentally through fidelity and authenticity to their vocation.

Religious life has found fertile ground in Africa and continues to experience a rapid growth. Evidently, its rate of expansion contrasts favourably with the stagnation and decline of vocation presently ravaging the Churches in Europe and North America. This increase leaves no doubt about the significant numeric force of religious women in this continent. While we admit the rapid growth and the indispensable contribution of African religious women to the African Church today, we are equally aware of the many challenges which they are called upon to confront. Often

when these challenges are not adequately handled they not only render the apostolates less fruitful, but above all they diminish the initial enthusiasm and fidelity to the religious vocation.

1.1 The challenge to search for their specific identity

The basic challenge for African religious women today is the search for their specific identity as women from the African culture, called, consecrated and sent on mission to evangelise and to incarnate the Gospel into their own socio-cultural reality. This brings our minds to a crucial question of what it actually means to be a consecrated religious woman in Africa with all the cultural, social, political and economic problems presently ravaging this continent. The African woman has generously welcomed religious life but today more than ever the question of who she is and what it means to be a religious woman in the African contemporary society haunts her conscience, both at the individual and the community levels. African religious women are questioning the validity of a life simply transferred from Europe and America to Africa. Though it has and still gives fruits, they believe it would bear more fruits if it is authentically enculturated into the African cultural, social and economic reality. According to Semporé, this process demands three concrete steps: to discern what in the African culture is not compatible or does not favour the growth and full realisation of this way of life. Secondly, to discern in the gift received what belongs to its essence and inalienable nature and what to the package. Thirdly, to determine the necessary help, care and attention to be given to this form of life for it to be authentically implanted so that it could bear abundant and desirable fruits in the African soil.¹

1.2 The challenge to be prophetic witnesses

The role of an African woman becomes more prominent when life is concerned; wherever 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. In effect, Africa today needs prophets who not only denounce the social, economic, cultural and political ills of this society, but who equally demonstrate with their lives another way of living rooted in the Gospel values and who can even go as far as offering their lives for the Truth. Prophetic witness does not consist fundamentally in proclamation, but derives from a “persuasive power, from consistency between proclamation and life.”² Thus, it is not based principally on doing something, but rather on being for Somebody; Jesus and the readiness to reveal that Person to the society that is constantly blind or alienates itself

from Him.

To incarnate the Gospel message into their socio-cultural reality, African religious women must identify 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 charism³ which is a dynamic force to be interpreted according to various situations, time and space.

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 which 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.⁴ With feminine sensibility and patience they are invited to help their people to be aware of the need for God and for an effort of liberation from sin and death.

The rediscovery of the Gospel roots of religious life is for today's religious women of Africa a fundamental, most urgent and an unavoidable task. Our contribution to evangelisation does not lie so much on our "doing" but fundamentally on our "being", which proves the truth of what we proclaim. Without authenticity of life, the 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."⁵

1.3 The challenge for an integral religious formation

In Africa today, religious congregations are graced with numerous vocations, but handicapped by the lack of a solid formation which would help them to understand their identity and role in the Church and to assume

it fully as African women consecrated totally to God in the service of their brothers and sisters. In effect, the crucial question that faces these religious women could be summed up by the question: *What type of formation for which form of religious life?* Since formation depends very much on the concepts that we have about religious life and on how it is lived, and from the image that is created and projected about it, the lack of a deep understanding of this way of life by our people and sometimes by some religious themselves equally poses a serious problem to formation.

1.3.1 Formation to be authentic African women

I am personally convinced that the formation to become a faithful African religious woman can only be founded on her authenticity as an African woman, rendering the African woman genuine not only according to the cultural values and norms, but letting the Gospel come in to enlighten, purify and uplift these values. This would be the pillar on which religious formation in its various aspects could anchor to create religious women who feel accomplished and fully realised; women who are fully responsible with deep personal convictions, who strive to implement, to share and who are capable of taking initiatives as mature and responsible women religious.

In fact, Africa today has a deep need for religious women who would carry in themselves the passionate love of God which they themselves have personally experienced and who will spread it to others as a spark of hope for a better future. In a society characterised by so much pain, suffering, fear, anguish and all sorts of social and political ills, religious women are challenged to shine out as signs of God's infinite love and mercy and of the future realisation of the Kingdom. Since one can only give what he/she has, the efficiency and depth of this mission lies heavily on who they themselves are as women in the African culture who have dedicated themselves to be used by God as instruments of His mercy and love.

For this to be truly realised there is an urgent need for a type of formation which distinguishes as much as possible the content from the form, the value itself from the cultural formulation; in other words formation that proposes and inculcates evangelical and charismatic values to African girls without linking them to the Western culture or setting Western religious women as models. African religious women today need a type of religious formation which will safeguard the anthropological values of their culture, while translating them into different modalities of believing, living and of expression in concrete behaviours. This calls for a need to transcend the external and to attain the internal factors, to go beyond the form to discover the essence. It is not enough to design a religious dress

according to the African pattern, to adopt some cultural aspects in the profession ritual, for example, a blood pact among the Congolese sisters, but there is need to touch the cultural views of life, of the world, of reality, of relating to others and with God as the Ultimate Reality. This delicate, yet important task regards African religious women themselves who are challenged to present themselves as authentic women with their feminine character which must first be enlightened by a personal experience with God who has consecrated and sent them to be signs of His boundless love and mercy. In effect, when people meet them, they should first see African women who have chosen to follow God in a specific way that does not alienate, but brings them closer to their people with a particular mission of revealing God's love.

We could thus affirm that without hesitation that the type of religious formation that is useful and effective for the African woman today is that which does not in any way disfigure her African identity but which modifies, transforms and purifies certain aspects of her cultural baggage. At the same time she must be open to learn what is good and valuable in other cultures. She must remain an African woman consecrated to God. It is this being as African that the grace of God will assume to make her an authentic religious.⁶ This is a long and complex duty, but not without fruits.

1.3.2 Formation to be faithful religious women

For the formation of African religious women to be complete and genuine, it must include every aspect of the Christian life; it must provide a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation which pays particular attention to the harmonious integration of all its various aspects.⁷ It must touch in a profound way the spiritual dimension which is the unifying centre of the journey into religious life since the entire process configures and leads towards Christ. This entails a serious pedagogy of faith aimed at helping African religious women to attain a mature and profound experience of God through reading and listening to His Word, participation in the sacraments, liturgical celebration, personal and community prayer, spiritual reading, spiritual direction, etc. All these practices are aimed at helping them to become more and more disciples of Christ, getting in close union with and in configuration to Him. It is a matter of putting on His mind and sharing in a deeper manner His gift of Himself to the Father and His brotherly service to humanity. This process requires a genuine and continuous conversion; putting on the mind of Christ (cfr. Romans 13:14), stripping off selfishness and egoism (cfr. Ephesians 4: 22-24) and walking according to the dictates of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Spiritual formation should be founded on profound biblical-theological and spiritual studies.

Spiritual life is the most essential dimension of religious consecration through which religious discover their specific identity and allow themselves to be guided by the charismatic gift of the institute. Religious formation, thus, promotes a spirituality that permits those involved to interiorise their experience of God through personal prayer, liturgical celebration, spiritual exercises, various forms of ascetism, etc. This formation is also based on the study, understanding and practice of the evangelical counsels, that is, learning to put on Christ in His poverty, obedience and love, and to know deeply the spirituality, rule and constitutions of the institute. This dynamic process starts in the initial stage of religious life and continues for the rest of life. The need for a constant maturity in the religious experience strengthened by God's grace, personal efforts and determination demands that this formation be continuous, hence, the need for permanent formation.

1.4 The challenge to be self-reliant

Religious life will never be effectively incarnated in Africa unless our communities are organised according to our proper resources and standard of life. If they actually wish to cease appearing like foreign institutions imported to the tropics which cannot survive without foreign aid, African religious women must set up their structures and works according to their local possibilities and capacities.⁹ In talking about this syndrome in the African Church which applies forcefully to religious congregations, Uzukwu underlines dependency as an attitude which kills initiative and creativity thus rendering the African Church poorer: "Indeed, the dependency syndrome of the Churches in Africa on the material level appears to be congenital. Material dependency leaves the road wide open to lack of creativity and even blackmail... the beggar has no self-respect. Self-respect of the Churches in Africa and indeed for the African nations, will keep on being elusive until there is a certain level of self-reliance on the material level."¹⁰

A real poor in the evangelical sense is not one who depends on others and is satisfied with what others give, but rather one who through his/her own sweat helps to ameliorate his/her own condition and that of others. Work thus constitutes an essential and integral part of Christian poverty. St Paul himself says: "We urged you when we were with you not to let anyone eat who refused to work... In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we urge and call on this kind of people to go on working and earning the food that they eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:12). The history of religious life confirms extensively how work has always constituted a fundamental chapter for each return to the authentic spirit of the Gospel. Monasteries of the medieval era are a splendid example of centres not only of prayer, but of development and culture. Hence the motto of the Benedictines: Prayer and Work.

Most of the African congregations count essentially on foreign aid for survival. Some still consider this aid an inalienable right. While I personally appreciate the value of Christian solidarity and collaboration, I emphatically underline the danger of the syndrome of dependence which characterises religious life in Africa. This does not only affect the lifestyle, but equally the future of religious life in this continent; once this umbilical cord will be cut, the results will be a serious crisis with drastic and dramatic repercussions.

Dependence renders us poor in a double sense; poor because of our context and above all because of the lost of identity. We keep attracting the sympathy of others to continue to benefit from their financial resources.¹¹ This makes our poverty to be absolute and total; when persons are bereft of their identity, their dignity, thought, ambitions and even the spirit of creativity, they sink into a type of poverty which not only concerns external goods or possessions, but which strike at the very being, essence and dignity of the human person. This is what Mveng refers to as “anthropological poverty.”¹²

1.5 Conclusion

The African Church and society today look in hopeful expectancy to their religious women as they struggle to grasp their real identity and role amidst many challenges and difficulties. Effectively, African religious women ardently desire to become who they are truly called to be; authentic African women consecrated and sent on mission to incarnate the Gospel message into their socio-cultural reality. Definitely, contemporary Africa needs religious women who are an embodiment of the passionate love of God and its incarnation into the various situations of life. Therefore, there is an ardent need for a type of formation which does not alienate these women from their culture, but which rather integrates them into it as signs of hope for their people. In this way their religious consecration through the profession of the evangelical counsels will have an eloquent and fruitful impact on their society characterised by many difficulties and challenges.

- ¹ Cfr. S. SEMPORÉ, «Les Défis de la Vie Religieuse en Afrique: Eclairage Historique», in *Annales de l'Ecole Théologique Saint-Cyprien*, 17 (2005), p. 265.
- ² *Vita Consacrata*, n. 85.
- ³ Cfr. M. AZEVELLO, *Vocation for Mission: The Challenge of Religious Life Today*, Paulist Press, New York 1988. p. 142.
- ⁴ Cfr. *Vita Consecrata*, n. 73.
- ⁵ *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 42 & *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 41.
- ⁶ Cfr. Cfr. LEON DE SAINT MOULIN (ed.) *Oeuvres Complètes du Cardinal Malula, Textes Concernant la Vie Religieuses*, Vol. 5, pp. 256-257.
- ⁷ Cfr. *Vita Consecrata*, n. 65.
- ⁸ Cfr. SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND FOR SECULAR INSTITUTES, *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life*, (31 May 1983), n. 45.
- ⁹ Cfr. N. MUGARUKIRO, «La Religieuse Africaine et l'Inculturation de la vie consacrée en Afrique Noire», in *Revue Africaine de Théologie*, 12 (1988), p. 134.
- ¹⁰ E. UZUKWU, *A listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll (New York) 1996, p. 88.
- ¹¹ Cfr. G. N'DONJI, «Le problématique de la pauvreté religieuse dans un contexte de misère sociale» in ASUMA – USUMA (ed.), *La Vie Consacrée dans l'Eglise di Congo: Bilans et Perspectives, Actes du Colloque National sur la Vie Consacrée en R. D. Congo*, Mediaspaul Publication, Kinshasa 2007, pp. 91- 92.
- ¹² E. MVENG, *Identità Africana e Cristianesimo*, Società Editrice Internazionale, Torino 1990, p. 100.

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIPS: A GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

Fr. Joy Kachappilly

Fr. Joy Kachappilly holds a doctorate from the Department of Inter-religious Relations, Madurai Kamaraj University, India. He teaches Missiology and the Theology of Religions at Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong.

This article was published in Mission Today vol. XV (2013) and in Omnis Terra, January 2014.

Original in English

Gandhi and Interreligious Friendship

The life of Mahatma Gandhi could be considered an epitome of interreligious friendship. As a young boy, he formed friendships even with persons belonging to religions other than his own. Although he formed them in the spirit of a reformer, in later years, he regretted some of these friendships. Hence in his *Autobiography*, Gandhi contends: “A reformer cannot afford to have close intimacy with him whom he seeks to reform. True friendship is an identity of souls rarely to be found in this world. Only between like natures can friendship be altogether worthy and enduring. Friends react on one another. Hence in friendship there is very little scope for reform.”¹ Further, he goes on to assert that he who would be friends with God must remain alone or make the whole world his friend.² This does not mean that Gandhi was averse to friendships or that he did not cultivate genuine friendships.

It is a fact that he had a predilection for Hinduism; however, he was not a fanatic. Being a sincere seeker of truth, he was quick to point out the accretions that had accumulated in it. It “is a living organism liable to growth and decay and subject to the laws of nature... The changes in the seasons affect it... Hinduism is like the Ganges pure and unsullied at its source, but taking in its course the impurities on the way.”³

His devotion to truth enabled him to appreciate other religions and nurture genuine friendships with members belonging to other religious traditions. To understand other religions, Gandhi acquainted himself with the religious scriptures of different religions as well as the writings of great thinkers. While in prison, Gandhi read the *Gita* in the morning and the Koran in English translation at noon. He used the Bible to teach English to his Chinese Christian fellow prisoners.⁴

One could notice this openness and impartiality with regard to religions and to members belonging to other religious traditions even when Gandhi was a child. When disputes arose among his companions, young Gandhi invariably acted as the peacemaker. He never made any distinction between Hindu, Muslim, Parsi and others.⁵ This candidness continued when Gandhi went to England in 1888 to study law. During his stay in England, he met two theosophist brothers. They introduced him to religious literature like the *Gita* and *The Light of Asia*. He also came in contact with Madame Blavatsky and Mrs Besant who advised him to join the society.⁶

Some of his Christian friends introduced Gandhi to the Bible. The books of the Old Testament did not inspire him. But the New Testament produced a different impression; especially the Sermon on the Mount which had a deep impression on him. He compared it to the *Gita*. He learnt that renunciation is the highest form of religion. He was also acquainted with atheism especially that of Bradlaugh. But Gandhi was prejudiced against it as it did not appeal to him.⁷

Just as Gandhi's Christian friends were trying to win him over to Christianity, his Muslim friends cajoled him to study Islam. "As a seeker after truth he welcomed their efforts to show to him the light, obtained a copy of the Sale's translation of the *Koran* and other books on Islam and read them with due care and reverence."⁸ While in South Africa, his receptive mind was ever ready to accept fresh values from other religious traditions. He took the motto of the Trappist monastery at Pine Town, *Ora et labora* when he opened ashrams to shelter the Satyagrahis. This was later embodied in essence in his own creed—service to God through selfless service to humanity.⁹

As a result of all his acquaintances with different religions and their followers, Gandhi faced within himself an intra-personal conflict. He wondered whether he should convert himself to any other religion leaving behind his ancestral faith. This conflict had two dimensions. "Objectively, it was a question regarding the status of religions: which religion was really a true religion? Subjectively, it was concerned with the response he

had to give to the issue: should he be converted to any other religion at all? Both questions are intimately connected with each other. It is only by solving the first that he could answer the second.”¹⁰ However, as a sincere seeker after truth, Gandhi drew himself into a prolonged process for resolving the conflict.

Gandhi took guidance from Raychandbhai,¹¹ a businessman, absorbed in godly pursuits. He advised him to be patient and to study Hinduism more deeply. He held that before getting oneself converted to another religion, one must know one’s own religion scrupulously. This spurred Gandhi to study not only Hinduism deeply but also other religions as well by reading books on various religions given by his friends. Gandhi interspersed his study of religions with prayer asking God for guidance. He was fully open to His will. He writes: “For a time I struggled with the question of which the true religion was out of those which I knew. To feel my way I waited upon God, seeking His guidance.”¹² Gandhi also put into practice various principles that he learned from the different religions as a result of his study. All these helped him to resolve the conflict by remaining a good Hindu while at the same time having sincere love and respect for other religions and their adherents.¹³

The outcome of this conflict that arose within him on account of his living contact with numerous followers of other religions and the subsequent resolution of the same was that Gandhi became the most accommodative person of any religious tradition. He was able to cultivate friendships with people belonging to other religions and get their assistance in his religious, political, social and economic pursuits. He writes: “Christian friends had whetted my appetite for knowledge, which had become almost insatiable, and they would not leave me in peace, even if I desired to be indifferent.”¹⁴ He acknowledges that, while in Durban, for example, his friendship with Mr. Spencer Walton kept alive his interest in religion.¹⁵ Charles Freer Andrews, a British Christian missionary and social reformer in India, was a close friend of Gandhi. When Gandhi affectionately called him ‘Christ’s Faithful Apostle’ based on the initials of his name, Andrews was perhaps the only major figure to address Gandhi by his first name, Mohan. Similarly, Gandhi was able to develop close relationships with a number of people belonging to other religious traditions throughout his public career.¹⁶

From a philosophical standpoint too, his acceptance of the doctrine of Advaita¹⁷ helped Gandhi in furthering his quest for promoting religious harmony. Under its influence, he held the essential unity of God and human beings. Having recognised the universal fatherhood of God who is the single divine source from which the universe was created, Gandhi was able

to construe the universal brotherhood of all humankind as all humans are children of one Father, the ultimate reality. This enabled him to enter into intense fellowship with people differing in culture, belief, custom, language, race, etc. and develop a catholic outlook towards everyone.

Further, as an Indian, Gandhi considered himself a privileged inheritor of India's diverse religious and cultural traditions. As a human being, he acknowledged that all great religions were his spiritual inheritance, to which he had as much right as their native adherents. While remaining firmly rooted in his own tradition, he felt free to draw upon their moral and spiritual resources. Needless to say, the interreligious friendships that he cultivated only aided him in this process. To express the ideas of rootedness and openness, he often used the metaphor of living in a house with its windows wide open. His house was protected by walls and gave him a sense of security and rootedness, but its windows were wide open to allow cultural winds from all directions to blow into it and to enrich the air he breathed.

Interreligious Friendships and Religious Harmony

After discussing the Gandhian perspective on interreligious friendships, it is quite obvious that personal friendship beyond one's religious boundary can be recognized as an important means for instilling religious harmony. In such friendships, people learn how a religion informs other persons as a way of life rather than simply as giving a set of beliefs, rituals or moral prescriptions. "Through friendship, self-sufficiency in religion is turned inside out, suggesting that religious identity is not only a function of one's own stories, traditions and practices, but is also evolving to become dependent on the broader context of interfaith relationships."¹⁸

It can be further construed that going by the etymological meaning of the word *religion*, it is quite obvious that it is an instrument that binds people together rather than divides them.¹⁹ It brings together a group of people through a bond, which is a deep faith in a living God whom they believe to be their creator, sustainer and final goal. Scriptures, myths and rituals not only help to sustain this belief but also unite the people. On account of the differences in creed, code and cult, there are a variety of religions in the world. If the adherents of these religions can come together in mutual friendship, then it should be possible for the members belonging to different religions to help one another in comradeship to live as children of one Father, who is in heaven. One can notice certain common factors in religions that can bring together different religions on a single platform which in turn can bring the adherents of these religions in fellowship.

Since the time of Aristotle, the human being has been delineated as a rational animal.²⁰ In other words, the differentia that distinguishes a human being from a brute is rationality. Unfortunately, humans can abuse this God-given faculty of reason and lower themselves even to the extent of living like the beasts. Further, reason often fails to convince people of certain fundamental truths like the existence of God. Hence we need to look for other pointers, which will better describe a human being. These pointers are the ideals of faith, perfection, transcendence, nobility, etc. They are not only found in various religions, but in fact, are realised through them. By identifying and promoting these values, religions can come together and their adherents can work in camaraderie and encourage concord and goodwill among different groups of people.

Conclusion

Interreligious friendships can inspire religious harmony especially in areas where religious rivalry is rampant perpetrating fear and brutality among followers of other religions in the false conviction of safeguarding one's own religious values. Gandhi, as an avid propagator of religious harmony, achieved this goal by making use of every possible means including interreligious friendships. When modern forms of crusades and jihads raise their ugly head and disturb the balance in the social fabric of any nation or society, it is imperative for all religions to come together and encourage their adherents to cultivate friendships beyond their boundaries. This can bring in the much needed respite, in the otherwise, grief-stricken societies ravaged by hostility promoted in the name of religion.

¹ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography (The Story of my experiments with truth)*, trans. Mahadev Desai, reprint, 1996 (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927) 16. Henceforth, Gandhi, *Autobiography*.

² Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 16.

³ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*,

vol. 29, 443-444; as cited by Sushila Nayar, *Mahatma Gandhi, Salt Satyagraha – The Watershed*, vol. 6 (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1995) 24.

⁴ Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, 79-80; as cited by Sushila Nayar, *Mahatma Gandhi – Satyagraha at Work*, vol. 4 (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1989) 188.

- ⁵ Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi - Early Phase*, vol. 1, reprint (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1986) 198. Henceforth, Pyarelal, *Early Phase*.
- ⁶ In fact, Gandhi declined to join the theosophist society on the plea that his knowledge of his own religion was very meagre. However, it was Madame Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy* that led him to read books on Hinduism, which freed him of his prejudice against Hinduism fostered by the Christian missionaries.
- ⁷ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 57-59.
- ⁸ Pyarelal, *Early Phase*, 327.
- ⁹ Pyarelal, *Early Phase*, 546.
- ¹⁰ A. Pushparajan, "Resolution of an Inter-Personal Conflict in a Multi-religious Context" (Madurai: Unpublished article) 7.
- ¹¹ For a detailed description on Raychandbhai, cf., Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 73-75.
- ¹² *Young India*, 6-2-1925, 273.
- ¹³ Gandhi himself narrates this conflict in his *Autobiography*. Cf., Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 113-115.
- ¹⁴ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 132.
- ¹⁵ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 132.
- ¹⁶ Eli Stanley Jones, the Methodist Christian missionary, Hermann Kallenbach, a German born Jewish South African, Madeline Slade later known as Mira Behn, Louis Fischer, the American journalist, Richard B Gregg, American social philosopher and pacifist, Horace Alexander, an English Quaker teacher and writer, pacifist and ornithologist, Joseph J. Doke, a Baptist Minister who wrote his first biography, Henry S.L. Polak, a Jew who was a friend and co-worker of Gandhi in South Africa, Sonya Schlesin, a Jewish lady who was his secretary in South Africa, Maulana Azad, a Muslim Indian freedom fighter, Zakir Hussain, a Muslim who advocated value-based education on the lines of Mahatma Gandhi and later became the President of India, and, Khan Abdul Ghuffar Khan, a Muslim disciple of Gandhi who opposed British rule in India and partition of the subcontinent are some of the friends of Gandhi who belonged to religions other than his own.
- ¹⁷ Advaita is considered to be the most influential and most dominant sub-school of the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy. Its main proponent is Adi Sankara. The philosophy of Advaita can be succinctly summarised thus: Brahman is the only truth, the spatio-temporal world is an illusion, and there is ultimately no difference between the Brahman and the individual self.
- ¹⁸ Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 2001) 7.
- ¹⁹ Etymologically, the meaning of the Latin word *religio*, from which the word 'religion' comes, is disputed. Some say that it is derived from *religare*, (to tie, to bind, to hold back), so that those who are bound (*religati*) to God by the bond of piety are considered religious. Others hold that it comes from *relegere* (to revere), so that those who carefully took in hand all things pertaining to the worship of the gods were called *religiosi*. Modern thinkers tend to accept and combine both the meanings and understand religion as something that binds people together through a commitment to a personal God. Cf., Varghese Palatty Koonathan, *The Religion of the Oraons: A Comparative Study of the Concept of God in the Sarna Religion of the Oraons and the Christian Concept of God* (Shillong: Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, 1999) 3; J. Goetz, "Religion," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol., 12 (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1967) 240; M Muller, *Natural Religion* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1979) 33-34.
- ²⁰ Rational animal is a classical definition of human being. Though it is often attributed to first appearing as a definition in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Aristotle does not define it here. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* I.13, Aristotle states that the human being has a rational principle. However, the definition of *human* as a rational animal was common in scholastic philosophy. In Meditation 2 of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes considers and then rejects the concept of rational animal. Having arrived at his famous dictum 'I think, therefore, I am,' Descartes goes on to wonder about who the human being is. "But what is a man? Shall I say

a rational animal? Assuredly not; for it would be necessary forthwith to inquire into what is meant by animal, and what by rational, and thus, from a single question, I should insensibly glide into others, and these more difficult than the first." Rene Descartes, "Meditation 2: Of the Nature

of the Human Mind and that it is more easily known than the Body," *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans., John Veitch (The Classical Library, 2001) para 5. <http://www.classicallibrary.org/descartes/meditations>; accessed on 25 August 2012.

LIFE IN UISG

The symbol of a crossroads is a very useful one when trying to describe the life and activities of UISG. Here at UISG we facilitate and participate in many different kinds of conversations and activities. We try to bring the voices and experiences of religious women worldwide into dialogue with different groups within the church and the world, in Rome but elsewhere. The more the individual members of UISG and delegates from the 39 Constellations of UISG communicate with the office here in Rome, the more effective we can be. Here is a flavor of some recent conversations and activities in which we have engaged.

There have been many meetings with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in preparation for the **Year of Consecrated Life**. By now you will have received information about the planned programme of events in Rome and the various suggestions offered for activities at national level. The theme of **Gospel, Prophecy, Hope** expresses the fundamental values of consecrated life. Perhaps one activity that we could undertake as UISG members worldwide is to explore the meaning of the logo offered. It provides an opportunity to explore the meaning of religious life today in the Church and the world. We can reflect on the many elements presented by the artist Carmela Boccasile. She uses a line drawing, with an outline which is similar to the Arabic word for “peace,” to depict a dove hovering over a swirling sea. What does this mosaic of blue tiles with various patterns and shapes convey? How to interpret the three stars and the multifaceted geometric shape? From the perspective of religious life lived in your part of the world, within your specific social, cultural and religious contexts what invitation is contained in this logo as you respond to the Spirit’s call during the Year of Consecrated Life?

Talitha Kum: We owe a great debt of gratitude to Sr. Estrella Castalone FMA, for her four years of outstanding service as coordinator of Talitha Kum. Sr. Estrella will return shortly to the Philippines and her replacement Sr. Gabriella Bottani CMS (who until recently coordinated the Um Grito Pela Vida Network – Brazil), will take over this important role in January 2015. In early October Sr. Estrella traveled to the US to speak at a conference organized by the US Catholic Sisters against Human Trafficking (USCSAHT). As a result USCSAHT has become the newest member of the Talitha Kum network. Another new member organization is that of NZRATH (New Zealand Religious against Trafficking in Humans). The increased expansion of our global network continues to strengthen our influence and our effectiveness as religious sisters in counteracting this global phenomenon. The Talitha Kum co-ordinator is regularly contacted by various Embassies to the Holy See and other

organizations/foundations to provide up-to-date information about the activities of sisters worldwide against human trafficking.

World Day of Prayer on the Feast of St. Bakhita - February 8th 2015.

Recently Sr. Eugenia Bonetti, who is President of the Slaves no More Onlus in Italy (<http://www.slavesnomore.it>), and has been working against the trafficking of human persons for 20 years, requested the Vatican to declare the Feast of St. Bakhita a universal day of prayer for the victims of trafficking. The Vatican in turn requested UISG through the Talitha Kum networks to promote this initiative. Other organizations have been invited to join in the promotion of this day of prayer. Materials are currently being developed and we ask all UISG members to make this initiative known throughout each congregation and its ministries.

ACWECA Assembly in Zambia: In August the Executive Secretary of UISG, Sr. Patricia Murray IBVM, attended the 16th General Assembly of ACWECA which was held in Lusaka. ACWECA is an umbrella group of nine National Associations of Sisterhoods in Eastern and Central Africa. As such it has over 20,000 members and seeks to sustain the spiritual and pastoral impact of sisters in the region. Among the many outcomes of the meeting was a commitment to train sisters as spiritual directors and canon lawyers and to continue to enhance the leadership capacity of sisters. Participants also acknowledged the need to affirm and integrate the many positive elements of culture which can help strengthen African identity in religious life. After several excellent presentations on Islam, sisters committed to continue to build community relationships through inter-religious dialogue. Regional responses to the scourge of trafficking were shared and a commitment to work to end the trafficking of human persons was proclaimed. ACWECA members were also conscious of the need to build ongoing solidarity with sisters in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan.

Regina Mundi in Diaspora: We are pleased to announce that UISG and ACWECA have received donor funding to provide 4 scholarships for sisters from the ACWECA Region to study canon law at the CUEA (Catholic University of Eastern Africa). Details of these special scholarships will be announced shortly and they will be administered within the Regina Mundi in Diaspora programme. An application form for the annual Regina Mundi in Diaspora Grant Award for theological studies is enclosed with this bulletin.

The November Meetings of the Council of 16 and Council of 18: The feedback received earlier this year from UISG delegates has been very helpful. The Council of 16 continues to discuss the revision of the document *Mutuae Relationes*. At the Council of 18, four Superiors General made short presentations – from the perspectives of Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania - on the

following theme:

How can my religious institute/society develop and deepen a more robust missionary awareness and zeal for Missio ad Gentes? How can it help young particular Churches and Institutes of Consecrated Life of Diocesan right, to do the same? What are some of the challenges and obstacles that have been encountered? What are the achievements?

These are questions that could be useful for reflection by different levels of leadership within religious congregations.

Meeting of the Council of Delegates: It was with great regret that the Executive Board of UISG made the decision to cancel the meeting in Accra, Ghana. Due to the presence of ebola in the region, governments, doctors and others were advising many delegates not to travel and the international media augmented fear of the disease. The committee in Ghana led by Sr. Alice Mathilda Nsiah had done extraordinary preparatory work and we thank them on behalf of all the delegates of UISG, acknowledging the disappointment that this decision must have caused. The meeting will now be held in Nemi (Rome) at the Centro “Ad Gentes” which is run by the SVD from February 4-11. This gathering will help UISG to determine how best to strengthen the worldwide effectiveness of its network.

Donors Meeting: The Executive Secretary recently facilitated a meeting in Amsterdam of international donors who fund the education of sisters in Africa at many different levels. This was the first such meeting and it provided an opportunity for donors to share information about the different educational opportunities being offered to sisters in Africa. To date funding has been provided for initial and ongoing formation, leadership and skills training, training in administration and financial management. Grants have been made available to prepare sisters for various ministries in such areas as education and health, together with pastoral, social and community development. Leadership within congregations has been greatly enhanced by educating sisters in theology, spirituality, canon law and for the crucial formation roles within congregations. Gratitude was expressed to the donors for the financial and other supports that enable sisters to strengthen their commitment as religious and engage in ministries which meet the needs of those who are most needy.

The Synod on the Family: Sr. Margaret Muldoon, former Superior General of the Sisters of the Holy Family of Bordeaux was the only religious sister invited to attend the first phase of the Synod on the Family – called the Extraordinary Synod. The next UISG bulletin will publish a report of her experience and reflections on the event.