

ON THE PATH TO RENEWAL

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PREFACE	2
<i>Sister Raffaella Colucci, ASC</i>	
AUTHORITY AND OBEDIENCE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE. ON THE INSTRUCTION “FACIEM TUAM.”	4
<i>Father J. Rovira, CMF</i>	
TELL THIS GENERATION TO MARCH ON!	23
<i>Brother Moacir Casagrande, OFM, CAP</i>	
RUNNING TO CATCH UP WITH THE SPIRIT: SPIRIT OF HOPE	32
<i>Sister Maria Chin, RSM</i>	
BAREFOOT BEFORE GOD AND WITH PEOPLE. THIRD NATIONAL GATHERING OF VIDA RELIGIOSA JOVEN (NEW GENERATION RELIGIOUS)	42
<i>Manuel Ogalla, CMF</i>	
FROM CAMBODIA TO EMMAUS	46
<i>Claire LY</i>	

PREFACE

Sister Raffaella Colucci, ASC

Original in Italian

On The Path To Renewal

O God, lead us, show us the way forward and enlighten us by your pillar of fire (cf. Ex 13:21) so that we might make out the new paths suggested by the writers of the articles in this bulletin filled with new ideas as well as risks. For we find in its content a desire to give new momentum to religious life.

Entitled “*Authority And Obedience In Religious Life. On The Instruction ‘Faciem Tuam’*,” the article by **J. Rovira, CMF** reflects on the 2008 Instruction “The Service of Authority and Obedience” from CICLESAL. Father Rovira highlights three main points in the Instruction: the reminder that obedience is due to God alone and Christ is the model of obedience to the Father’s will; 2) the emphasis on fraternity and community and on human maturity as the context in which this service is exercised; 3) awareness of one’s own limits, whether one is obeying or ordering. He also notes that it is understandable that tensions and difficulties arise but suggests that obedience thus becomes more complete and true because more mature from a human point of view. In the final analysis, obedience is a path to communion, a communion based on humility and lived out for the sake of mission.

“*Tell This Generation To March On!*” Wishing to stimulate and deepen reflection on the situation of religious life today, brother **Moacir Casagrande, OFM** focuses on chapters 14 and 15 of Exodus. Throughout their journey in the desert, the Israelites experienced difficulties, discouragement, revolt and the temptation to return to Egypt. What is “Egypt” for us in religious life? What is our choice: to die as slaves to be buried in “Egypt” or to die in freedom? Moses invites us to march on in faith.

A spirit of spiritual renewal runs through Sister **Maria Chin, RSM**’s article entitled “*Running To Catch Up With The Spirit: Spirit Of Hope.*” She calls on the Spirit for inspiration in exploring this title and cites various authors in making the point that it is truly risky and bold to believe that the Spirit of God is present and active in human history, calling people and communities to action and a sharing in the life of God in order to discover God’s will today.

In “*Barefoot Before God And With People*,” the young Claretian missionary **Manuel Ogalla, CMF**, speaks on behalf of New Generation eligious. These young Spanish women and men religious with a passion for Christ and humanity wish to announce without fear or embarrassment that their hope lies in Jesus Christ. They rediscover Moses as an icon to enlighten them and help them experience the nearness of a God who once seemed far distant. The transformative encounter with God impels these young religious, as it did Moses, to *take off their shoes*, to renounce comfortable securities and unambiguously identify themselves as beggars of grace. God’s promise: “I will be with you,” assures them that God transforms crutches into trampolines, littleness into prophetic cry, and cold into burning fire.

In her article “*From Cambodia To Emmaus*,” **Claire Ly** gives us an example of what it means to take off one’s shoes and put on someone else’s as she recounts her journey of conversion from Buddhism to Christianity. She divides her presentation into three parts or breaking points: 1) the displaced woman; 2) the immigrant woman; 3) the woman disciple, and she likens life to a piece of cloth being woven ... it often happens that the main thread breaks. This was her own experience in converting from Buddhism to Christianity. At a certain point on her journey, she felt that someone had irrupted into her life and she discovered that this someone was the God of love come to accompany her in the midst of hatred. Due to this encounter with the gospel of Christ, an intra-religious dialogue began within her between the two cultures, between the Buddhist tradition and the Christian one. This dialogue generated a spiritual hospitality between the Buddhist and the Christian, one marked by mutual respect on the journey to Emmaus.

As we noted at the beginning, these authors offer new yeast for renewed mission. This renewal, however, requires the difficult move from familiar places where one feels secure to places where God seems absent, where there is poverty ... where new paths must be made. We are invited to move toward renewal in this spirit, fruit of God’s love which transforms our life and our world.

*AUTHORITY AND OBEDIENCE IN
RELIGIOUS LIFE.
ON THE INSTRUCTION "FACIEM TUAM."*

Father J. Rovira, CMF

A Claretian missionary, Father J. Rovira, CMF, was born in Vic, Spain, in 1942. In 1969 he earned a licentiate in theology from what was then the "Studium Claretianum de Urbe" and a diploma in moral theology from the Alfonsianum in 1973. He then became professor of Theology of Consecrated Life at the Institute of Theology of Consecrated Life "Claretianum" (P.U.L.) where he held the chair after having been Vice-President and President. He is presently librarian of this institution. From 1973 to 2005, he was professor of moral theology at the Pontifical Institute "Regina Mundi." Today he is visiting professor at several institutions in Rome: the Salesian Pontifical Institute (since 1992), Urbaniana University in its Faculty of Missiology (since 1997) and the Pontifical Institute "Auxilium" (since 1998). On various occasions, he has also given courses in different countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Original in Italian

Before broaching our topic, we might ask if the Instruction "The Service Of Authority And Obedience. *Faciam tuam, Domine, requiram*" (May 11, 2008) offers anything new within the totality of documents on consecrated life published over the course of the last ten years or so. This is a particularly apt question given that the topic has traditionally been considered somewhat "delicate" whether within the Church in general or within religious life in particular.¹

Personally, I would summarize in three points the aspects which struck me in the document: 1) the constant reminder that we owe obedience to God alone, with everything else amounting to mediations and the reality within which we seek the divine will; 2) the emphasis on the fraternal-communal aspect and on the fact of human maturity as the context for living out this service; 3) therefore, an awareness of limits, whether of the one obeying or the one ordering, limits which give rise to understandable tensions, difficulties and even "objection in conscience." All of this does

not devalue the obedience proper to women and men religious; on the contrary, it has the effect of making it more complete, more true, because humanly more mature² and evangelically more christological. Neither does it take from the statement that whoever is in charge “has the responsibility for the final decision,” as the other documents had noted (FT 20; cf. 25, PC 14c, VC 43, FLC 50c, SAC 14).

1) Christ, Model Par Excellence In Searching Out And Accepting The Will Of God.

The Father has given us a visible model in seeking and living out his will in the midst of history, the model of Christ (cf. FT 8). Yes, as the Instruction notes: “Obedience to the Father’s will is not an attitude added to the personality of Christ but rather one that expresses it fully: ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me’ (Jn 4:34)” (FT 23a). He was the *amen* (cf. Rv 3:14), the perfect *yes* (cf. 2 Cor 1:20) in response to the Father (FT 23c). We are called to continue his life “in history, to afford others the possibility of meeting him” (FT 23b). This obedience of Christ is an obedience that brings to fruition the mission entrusted to him by the Father.

Our own obedience as disciples consists in nothing other than an extension in history of the incarnate Son’s obedience to the Father, a “filial obedience” (VC 16c), “*not servile but filial ... a reflection in history of the loving harmony between the three Divine Persons*” (VC 21d; cf. 22, 23). The most profound and true theological foundation of our Christian life lies in this christological-trinitarian aspect. We must therefore be careful not to fall into the trap of viewing the linking of authority and obedience in religious life as simply an organizational tool, a practical and sociological fact of life designed for efficiency even though its ultimate purpose is apostolic. So, paraphrasing Saint Paul, we can say that we are members of his body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12 and following; Eph 4:11-17) and, as a result, our obedience of the Father becomes a true extension of that of Christ. In this way, for the sake of the reign of God and with the help of the Spirit, in his Church we complete in our flesh (in our human history, both personal and collective) what is lacking in Christ’s obedience to the Father (Col 1:24) “so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21). The obedience of Christ introduced that of the new Israel, of the new humanity, of the Church and, through her, that of various groups or individual Christians down through the centuries.

So let us ask: what is this will of the Father which, for our good, we

must search out and fulfil – as did Christ – in the midst of history, time and the circumstances in which we find ourselves whether individually or as groups (congregation, Church, humanity)? The answer is simple: to make Christ known as the unique Holy One so that God’s historical and eschatological kingdom may come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven (cf. Mt 6:9-10; Lk 11:1-2). This kingdom becomes reality to the extent that God’s salvific plan is carried out, the plan conceived for humanity from all eternity in Christ out of God’s infinite love. This plan is being realized as it unfolds throughout history but it will not be completely fulfilled except in Christ, in eternity (cf. Eph 1:3-14; Col 1:13-20), when the Son will hand back everything to the Father and God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:24-28). Salvation – kingdom – cannot but be the happiness and fulfilment of human beings whose humanity reaches perfection when it attains the full maturity of Christ (cf. Eph 4:13-16). The divine will begins to be accomplished first of all when human beings believe in the Son whom the Father sent out of love into the world (cf. Mk 1:15; Jn 3:16 ff; 17:3) so that none may be lost (Jn 6:40). Now God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16) and has made us sharers in his divine nature (cf. 2 P 1:4): this love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5) so that the Trinity might come to us and make its home in us (cf. Jn 14:23) and we might thus enter into communion with it (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3). All this comes about when we try to love God with all our strength as well as our brothers and sisters (Mt 22:37-40) without distinction (1 Jn 4:20-21), keeping as an invisible reference point the perfect love of God himself (cf. Mt 5:43-48) and as a visible reference point the attitude of Christ and the way the Father has loved us in Christ (cf. Jn 15:9-17).

This having been said, if Christ is our model, what was the nature of Christ’s obedience and how did he obey? The Instruction provides an answer: Christ abandoned himself totally into the hands of the Father: “Even if in his passion he gave himself up to Judas, to the high priests, to his torturers, to the hostile crowd, and to his crucifiers, he did so only because he was absolutely certain that everything found its meaning in complete fidelity to the plan of salvation willed by the Father to whom, as St. Bernard reminds us, ‘it is not the death which was pleasing, but the will of the One who died of his own accord’”³ (FT 5c).

In the Gospel, the life of Christ is seen as an experience of filial communion in the will of the Father. Christ’s first and last words clearly express such docility: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49) and “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (cf. Ps 30:6; Lk 23:46), an echo in history of the words of the psalmist

(Ps-39:7-9) which the author of the Letter to the Hebrews puts on the lips of Christ from the very beginning: “When Christ came into the world, he said ... ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’” (Heb 10:5-7).

Such is the goal of the third request of the Our Father: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10), a request repeated in anguish at Gethsemane: “Not what I want, but what you want” (cf. Mt 26:39,42). This is an obedience exercised in the midst of trials: “He learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8), an obedience “to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Ph 2:69), ever real like daily “food” (Jn 4:34). As a result, on the cross Christ could say: “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). He was the Father’s “yes” to humanity (God’s fidelity to humanity) as well as humanity’s “yes” to the Father (total obedience) (cf. 2 Cor 1:20; Acts-1:4-5; 3:14). Such obedience is, as we quoted earlier, “*not servile but filial* ... a reflection in history of the loving *harmony* between the three Divine Persons” (VC 21d).

This obedience becomes evident in a stance of listening and continual searching for the Father’s will: “Whoever is from God hears the words of God” (Jn 8:47). Now as true man (cf. GS 22; CCC 470), Christ, too, had to search out, discern and articulate the Father’s will through “multiple external mediations” (FT 9a; cf. 11c); it was not always easy for him to understand or fulfil it because he was “born in human likeness” (Ph 2:7) and had to grow and learn (cf. Lk 2:40,52), and he was “tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). In fact, his public life begins and ends with two tests of his mission, the will of the Father and, therefore, obedience: the temptations (cf. Mt 4:1-11) and the anguish not only in Gethsemane (cf. Mt 26:38-39; Heb 5:7-8) but also on the cross (cf. Mt 27:46; Ps 22; 31). This is where Christ experienced what the mystics would call his “dark night.” He “suffered” and “learned” obedience (Heb 5:8). It is in fact in the Gethsemane scene as described by Matthew (26:36-46) that we gain a true appreciation of the process of obedience. Whereas in verse 39 Christ asks that, if possible, he not undergo his passion but, in any case, that the Father’s will be done, in verse 42 he simply wishes that this will be accomplished and does not ask to be spared. In verse 46 he is from then on resolute: “Get up, let us be going.” He understood and fully accepted the Father’s will. “He was heard” (Heb 5:7), not because he was exempted from suffering, but because he was helped to understand and accept it resolutely. In fact, Christ was not the victim of the cross, limited to enduring it with resignation, but rather he embraced it in a positive way and, since he viewed it as his beloved Father’s will, it was less heavy. As FT notes, however, this does not mean that it was the cross as such which

pleased the Father but rather the love faithful to the very end for humanity, his brothers and sisters, of which Christ gave proof. In brief, Paul's comment about being detached from material goods to the point of undergoing a bloody death is applicable here: it is not this detachment itself which is positive but rather what results from it: "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3)⁴.

This explains Christ's freedom in facing death: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:17-18). Yes, in obeying the Father, Jesus is revealed as profoundly free and independent: free in regard to money (cf. Mt 6:25-33), other persons (cf. Jn 6:15; 13:5,14), the powerful (cf. Mt 26:62-64; 27:13-14; Lk 13:32; 23:6-12), his family (cf. Lk 2:49; Mk 3:33), political or religious power groups (cf. Mt 22, 34; 23:13-32), the Law (cf. Mt 5:21s; Macc 1, 22; 2:27-28), and death (cf. Jn 10:17-18; Mt 26:36-46).

Christ's was a sometimes costly, difficult and dramatic obedience (cf. FT 8c) because it was human, the kind of obedience which goes so far as to give one's life for those one loves (Jn 15:12; Phil 2:8), but, at the same time, one not simply endured, a life not forced but given in freedom even in joy as in the case of the woman in anguish before giving birth but ultimately in ecstasy at bringing a human being into the world (cf. Jn 16: 21). And we know well how much God loves those who give joyously (cf. 2 Cor 9:79), who joyfully carry out works of mercy (cf. Rom 12:8). Indeed it was the freedom of love which impelled Christ to give himself totally (cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2). His was a difficult obedience but one which was free, vigorous and courageous, even joyful because it was above all loving. In obedience he simply lived out "to the end" (Jn 13:1), to "death on a cross" (Phil 2:8), to the "it is finished" (Jn 19:30), his love for the Father, a love concretised in love for his fellow human beings. That is why the crucifix is not simply and forever the symbol of suffering and death but of fidelity to one's love for the beloved whatever the consequences. It is a positive symbol, a symbol of the victory of love over sin, suffering and death.

2) The Church, A Communion Of The Obedient Ever Attentive And Discerning In The Search For The Will Of God.

Disciples of Jesus should have his attitude. He is the prototype, the supreme model. He himself makes this point: "Whoever does the will of

God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk. 3:35). As he did, the disciples also listened, welcomed and carried out the wishes of the Father and so became part of his new family, the new Israel. The new family is in fact made up of “those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21): listening and doing are the two essential characteristics of “the family” of Christ (cf. FT 8).

This is the way to understand obedience within the Church, an understanding intended for all Christians, and this is the obedience required of all down through the centuries. Such obedience precedes and is the foundation and explanation not only for the obedience of a religious to a superior but also for that of each believer to the internal demands of the ecclesial community, including obedience to the hierarchy who exercise the ministry of guiding the faithful.

This explains why the Church does not distinguish between those who command and those who obey since all actually obey and the whole Church follows the example of her spouse, Jesus Christ, in listening to and doing the will of the Father with the help of the Spirit. Each Christian then lives out this obedience within the particularities of his or her vocation, and religious obey within the parameters of their own way of life (in multiple ways, in fact). So the way one chooses to follow Christ is not an unimportant matter. Each person must, however, seek out his or her vocation, that is, the will of the Father for him or her, and accept it with joy, love and fidelity. This is not an oppressive obedience but rather a liberating one (cf. FT 5-6; VC 91) because God is love (cf 1Jn 4:8.16) and therefore cannot help but desire the greatest good for each and everyone of us when gifting us with a specific vocation (cf. Jn 3:17; 12:47; Rom 8:28; 1Tm 2:4, 2 Pet 3:9). When all is said and done, the vocation of a particular Christian cannot be considered better or superior to all others because it is God’s will for him or her.

Now the obedience of each person is carried out within the ecclesial community and so involves not only the fundamental personal connection between God and one’s conscience but also the relationship with other brothers and sisters in the Church who are journeying together toward God. In other words, our obedience to an invisible God is carried out within God’s visible community of the Church in the same way that love for the God whom we do not see is proven by love for the neighbour whom we do see (cf. 1 Jn:4:20-21). Furthermore, if charity lies at the heart of Christian life (cf. Jn 15:12-17), given the fact that God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16), the exercise/service of obedience in the Church cannot but be how charity and fraternal love are lived out “so that the world may believe” (cf.

Jn 15:12-17; 17:11, 21-26). On the other hand, the service of authority as well as obedience will be considered Christian to the extent that it is the expression of charity. Charity is the proof of gospel authenticity because “love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10; cf. 1 Cor 13) and “above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:14).

“Above all” means, then, above even the desire to maintain a purely external order, a certain ‘ecclesiastical politics,’ or to safeguard a certain image of the Church. For God who is “the” truth (cf. Jn 3:16; 14:16) defines himself as love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16). Love is therefore “the” truth because it is a sharing in the life of God (cf. 1 Jn 4:7-8, 12-16). As a result, to defend the truth of Christianity at the expense of love, as individuals or groups have done more than once, would simply be a contradiction – such a truth would be self-destructive. Love without truth is impossible and there can be no truth without love. Yes, while we cannot be saved by love without knowing revealed truth, we cannot be saved by revealed truth if there is no love (cf. Mt 25:31-46; Lk 12:47-48; 1 Cor 13; Jas 2:14-26; see also: LF 14-16, CCC 839-848).

The exercise of authority and obedience in the Church originates then in love (communion); they are demonstrations of it and, when lived in a Christian manner, they certainly increase love (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3; cf. also ChL 32, FLC 58, VC 46a). As a result, authority will be all the more authentic, that is Christian, to the extent that, in seeking and doing the will of God, its exercise is prompted by love, motivated by love, for the sake of love and enabling of a love lived ever more deeply. In other words, the more authority actualises ecclesial sharing in the Father’s *agape* with the help of Christ’s paschal mystery and the working of the Spirit (Jn 17:11-21; 1 Jn 4:18, 16; Rom 5:5; 2 Pet 1:4), the more it will become a visible reflection “of the *infinite love* which links the three Divine Persons” (VC 21d).

That is why communion (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3) is the foundational element, even the goal, and it is in communion that the disciples listen, discern and do the will of the Father. In the Church, there are then a variety of gifts distributed by the Spirit (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4-5) and among them is the authority of the hierarchy which must be exercised precisely because it is given by the Spirit for the common good. The body is made up of many different parts, each with its own function, and none is useless; authority is one of these gifts and it is essential even though it is not unique. Obedience, however, is also a gift, a service offered to the communion and to authority. One serves by seeking, listening, discerning,

dialoguing, ordering and obeying. Faith comes before authority, and authority is at the service of the communion which has its source in faith (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3). Faith precedes, envelops, conditions and explains the meaning of authority as well as obedience and the way they are to be exercised within the Christian community. After all, what everyone must aspire to do is the will of God, not that of another member of the community. In seeking it out and doing it, each person is called to collaborate according to the different sacraments received and the particularities of one's own Christian vocation and various responsibilities. Some members of the community are then chosen by the Spirit to offer their spiritual and human gifts to ensure the stability and solidity of the communion and the unity of the faith, and it is through them that the Spirit affirms the whole ecclesial community (cf. Mt 16:18-19; 18:18; Lk 22:32; Jn 21:17; 1 Jn 1:1-3). Nonetheless, this authority remains an historical reality, a transitory one, and in our final communion with God it will in fact no longer exist. That is why, within the Church, God alone is absolute, not authority, and so the necessity of listening to everyone within and without the community in the conviction that even together we will never arrive at the complete truth, let alone exhaust it. On the other hand, the great gift will be that the truth will little by little take possession of us. We are all the Church, we share in responsibility for it, and so the collaboration of all is necessary as is respect for the role each one plays since no one person owns the Church. As brothers and sisters, we are all fundamentally equal (cf. LG 32; CCL 298; CCC 871-873; VC 31b, 84-85), having one Father alone and one Master alone (cf. Mt 23:8-12). We find this profound evangelical and human truth in the homily of Benedict XVI at the Mass inaugurating his Petrine mission on April 24th, 2005: "I am not alone. I do not have to carry alone what in truth I could never carry alone My real programme of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas, but to listen, together with the whole Church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by Him, so that He himself will lead the Church at this hour of our history Let us pray for one another, that the Lord will carry us and that we will learn to carry one another."⁵

This was not a case of rhetoric but the simple truth. That is why we always acknowledge that authority has human limits (cf. FT 13d, 18a, 21ac, VC 92) and persons in authority would be mistaken if they were not aware of it (cf. FT 20g, 25a).

At this point, let us ask how we seek God's will within the Christian community and what is the actual role of authority.

The problem is twofold. It is true that we are called to freedom (cf.

Gal 5:13), we are all led by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 5:32; Rom 5:5) and therefore are no longer subject to the Law (cf. Gal 5:17-18) because where the Spirit is there is freedom. It is also true, however, that, as long as we are in this mortal body, our freedom is imperfect, we do not fully possess the Spirit, we carry this treasure in earthen vessels (cf. 2 Cor 4:7), we see in a mirror dimly (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) and we are God's children now but what we will be has not yet been revealed (1 Jn 3:2) As a result, we must still seek God's will in our own way, that is, as far as is humanly, personally and communally possible. Because of the limitations of our human and spiritual maturity, we have research, discussions, laws and norms, inevitable tensions ... obedience (cf. FT 9b). In his letters, Saint Paul himself gives many norms and sometimes very concrete ones.

Keeping in mind this goal and in this context, those in authority in the Church's magisterium also have a duty which is both discretionary (helping individuals to seek and carry out the will of God) and communal (guiding the whole community toward the historical realization of God's design). The mission which the Spirit entrusts to the magisterium is, therefore, to be of service in the formation of conscience and the life of the whole community; it is not to assume anyone's responsibility. The magisterium accomplishes this mission through teaching, sanctifying and governing (cf. LF 24-27; MR 13; CCC 888-896).

Now, as we have noted, such searching for the will of God and such obedience is meant for everyone in the Church, it is communal. The authority of the magisterium does not stand alone because it is not always easy to know God's will (cf. GS 33b, 43b) since all have the gift of the Spirit (Acts 5:32; Rom 5:5) and, as blessed John XXIII used to say, the fact of the "*depositum fidei*" is one thing and its historical and cultural articulation another.⁶ It is also true that the magisterium will be authentic to the extent that it is docile to Christ and the Spirit. Even within the Church, it is clear that one must obey God rather than human beings (cf. Acts 4:19; 5:29; see also: FT 27a). As a result, no one can remain passive in the Church because this would amount to infidelity to the Spirit living within, and this is so even when someone can create tensions, as was the case between Peter and the Jerusalem community (Acts 11:1-18), between Peter and Paul (cf. Gal 2:14), between James and Peter and Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15). Mutual respect, a practice of listening and dialogue are a necessity, a right, an obligation of all toward all, not a passing fancy, a luxury or a kindly concession by someone, even if that someone is in the service of the magisterium with its authority (cf. ES passim).

That is why when an individual or group in the Church offers a critique out of a sincere desire to know the will of God, as long as charity is maintained such a critique is not evidence of disobedience but is, rather, a responsible act of love for the Church and fidelity to the Lord. One has only to recall Saint Catherine of Siena's criticisms of the Popes resident in Avignon, urging them to return to Rome, the misunderstanding between Saint Teresa of Avila and the Papal Nuncio of Madrid, the tension between Francis of Assisi and his bishop ... (VC 43, 46, 84, 85, 91, 92). Criticizing certain things in the Church or a few of its members in love and out of a sense of responsibility indicates more love rather than less – just as the love parents have for their children does not prevent them from criticizing certain things that do not seem right or acknowledging certain faults. Anything else is childishness, a lack of human maturity and serene objectivity: anyone who loves criticizes while still loving the person criticized and, not only that, but criticism is done out of love and lovingly. Remaining silent is not always a sign of mature obedience but, on the contrary, it can be a sign of indifference or failure to take responsibility for the common good as much in the Church as in society. Listening and being listened to is a duty and a right of every Christian if we truly wish to understand God's will (cf. NMI 45a): "The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities Therefore the Church of the Third Millennium will need to encourage all the baptized and confirmed to be aware of their active responsibility in the Church's life" (NMI 46a).

So it is that, in the often difficult search for the will of God in the Church, Christian tradition has always acknowledged the possibility of "prophecy," the possibility that a Christian might perceive with absolute moral certainty a sign of God beyond the actual norms or methods of ecclesiastical authority. Apart from such an exceptional circumstance, however, can confrontation take the form of a clear protest arising more or less from within the community against the way authority is exercised, a loyal and responsible opposition by an individual or group at a particular historical moment? It is not a matter of contesting authority in itself (which would be a problem to be considered by dogmatic ecclesiology), but rather a concrete operational judgment, a way of asking a question or insisting on serving in a definite way. This displays an attitude of critical loyalty in the search for God's will – a true friend tells the truth to a friend (cf. Pet 27:5-6) – and, as far as I am concerned, it is a responsible act toward the Church-communion. In fact, in the history of the Church there has hardly been an official reform which was not to some extent preceded by or the fruit or

consequence of loyal and responsible opposition by a few of her members. To limit ourselves to recent history, we have only to recall liturgical, biblical and ecumenical reforms promulgated by Vatican Council II, reforms achieved by theologians who had experienced difficulties with the Roman Curia in previous years. A few years ago, Ratzinger, then a theologian, remarked that the Church: “lives always by the call of the Spirit, in the “crisis” of the passage from the old to the new. Is it by chance that the great saints were in conflict, not only with the world but also with the Church and that they suffered while working for the Church and in the Church? True obedience is not that of sycophants (called “false prophets” in face of the authentic prophecy of the Old Testament), of those who avoid any obstacle or hurt, who value their own comfort above all: obedience is truthfulness, an obedience animated by the enthusiastic energy of love, that is the true obedience which has made the Church fruitful over the centuries, freeing her from Babylonian temptation and bringing her back to the side of her crucified Lord.”⁷ This same member of the magisterium would later praise the prophetic, even “provocative,” spirit of a good number of religious throughout the Church’s history (cr. EN 69; VC 84b: see also numbers 46, 74, 84-85).

Loyalty and obedience are demonstrated: 1) in the humble and opportune presentation of one’s personal point of view (as a “no” to fear, inhibition and passivity, to the lack of a sense of ecclesial co-responsibility in the search for God’s will); 2) in the sincere desire to seek the truth (as a “no” to the lack of uprightness or the playing of both sides, to putting one’s own interests first); 3) in continual respect for everyone, including therefore those who exercise the service of authority (as a “no” to offending or denigrating a neighbour); 4) in the untiring effort to reconcile the demands of obedience to legitimate authority with the demands which cannot be abandoned in conscience (as a “yes” to respecting everyone’s clear conscience, even when they make a mistake – let us recall the words of Saint Paul (Rom 14-15; 1 Cor 8-10)); 5) and all this is done in a spirit of faith and so of prayer that must characterize Christian life. People in such a situation who act with this attitude certainly serve the Church, are the Church even when they provoke times of crisis and tension, and they help us know and accomplish the will of God (cf. LG 37a; CCL 212; CCC 907 and 911).

In all of the above, it is finally a question of the necessity and, at the same time, the provisional character of any authority whatever, even that of the Church, and this highlights the fact that, in the Christian community, everyone obeys. According to Saint Paul, the one head and mediator is

Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:5-7, 9, 11; Col 1:18; Eph 1:22; 1 Tim 2:5), “the” Shepherd (cf. Jn 10:11-15); Peter, Paul, Apollos ... are God’s collaborators in the community (cf. 1 Cor 3:9), they are members of it and at the service of its well-being. That is the profound evangelical truth behind the Pope’s title of “servus servorum Dei.” Only God has authority, only Christ is the absolute authority in the Church. This explains why, as we said at the beginning, there is a fundamental equality among the members of the Church, a principle which takes precedence over that of various ministries and charisms given by the Spirit for the good of all (cf. LF 32; CCL 298; ChL 15a, 17g; CCC 872; VC 31): each having received gifts for the good of all, all members together seek God’s will and are busy accomplishing it.

3) The Religious Community And “Its” Way Of Listening To And Following The Will Of God.

As the Instruction notes: “Consecrated life, called to make the characteristic traits of the virginal, poor and obedient Jesus visible,¹ flourishes in the ambience of this search for the face of the Lord and the ways that lead to him (cf. Jn 14:4-6). A search ... which underlies each day’s struggle The consecrated person, therefore, gives witness to the joyful as well as laborious task of seeking diligently the divine will ...” FT 1b; cf. 8e).

From all that has been said so far, it becomes all of a sudden clear that we women and men religious are not to be identified as “the obedient ones” in the Church, as though others did not have to obey. Given this way of looking at it, our life is but one among so many ways (various ways: cf. FT 3c) of seeking and living out the will of God, a continuation in history of Christ’s obedience to the Father.

The authority-obedience relationship/service specific to religious life is rooted in communion of charism, life and mission: in the “con-vocation” of certain believers by God, that is, in the call to build a more intimate communion with each other. This is a call to live together with other disciples of Christ according to a charism (that of the founder or foundress) which enfleshes and interprets the way to live out the mystery of Christ and emphasizes a particular aspect of it, a charism with which, thanks to the gift of the Spirit, one feels in spiritual harmony. A recent document has put it very well: “From their communitarian way of living flows that form of presence and involvement which should characterize them in the Church’s mission They have freely and consciously chosen to participate

completely in their mission of witness, presence and apostolic activity in obedience to the common purpose and to the superiors of their institute. This participation expresses fraternity and support, especially when the apostolic mandate exposes religious to greater and more demanding responsibilities in the sphere of difficult social contexts” (cf. RHP 25). So it is that obedience links and unites different wills in one fraternal community entrusted with a specific mission in the Church. Obedience is a “yes” to the design of God who has assigned a particular task to a group. Mission is an important aspect of it but so also is the community who exercise it together in the here and now. It calls as well for clarity of vision in faith on the part of superiors who “carry out their duty of servant and guide” (MR 13) and must ensure that apostolic work is in keeping with the mission; therefore it is in communion with superiors that the divine will, alone able to save (FLC 46bcd, cf. 18a), is to be carried out. Note the continual reference to God and to the whole of the community, that is, superiors and those united to them, all of whom keep in sight the will of God for them.

A two-fold service flows from this initial communion-‘convocation’: 1) from an interior point of view, a common search for the will of God and a communal life; 2) from an external point of view, apostolic mission (cf. VLC 58; VC 46a, 72). In this context, authority and obedience are two aspects of the one process of obedience to God through which all seek and carry out together what is pleasing to God (cf. FT 12e); “all obey, each with various tasks” (FT 18b). In this way of life, a diaconia and mutual mediation are necessary between the one who commands and the one who obeys; each is God’s presence to the other: “Thus brothers and sisters become sacraments of Jesus and of the encounter with God” (FT 19c).

What then makes the authority-obedience relationship/service in religious life unique compared to other Christian vocations? Uniqueness does not lie in imitation of Christ’s obedience (the “why”) since this is, as far as humanly possible, common to all Christians. Uniqueness lies in the “how,” in the kind of mediation through which the religious feels called by the Spirit to seek the will of the Father and so extend the obedience of Christ. As we have said, such a mediation is understood within a two-fold context: first, within a Christian’s (founder’s or foundress’) particular “reading” and charismatic experience of the Gospel (of the mystery of Christ) which harmonizes with one’s own in the sense that one is impelled to follow and imitate Christ in like manner and join the group which she or he has founded in the Spirit; and second, within religious life, within a life in community which involves not only obedience but also the

evangelical counsels of celibacy and poverty. A celibate religious feels called, therefore, to scrutinize, discern and carry out the Father's will in fellowship, that is, together with other Christians called by the Holy Spirit. These others with their own human and spiritual baggage (positive and limited aspects as well) become, from that moment, part of the life and mission of a religious, and the convoked become brothers and sisters (cf. FT 9c, 12a).

That is why the obedience of a religious should be viewed within a new and broader horizon encompassing the brothers and sisters given by God and to God rather than understood first as a "renunciation" to one's own will (even though this is part of it, as in every Christian vocation). It is a case of the expansion of self so as to include one's brothers and sisters in such a way that one's human and spiritual mode of thinking and acting is affected decisively and forever more. A religious, then, does not give up thinking, searching, judging and deciding but gives up doing this alone: a renunciation of aloneness for the sake of communion. The relationship among brothers/sisters constantly overcomes the "I-you" opposition in favour of the "we." Each one must feel like a "we." Each one must participate in the community according to his or her human and spiritual gifts (intelligence, experience, abilities, etc.) by freely and willingly offering them to the others and by counting on the gifts of others when thinking, deciding and acting. That is why "there is no contradiction between obedience and freedom" (VC 91b). Both the individual and the community itself become "sacrament" of the path to and discovery of God and God's will (cf. FT 19c). To conclude, mutual obedience in community and obedience to the one who leads are not simply sociological, organizational, ascetical or juridic realities but rather they are profoundly theological-spiritual in nature.

So now, where do the role, mission, ministry and service of the superior come in? In order to protect, stimulate and encourage its cohesion and fidelity to communion and the mission to which God calls it, the group chooses from among its members – keeping in mind its own charismatic and juridic features – someone who will look after all that. Communion and the search for God's will are the work of all members and not the monopoly of one person, but the superior has this specific responsibility. The superior is then servant *par excellence* of communion and search for God or, as the Instruction puts it, "while *all* in the community are called to seek what is pleasing to the Lord and to obey Him, *some* are called ... to exercise the particular task of being the sign of unity and the guide to the common search both personal and communitarian of carrying out the

will of God. This is the service of authority” (FT 1c). For this reason, we might say that, “while consecrated persons have vowed total dedication to God, it is authority which enables and supports their consecration. In a certain sense, we might consider it to be ‘servant of the servants of God’”. Its first duty is to build, along with the brothers and sisters, “fraternal communities where God is sought and loved above all” (CCC 619; cf. FT 12d, 13a, 21c). This authority must therefore be vested first of all in a spiritual person, one convinced of the primacy of the spiritual in personal life and in the building of community life and aware that the more love of God grows in hearts the more hearts will be united. Authority will then give priority to the task of spiritual, communitarian and apostolic animation of the community (FLC 50a; cf. FT 12a, 13). In a manner similar to what is required of a bishop – without however confusing or equating the two types of authority – the religious superior must be spiritual leader, prophet, instrument of holiness and government, and brotherly/sisterly companion (MR 13, 14c, 26-27; CCC 619; FLC 50; VC 43, 93). On the one hand, the superior is one of the brothers or sisters; on the other hand, the superior represents and is at the service of what God and the Church expect of the community. Authority “represents” God, not that he or she is humanly infallible in concrete decisions – the superior’s human limitations are explicitly recognized (cf. VC 92b; FT 13d, 18a, 21c, 25a) – but because authority does its best in journeying with us in the search for and accomplishing of God’s will and in using methods sanctioned by the Church (the Word of God, the Rule and Constitutions, Chapter decisions, signs of the times, etc). Authority is an indirect mediator (cf. FT 13c, 17c, 21c, 25 beginning). So whoever obeys welcomes in a spirit of faith – by “humbly submitting” to superiors – this mediation of grace which is offered and which gives a “guarantee” that one is guided by the Spirit and sustained even in the midst of hardship (Acts 20, 22f; VC 92b). In the end, we are placing our trust in God who works through the community to which he has called us, and so we are placing our trust also in our brothers and sisters and in those who go before us on the path to God.

The superior is therefore a member of the community, among the community and is elected by the community. He or she lives in the midst of the brothers or sisters, at the side of each one and is always ready to help them, to “wash their feet” (Jn 13:1-17; cf. Mt 23:11; FT 12b, 17b). “Supported by prayer, reflection and the advice of others,” the superior seeks “what it is that God wants” (FT 12d). Such are the priorities of the service of authority (cf. FT 13), its role in the growth of brotherly and sisterly love (cf. FT 20; and also FLC 50c; VC 43; SAC 14) and in the

carrying out of the mission (cf. FT 25). It is not the superior but Christ, God, alone who is the head of the community and whom all wish to serve together. The superior is to be memory, yeast, stimulant, encouragement; he or she does not take the place of anyone's conscience but rather assures that all members are responsible. The superior listens, serves and enriches rather than being the brake, the constraint or, even less, the one who subjects others.

It is not a case of the superior on the one hand "and" the community on the other, as though these were two different or, worse, opposing realities, just as there is no such thing as a superior without a community or a community "for" a superior. The members of the community are not at his or her service but are rather together at the service of the kingdom of God. In this context, the superior, the authority is an important service but it is not the only one; it seems clear that "far from lessening the dignity of the person, religious obedience brings it to maturity by developing the freedom of the children of God" (PC 14b) and "there in no contradiction between obedience and freedom" (VC 91b).

To summarize, religious obedience must be: 1) human, adult, mature and sustained by faith, not individualistic, egocentric, "childish" (FT 25a; "childishness" 20b), passive or secularised, any more than authority must not be a sign of "paternalism or maternalism" (FT 14b); 2) its reference point is Christ, the will of the Father; 3) it is expressed in congregational fraternity; 4) obedient religious look upon the superior as a brother or sister, are grateful for his or her service, pray for the superior and help him or her in discerning and accomplishing of God's will through dialogue and a sense of co-responsibility and collaboration (cf. FT 19b).

It can happen, however, that even in religious life – as we noted above in regard to the Church – there may be some who believe that they cannot obey on a fundamental point, even though it may not be a question of something sinful in itself (if this were the case, authority would lose its *raison d'être*). In the Church, it is not unusual that, once having entered religious life, a religious comes to understand after a while that the life is not for him or her and believes that God is calling to another form of religious life, whether one that already exists or is to be founded. Have there not been many institutes founded by religious who first belonged to another institute? When the Church gave approval to the new institute, she implicitly recognized that, in that particular case, the religious was right to leave the first institute. We have only to think of Saint Teresa of Avila and, in our own time, blessed Teresa of Calcutta.

On the other hand, a more widespread problem is perhaps that of a religious who does not believe it necessary to leave his or her congregation but at the same time has difficulty accepting an order. On this point, the Instruction generally repeats itself (cf. FT 10, 20e, 26-27). The text distinguishes between “difficult obedience” (FT 26; cf. 10a, 20e, 26-27) and “objection in conscience,” given the fact of “the obscurity and ambivalence of many human realities” (FT 27d). In reference to the first case (cf. 26a), it admits that orders may seem absolutely “absurd.” Following the advice of Saint Bernard and Saint Francis, it recognizes that “it is understandable, on the one hand, to have a certain attachment to personal ideas and convictions, fruit of reflection or of experience and matured over time” and that, in the end, “it is also a good thing to seek to defend them and to carry them forward, always in the perspective of the Reign of God, in a straightforward and constructive dialogue” (FT 26c; cf. 20e). On the other hand, the text reminds us that the model is Christ who did not “pull back from death on the cross (cf. Heb 5:7).” That is why, even if one admits that a religious might experience “a weakness or a temptation to refuse to obey authority,” he or she is reminded that in such a situation one should entrust oneself to the Father so that his will may be done. In the second case (cf. FT 27), it raises the possibility of “situations in which a person’s conscience would not seem to permit following the directives given by persons in authority.” The text recalls that Paul VI had spoken earlier of what is termed “objection in conscience” (cf. ET 28-29). It acknowledges that “it is true that conscience is the place where the voice of the Lord resounds, the voice that indicates to us how to behave” but it is also true that we must be careful not to fall prey to subjectivism and the judgment of conscience must be formed. The consecrated person “will then have to reflect long before concluding that it is not the obedience received but what is sensed within him or herself that represents the will of God” and will have to engage in confrontation and verification with the mediators given by God. Even if “it remains indisputable that what counts is to arrive at knowing and fulfilling the will of God, ... it ought to be likewise indisputable that the consecrated person is committed by vow to accept this holy will through determined mediations.”

When all is said and done, in such a situation a religious is required to give up his or her personal opinion – even when right – in favour of the wishes of the community and its leader. How then justify this renunciation and ensure that such an attitude is valid from a human and Christian point of view? Renunciation is justified if there is a willing attitude and it is not a question of an obedience which is forced or simply easy or passive or,

even less, involving something seriously imprudent or sinful for, in such a case, a subject would definitely not be expected to obey and authority would lose its justification. Or, as number 27 of the Instruction puts it in quoting Paul VI, renunciation is justified, “apart from an order manifestly contrary to the laws of God or the constitutions of the institute, or one involving a serious and certain evil—in which case there is no obligation to obey” (ET 28). This attitude is justified because a religious recognizes in his or her brothers/sisters and in their opinion a certain value which enables him or her to do what they say without a lessening of responsibility or dignity. In effect, a religious acts in such a case according to the will of the other because of a humble recognition that it is humanly possible that others, not oneself, are right (cf. FT 27b; ET 28: “the obscurity and ambivalence of many human realities”), even though sometimes, in the heat of the moment, this does not seem exactly true: this is human reasoning (cf. FT 9d, 10a). A religious also acts this way because he or she acknowledges in a spirit of faith not only the possibility but also the certainty that God is making use of the others since God has called them to a common life in order to discover God’s will and that it is a case here of “an order legitimately given” (FT 10a): this is theological reasoning. A religious is aware that brothers and sisters can make mistakes – just as he or she can – and this is neither surprising nor scandalising. Looking beyond their fragile humanity, however, a religious puts trust in God who has called him or her to communion of life and charism with them, convinced that God does not make mistakes (cf. FT 10c). One obeys “not only God but also others, but in every case, for God and not for others” (FT 11a). This does not mean that one renounces one’s dignity and personal responsibility but rather that one places them within a broader vision which includes the other members of the community and institute, and that one also acknowledges with realism and humility one’s own limits and the possibility of making a mistake. If one discovers later that one’s brothers or sisters were right, and not oneself, it is all to the good; but if, on the contrary, it becomes clear that, humanly speaking, reason was on one’s side, it will remain true that one has lived the Gospel and one’s vocation (the true goal in life) because one will have searched for God through the given mediation of brothers and sisters and so will have done what God had asked, that is, God’s will. It is obvious that faith is not a unique element in religious life but a decisive one. Consequently, there should be no reason to feel frustrated or bitter, even in the second case. That is why the obedience of a religious should always be a reasoned one – we must use the gifts God has given such as intelligence and experience – but it can never be simply a rational one because faith and so abandonment to God

(cf. FT 10c, 11a) have the last word.

In the life of the believer, the “Fides et Ratio” of which John Paul II spoke in the encyclical with this title (FR) always go together. Such is the case with Mary at the annunciation and birth of Jesus when she questions herself (cf. Lk 1:34), reflects and meditates (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). This is a characteristic obedience which is “believing and questioning” (cf. FT 31a; cf. LG 58; Rma 17d). At the same time though, Mary “is quick to obey” (VC 112c) and entrusts herself, abandons herself, to God: “Here I am ...” (Lk 1:38). Mary is “a strong woman,” one who is not “passively submissive or inclined to an alienating religiosity” (MC 37). She is a model of biblical “poverty,” of confidence in and abandonment to the Lord (cf. Rma 17c; cf. 12-19, 39).

¹ Abbreviations for documents from the Magisterium which will be cited. *Faciem Tuam*: FT; *Ecclesiam Suam*: ES; *Lumen Gentium*: LG; *Gaudium et Spes*: GS; *Perfectae Caritatis*: PC; *Evangelica Testificatio*: ET; *Marialis Cultus*: MC; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: EN; *Mutuae Relationes*: MR; *Religious and Human Promotion*: RHP; *Code of Canon Law*: CCL; *Redemptoris Mater*: Rma; *Christifideles Laici*: ChL; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: CCC; *Fraternal Life in Community*: FLC; *Vita Consecrata*: VC; *Fides et Ratio*: FR; *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: NMI; *Starting Afresh from Christ*: SAC.

² The Instruction speaks in fact of “childish

dependence” (FT 25a), “childishness” (FT 20b), and “paternalism or materialism” (FT 14b) as dangers to be avoided.

³ Saint BERNARD, *De errore Abelardi*, 8, 21: PL 182, 1070A.

⁴ Saint AUGUSTIN would later remark: “Martyres non facit poena, sed causa” (Enarr. In Ps 34:13).

⁵ *Homily*, AAS 97 (2005) 709; quoted in FT 12b.

⁶ Cf. John XXIII, October 11, 1962; Opening speech at the Second Vatican Council (Vatican Council II Documents, Bologna 1966, 995-996).

⁷ J. Ratzinger, *The New People of God*, 1971, 284-286.



TELL THIS GENERATION TO MARCH ON!

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It is my task to put into context the slogan of the XXIst Ordinary General Assembly of the Conference of Religious in Brazil. Without attempting to be all-encompassing, I will try to give an overall view and, particularly for such an important gathering as this Assembly, point out some elements designed to deepen reflection on the current situation of consecrated religious life.

The inspiration for our title comes from Exodus 14:15, a verse which carefully records the most critical moment in the Exodus process. The authors gift us with a framework which recalls the most important event in the history of the people of God¹.

The Wider Context

Migrating for better living conditions or simply fleeing from hunger are millennial and universal historical realities. The people of whom Exodus speaks are made up of *Hebrews*² from the Nile Delta in Egypt who seek survival and opportunity. History mentions the Hyksos³, a people who inhabited Lower Egypt and whom the Pharaohs had to confront. They were expelled by the Pharaoh Ahmose in 1575 B.C. In their wake, and even before them as well as after them, many groups journeyed back and forth, some not to return. According to history, there were times when the Pharaohs were occupied more with Upper Egypt, and during these periods the Nile Delta was freer for occupation by migrants and nomads.

The reign of Ramses I⁴ began in 1308 B.C. He resolved to move his official residence and to build large fortifications in the Nile Delta, a decision which resulted in great investment. Seti I, Ramses' son, continued this work. The Hebrews (migrants and nomads) were located there and were used as

efficient and cheap manual laborers for the projects. As a result, they were oppressed and their oppression continued to grow.

The Egyptians maintained a system for storing food (Gen 41:33-36, 53-57) which resulted in their subduing the inhabitants around the area as well as those at a considerable distance. In times of drought and food scarcity, the local and neighboring populations submitted to the lord of the depositories so as to not perish from hunger (Gen 47:13-26). According to Gen 42:1-5, the people then gathered by the sea shore had come to Egypt because of famine. Famine had brought them there but the land dear to their hearts was not Egypt (Gen 47:29-31; 49:29, and 50:22-26). In Exodus 12:40, we learn that they remained in Egypt for 430 years. Their oppression began to weigh on them in 1308 B.C., however, and it became unbearable fifty years later during the reign of Ramses II (Ex 1:8).

The Nile Delta, A Space In Transformation

Genesis 47:1-12 notes that the people entered this area peacefully and remained for about ten generations, living on the fertile land without being bothered. Ramses I decided, however, to transform the space and occupy the land for mega projects. Because of his plans, therefore, the land was no longer a gift from God but the property of the “Lord of Egypt,” and not only the land but all that was in it since owning the land also meant possession of its wealth and the peoples who lived there. Pharaoh decided to transform the area and put all who were there to work on his plan. What were they to do now? Accept and adapt to the change? Rebel and cry out for a liberator? Create new spaces within that of Pharaoh? Create new spaces in other regions? Participate in the transformation he had decreed? Seek new spaces to continue living in the way they had for generations? Create space within themselves to find a new way of life? The truth was that they could not stay. The world had changed, the times had changed and Egypt was no longer the same. New generations with new attitudes had emerged and they demanded that history move on....

The Hebrews who had entered Egypt were well fed, had multiplied and were perceived as a menace by Pharaoh (Ex 1:8-10). Things changed and the same land that had sated their hunger was now threatening to destroy their liberty and the meaning of life. The Hebrews could survive but not flourish since their growth threatened others.

Oppression grew, leaders disappeared and the deeds of the past were forgotten (Ex 1:8). Events of the past are valuable only as signs and, for them to influence the present, they must be reread and reinterpreted. So it is that, lost in the present of their history, these people cannot abide oppression and have

no recourse but to moan, lament and cry out without knowing to whom to turn. The God who hears the cry of the oppressed is attentive to them but needs someone to be a presence among the people. He calls Moses in order to effect with him the liberation of the people (Ex 3:1-12). God needs someone open to being embraced by God's Spirit in order to bring forth wonders in the present.

Always Prepare A Way Out

In the first chapters of Exodus, we already see Moses urging the people, in the name of God, to leave Egypt, henceforth to be called a den of slavery, for the Promised Land, a land of milk and honey (Ex 3:7-8). Slavery is a systemic component of Pharaoh's organization and helps explain his *success*⁵. The Promised Land is really a dream to be built in faith and nourished in hope.

This book has a great wealth of information concerning the difficulties envisaged by Moses for not accepting the mission (Ex 3:11,13; 4:1,10,13; 5:22-23), the difficulties Pharaoh creates for Moses in carrying out his mission (Ex 5:2; 7:13; 8:11,15,28; 9:7,12,35; 10:10-11,20,27-29; 14:5-9) and the difficulty the Hebrews have in welcoming God's proposal through Moses (Ex 5:20-21; 6:9). Confronting such difficulties is possible only through God's grace and with God.

The text makes clear that the Hebrews were not to flee by the back door, but through the front, and their departure was to be authorized by the "hard-hearted man," the Lord of Egypt (Ex 3:21-22). This will only happen after the tragic death of his first born, the legitimate heir to his throne who was to continue his dynasty (Ex 12:29-34). Only when Pharaoh perceives that there is no future does his heart soften.

The mission is from God and Moses is called to be God's presence in history, among a multitude of slaves in Egypt. Moses is to guide not only the slaves but also the slave masters in the process of conscientization. In the name of God, he offers an alternative unknown to the slaves and their master but feasible and real. This new venture takes place, without violence, when the enslaved become agents and the master lets go of power a little. God wishes liberation without violence, but the purported Lord of Egypt refuses to give in.

Strategies

As we study the text, various strategies become apparent: seeking and opening new paths, going as a caravan, living in tents and camping at the borders of the water and the desert.

Liberated by Moses and guided by God, the Hebrews finally leave but,

Tell this generation to march on!

curiously, they do not take a traditional route; rather, they penetrate into the desert by obscure, unknown and unexplored paths (Ex 13:17-18). They always pitch their tents at the edges of the desert, at the borders of lakes and the sea.

Well-traveled routes are known, already explored and offer nothing new. The conquest of the new is not made on such roads but by carving out new ones. Whoever travels old roads must have new eyes to see the invisible and discover the new in the ordinary. Newness is an ongoing construction, a daily crafting, fruit of the “dynamic” of the Spirit of God in the story of those who let themselves be guided by the Spirit and become the Spirit’s agents through grace.

For the “prudent,” the desert and the sea are not good choices for safe encampments. They are frontier places and, while the risk is great and the surprises more frequent in such a “liminal” situation, the opportunities are greater also. The future lies beyond risk taken and confronted. The desert and the sea are challenges on the journey, but they are neither goals nor destinations in themselves. They oblige us to confront ourselves and recognize what lies within. We are more dependent on things than we imagine and we have great difficulty in dealing with liquidity. Water calls to us but also frightens and terrorizes us.

According to the text, it is God himself who leads God’s people: “The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light” (Ex 13:21). The idea of making a journey led by a pillar of cloud and enlightened by a pillar of fire is suggestive of many things. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1Corinthians 10:1-4 that Christ was the cloud or the fire accompanying the people of Israel. Through the mediation of Moses, Christ was guiding them in the fragility of the cloud and the strength of the fire. Although they often appear insignificant, signs are not lacking to invite us to proceed at the right time or remain where we are. We must, therefore, be watchful and move forward with the signs we have, knowing how to discern the permanent in what is passing and fleeting.

The Danger Of Returning To One’s Vomit (Prov 26:11)

The text speaks not only of the Hebrews’ march and Pharaoh’s remorse, along with the ensuing persecution (Ex 14:5-9), but also of the Hebrews’ regret at having left Egypt (Ex 14:10-12). This shows that it is not enough to leave a place or time. We must also put aside the old ways with their mental processes and undergo the change of a heart grown rusty. Our eyes must be bathed with the eyewash of the Spirit.

The writers say that Pharaoh resolved to pursue and recapture the Hebrews whom he had let go shortly before. Their freedom came with the price of upheaval, hard work, sweat and the sacrifice of a comfortable life, but it also cost Pharaoh his powerful reputation and popularity. Those who earlier were masters of their own households now had to provide for their own sustenance, see to their own needs and complete their projects by the work of their own hands and the sweat of their brow. Furthermore, those who had always provided sustenance for and met the needs of others would henceforth have to take responsibility for the direction of their own history. They seemed, however, to lack confidence in themselves and doubt their own abilities. An implicit affective complicity must be ripped apart to make possible an effective freedom. Pharaoh missed his slaves and many of the slaves missed Pharaoh's system.

Where Is Consecrated Religious Life In Brazil Today?

A Choice Is Required And We Must Prepare For It.

Now the Hebrews are hemmed in, on the one side by the immense sea, mysterious, unknown, terrifying and menacing and, on the other side, by the approaching army inflamed by Pharaoh's anger. What to do? Turn around, beg forgiveness and surrender? Who can guarantee that Pharaoh will act as before and that the slaves will enjoy once more what they had before? Move forward? This seems a collective suicide. Overtaken with fear, they turn against their leader (Ex 14:10-12), and Moses calls out to God (Ex 14:13-15). This happens not because they lack a goal but because they lack confidence and do not act.

It would seem that Moses made a tragic decision, undertaking an enterprise destined for failure from the beginning. To end up in the absurdity of death without burial is actually the most tragic of ends. Such seems to be the prediction of the most realistic among us in a time like ours. We all know that "poking the jaguar with a short stick" can be dangerous. What a strange thing to do, to leave what is certain to seek what is doubtful. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between prudence and cowardice.

In Egypt the Hebrews were not free and their work was very humiliating, degrading, stressful and inhuman, but they had a place to stay, something to eat and a burial site. "Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone,'" said the Hebrews (Ex 14: 12). Even when oppressed by Pharaoh, they felt at peace. Now free from oppression, they have lost their peace. Journeying in insecurity and uncertainty is for them more wearing and painful than being in slavery with its certainties and securities. And this they call peace.

Might it be that consecrated religious life is not satisfied with the peace

Tell this generation to march on!

of Egypt? Can we name the Egypt of today? How do we relate to it? What is our choice: to die as slaves in order to be buried in Egypt or to die free, running the risk of remaining unburied in the desert?

From Passive Trust To Active Surrender

The response of Moses is a call to walk in faith, in spirituality, to seek what is missing for the journey to have meaning. It begins with a strong “Do not be afraid, stand firm!” (Ex 14:13). Fear must certainly be the most efficacious paralyzing agent in history. It explains the domination of so much evil and the prevalence of so much submission, subjugation and suppressed, stifled and quiet groaning in our history. Moses continues with a prophetic declaration: “The Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you” (Ex 14:13-14). The words of Moses are a two-edged sword since already the Hebrews do not believe in themselves and they do not trust Moses. Will they hope in God? Will God act for them?

Today as well, many people hope in God and beg, pray, wail and look to heaven, hoping that things will fall into their hands. God will indeed do something for them, but it will be *with* them. God does not absolve us from doing our part, contrary to a dominant attitude in our day. It is common to hope in God without giving of ourselves and so allow God’s strength to act through us.

Moses consoles the Hebrews with words, but this is very little in response to the needs of the people he leads. What is needed is guidance through incarnation of the Word and leadership with a boldness that is “fearful and spontaneous.”

The Miracle Of Engagement

What Word does God provide at such a critical and decisive time? God begins by reproaching the leader: “Why do you cry out to me?” (Ex 14:15). What nonsense is this, always crying out for help from me at a time of danger?⁶ In truth, not only are the people lost but so is Moses. The Word, however, confirms the original plan: “Tell the Israelites to go forward!” (Ex 14:15). Tell them to march on, continue the mission already begun and follow the direction given. Tell them not to be discouraged in the face of perceived danger. The future lies ahead, the “land of milk and honey” lies beyond the sea. The Hebrews as well as Moses have known the goal from the beginning. They left Egypt with this goal, but they are losing sight of it in the face of the obstacles which have arisen. They stop journeying, stay in place, become stagnant, lose hope and deceive themselves. They hoped for an instant future but they have to build the future as well as the road to it.

It is necessary to go before those who are led, not just encourage and organize them. “But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground” (Ex 14: 16). The same staff which Moses used in Egypt to convince Pharaoh to let them leave (Ex 7:8-13) must now be used to open a way through the sea. The staff gives warning, encourages and gives the signal. It is the symbol of the power Moses uses as a gift from God for the sake of mission whereas Pharaoh uses power as a ruse to subjugate others and to impose his will. The staff as power is not an instrument of self-help but of service to others, for the good of all. Moses uses his staff to confront “the hard-hearted man,” and convince him to let the Hebrews leave, and he uses it to confront the mysterious sea so that it parts before them and allows them to leave.

According to Exodus 14:21, the uplifted staff brings the east wind which separates the waters, dries the land and opens the way. While the staff is a symbol of power, the wind is a symbol of the Spirit. Power and the Spirit of God in leadership of the people are thus related. The two must go together. Leadership is exercised with the power of the Spirit in order to find alternatives and open the way forward.

Between the alternatives of returning to Pharaoh or jumping into the sea, the latter is chosen because it is the only choice that is coherent with God’s original proposal. Being helped and accompanied by God and doing God’s will does not exempt us from problems but encourages us to face them, to challenge and overcome them. Superhuman boldness beyond the rational is, however, required. We must adopt uncommon attitudes and we pay the price of being a sign of contradiction. The way is easier once many feet have walked it. Life teaches us that we owe whatever has already been accomplished to those who have gone before us.

How does consecrated religious life use the staff received from God? In what places, in what situations and for the benefit of whom? What new paths does consecrated religious life open for society today?

Seize The Moment

The Hebrews enter into the sea and a new story is born, or, to put it another way, their history will forever be marked by this event. All enter the sea and begin to cross it, both Hebrews and Egyptians. The sea does not open only for the Hebrews but it is they who go ahead and open the way. They are the first, they have the blessing and the grace of breaking new ground in the sea and, because of this, they also make it out in time. The others go after them, in their footsteps, imitating them and making use of what has already been done, and thus living from what has been created. Those who follow are of another

Tell this generation to march on!

time and out of touch, and they lose the rhythm of the water, are engulfed and lost.

Those who live by the water know the meaning of its rhythms and its influence on daily life. The sea is a space in constant movement and transformation.

What sea does consecrated religious life need to cross? What does it need to do to be ready? Might it be that we are dreaming of a Promised Land at the entry point to the Red Sea rather than on the opposite shore? The Egyptians were swallowed up by the water because they delayed in following. As for ourselves, where are we with regard to this crossing?

From The Sea With Moses To The Sea With Jesus

For those who find the episode of the crossing of the sea to be a marvellous and distant episode, I suggest a reading of Mark 6:45-52 where there is a more up to date telling of the story.

In Exodus, the people pass through the sea and receive manna (Ex 16:1-36). In Mark, the people first receive bread and then cross the sea. In the first case, Moses parts the sea and the people pass through dry shod (Ex 14:21-22). In the second, Jesus “obliges” the disciples to take a boat and go ahead of him to the other side. This may mean that a true leader does not always go before but needs rather to make leaders of disciples.

According to the Exodus text, they cross the sea dry shod, led and protected by the cloud and the column of fire (Ex 14:19, 24). In Mark, on the other hand, even in the boat, they get wet feet and they cross in the darkness of night, against a violent wind and over turbulent water, while Jesus walks in power on the water. The boat is the new way to cross. It was used a great deal by the first Christians as a symbol of church-community. It seems that the power of the staff dividing the waters has been superseded by the simplicity of the boat that is resistant to contrary winds. Jesus also prevails over the water. Today, it is possible to interpret the cloud and the column of fire as the person of Jesus who no longer walks in front but behind. The sea no longer needs to be parted. The Hebrews of today have a boat. Many, however, prefer to jump over the sea rather than cross it.

In Exodus (7:3,13,22; 8:11,15; 9:7,12,34-35; 10:1,20,27; 11:10), the heart of Pharaoh had hardened. In Mark, it is the hard heart of the disciples which prevents them from interpreting the signs (Mk 6:52). Pharaoh does not see God in the actions of Moses and neither do the disciples detect God’s presence in the action of Jesus. A hardened heart prevents one from seeing the needs of others, from welcoming the other in his or her difference.

In the first case, the proposal of God was not adopted by the people. In the second, the proposal of Jesus is not adopted by the disciples. As well as being gift from God, the Promised Land and the new person are also constructed personally and communally in obedience to God's will.

In Exodus, they enter into the sea because it is the only alternative if they do not wish to turn back. In Mark, they go to sea because they must continue on the way. For many, this is suicide. Ironically, it really is suicide since one must accept death in order to be born anew. One must kill preconceived notions in order to birth the kind of thinking faithful to the original spirit.

Crossing the sea, therefore, is a sign, and a mere sign does not nourish. One must welcome and take the direction to which the sign points. Moses lifts the staff, touches the sea, points out the direction and the people continue on. Even after having crossed the sea, the disciples do not understand the sign of the bread.

What makes the passage difficult for this generation or prevents it from moving forward? Fear of the sea, uncertainty about what will happen, nostalgia for the past, lack of leadership, lack of spirit....

Concluding Without A Conclusion

I want to make it clear that all these questions do not necessarily indicate pessimism or lack of trust with regard to consecrated religious life. They are intended to move us forward since accommodation stifles the good and is the enemy of the optimal. There are such things as a healthy disquietude and a detrimental calm. Even though we value and appreciate what we have and who we are, as pilgrims and foreigners we know that we have yet more to learn.

¹ B.S. Childs, Exodus, Old Testament Library, 1984, pages 237-238.

² Hebrews are a social category, more than a group of descendants of only one family. For amplification, see N.K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, Paulinas, 1980, pages 409, 428 and 429.

³ See N.K. Gottwald, pages 399-402.

⁴ The XIXth dynasty of Ramesses I and Ramesses II, to whom is attributed the most violent regime of oppression of the Hebrews to the point of their leaving

Egypt, lasted from 1308 to 1186 B.C. and was comprised of seven kings and one queen. See Lehneret and Landrok, Cairo, Egypt, 1981, page 32. This view differs from that of G. Alan, *La Civiltà Egizia*, Einaudi, 1985, pages 226-255.

⁵ An ambiguous reality because the success of Pharaoh results in the suffering of the people occupying the territory.

⁶ See M. Noth, Esodo, Paidéia, Brescia, 1977, p. 141.



RUNNING TO CATCH UP WITH THE SPIRIT: SPIRIT OF HOPE

Sister Maria Chin, RSM

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week ago, crunched by the limits of time and the overload of making the transition of returning home to Jamaica after 15 years in the USA, I found myself literally sprinting after the Spirit for inspiration for this presentation. In a moment of lucidity, no doubt triggered by seeing Don Bisson's name on this programme, I remembered a dream I had many years ago prior to a retreat Don was directing. In this dream, I was in a large empty field with nothing in sight. Suddenly there was a herd of cows dashing towards me, threatening to trample me. Startled and petrified, I tried to outrun the cows, only to realize that this was a hopeless attempt. What I needed to do was to run with the cows. As soon as I began to run with the cows, I woke up. Later, Don was to explain to me that in Jungian terms cows symbolize femininity, a piece of information that has some bearing on what I hope to develop later in this presentation.

This dream came at the end of a project, organized many years ago, for women religious to experience the reality of Haiti. I am getting old. These days, not only do my memories coalesce around events that occurred long ago but one memory leads to another. And so, as I continued to run and catch the Spirit's message for this presentation, bits and pieces of this experience came to mind: the realization that despite the restoration of democracy and the promises of the "international community," nothing has

significantly changed for the people of Haiti, the ancient Creole proverb “after the dance, the drum is heavy” is a daily lived reality in the absence of means to address the legal, social and economic circumstances of the people, the problems of poverty, hunger, and unemployment; I thought of the people’s high level of political consciousness and the difficult task of birthing democracy. I tasted once again snatches of conversations with groups of people, especially women, from every walk of life who were not afraid to lament and complain, who dared to say out loud how overwhelming were their feelings of powerlessness and despair at times, how great their anxiety, how deep the consequent fear. At the same time, they had a marvelous way of putting things into perspective, for example their artful use of strategy, the knowing chuckle at the incongruity of life, the burst of laughter at their own expense. I am reminded that people struggling with issues of truth and justice are not simply left to their own limited resources: they are deeply touched by a light and a strength not of their own making. This is hope, a piece of God’s purposefulness moving like sap through our being. (Cynthia Bourgeault)

Each conversation would be an interesting subject to consider for this presentation but it is a photograph that most stirs my imagination and touches the strained absence of meaning I feel in the face of inexplicable poverty and suffering. The photograph focuses on a tiny Styrofoam cup that seemingly someone has placed behind the huge back tire of a truck, as if to halt it in its track. Underneath the photographer has neatly penned: You’ve got to have high hopes. A tiny Styrofoam cup holding back and resisting the powerful force of a huge tire? Incongruous? Ridiculous? Hopeless? Perhaps. Yet it tells another story. At the end of his life, Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have remarked, “Do you know what astonished me the most in the world? The inability of force to create anything. In the long run, the sword is always beaten by the spirit.” Hope is the great reality, the spirit of the Haitian people, which reaches into the recesses of their daily lives and informs their incredible ability to survive.

These memories draw me beyond Haiti into the awareness that these stories are not unique to Haiti. All over the world similar stories are being told and heard of how people live lives of economic deprivation, fear and violence, degradation and oppression, how they confront chaos and confusion in their lives and emerge full of hope. For them hoping is an ethics of liberation. (Robert Raines) They are creating survival structures that engage communities at grass roots. They meet, sometimes at great risk to themselves, to share their gifts and talents, teaching one another technical skills, developing literacy programs and household banking systems. They call

upon the spiritual resources of prayer, study, art and drama, music, consciousness raising, anger at injustice, community organizing on small and large scales, mentoring and the power of friendship.

Hoping is also an ethics of resistance. There is immense power in these groups, formed around the daily needs and lives of ordinary people, reaching out to share with kindred spirits, and digging in their Gospel heels to bring about small transformations wherever feasible. They began at first to support one another in the struggle against political oppression; they now direct their energies to economic struggles in many of these situations. And here is where I see them crucified — stretched vertically by their deep desire for sustainable development and systemic change and pushed and pulled on the horizontal by their daily and immediate need for food, clothing, shelter, health and education, essentials of which they have so little. As I replay my encounters with scores of people who are in dire straits and whose lives are in jeopardy from the culture of violence and death that surrounds all of us, I see how impossible it is to understand this spirit of hope apart from their deep awareness of God's spirit at work within the context of daily life. This awareness gives rise to their realization that the Gospel is political in the deepest sense, that it is their vocation to participate in the work of the Spirit and resist injustice in their community and nation. For them there is no other option than to remain in solidarity with each other and to struggle with the "power of death" in order to understand and live through it. "If we cannot overcome, we can refuse to be overcome," one woman told me. She was a member of a small group of merchant women whose businesses and inventories were destroyed by the military.

A fascinating aspect of all this is how often I would see glimpses of the scriptural images of God, e.g., the fiercely protective love of the mother bear when someone attacks her cub, or the strength of the eagle spreading out her wings to protect her young — we would see these images of God reflected and alive in the strong and angry love of the mothers and wives from Rwanda, the mothers who go hungry so that their children can eat, the mothers who watch whole villages in Africa die of AIDS, mothers who demand justice and jobs for their sons and daughters.

I am belaboring all this to make the point that these stories are about all of creation. They are about you and me and the places in our lives and in our world where God's spirit is indeed present and intimate, defying God's mission in our world as She drives the Church and perforce religious women and men to run after Her, to catch up with Her vivifying and healing presence and to realize the power of love in history and the power of justice and right relations in our world. (Gary Riebe-Estrella SVD)

Pondering on this reality has led me to two convictions that I would like to further develop. The first conviction I would like to explore is that there are people of faith “running after the Spirit” and giving a new definition to community - an eruption of compassion and solidarity. All over the world, Kosuke Koyama contends, the life experiences of people from the under side are coming into our consciousness like a rush of wind at Pentecost. People from the underside are re reading the gospel from the stance of their lived experience and with alternative imagination; they are reclaiming the sub-version of the Gospel. All over the world, in pockets of hope, the gospel is speaking powerful words about Jesus’ solidarity with history. So boundless is Jesus’ mercy and compassion that he continues his healing and rebuilding ministry where he can and follows us into the pain of humanity and the anguish of creation. All over the world, the gospel is speaking powerful words, articulating crucial aspects of the gospel which have long been ignored about harmony with all creation, wholeness and integration, sharing and partnership. This “partnership” paradigm talks of people as having unique stories to tell, invites relationships based on equality, mutuality, and sharing and emphasizes service and power as energy. We hear the gospel telling us of connectedness and interdependence, of integration and wholeness, conservation not exploitation, abundance not scarcity, solidarity with and not competition against, inclusive humanity and transformation of consciousness. It proposes an alternative form of discipleship that urges us to recover the fundamental community orientation of the gospel that calls us to cross over from where we’ve been secure and comfortable to stand in solidarity with others who have nothing but their memories, faith, and hope with which to create alternative options to the culture of death that surrounds them.

Can “solidarity” mean for secure, well-fed, well-educated, well-clothed people what it means for people whose lives are constantly in jeopardy? Do you ever stop to think how profound must be their ambivalence when they relate to those of us who seem to have so much?

Last year in preparation for the Institute Chapter of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, I mentioned to my congregation that being in solidarity with others may well be the crux of our transformation and the biggest challenge that faces us as Church and as women and men religious. Today I am more convinced that this is a critical dilemma that needs our thoughtful exploration and it bears repeating here as I address you who play such a vital role in the formative processes of newer members in religious life.

Many years ago, Albert Nolan, a South African Dominican priest gave us a lucid description of the summons of the gospel in our contemporary

situation of gross imbalance and suffering. As he sees it, being in solidarity is a spiritual journey of transformation that goes through “different stages with its own crises or dark nights and its own discoveries or illuminations.” This journey takes us through and beyond compassion, through and beyond the rigors of intellectual analysis and understanding of what causes such anguish, confusion and despair to discovering the disturbing fact that those whom we thought were in need of our assistance can and will save themselves with or without us. Suddenly we, who are accustomed to be in control, find the shoe on the other foot. Those whom we thought we were liberating are in fact our liberators. We cannot be liberated without them. In theological terms, Nolan points out, we have to discover, not merely in our heads but in our lived experience that it is those who are vulnerable and in jeopardy of life who are God’s chosen instruments for transforming the world. Real solidarity begins, Nolan says, when we recognize that we are a part of the process of solidarity that the poor and distressed of the earth are building with one another, and we understand the way the spirit is moving and working in us and through us.

In spiritual terms, he says, this can amount to a real crisis for us and can lead to a very deep conversion, a different way of walking together with people in the struggle to fullness of life. Gloria Albrecht is thinking in a similar vein but states it more starkly:

Learning how to use the power of the dominant for the purpose of liberating others from oppression and ourselves from dominating is a conversion to a new way of walking ... It is a risk of faith for (white) privileged Christians to turn and walk with those who are living lives of resistance to the oppression created by our privilege. It is a risk to use our resources to support the ongoing resistance of those whose success will de center us.

Here, I think, is the crux of our challenge as people of faith: to turn and walk with those who are living lives of resistance to the oppression created by our privilege, to learn from them what it means to be de-privileged / de-centered. What this would mean concretely I honestly do not know. I am painfully aware of my lack of imagination in this matter. Since I have returned to Jamaica not a day passes that I am not confronted by this dilemma and no concrete answers to give but a suspicion that what is needed is some genuinely radical rearrangement in our life experience, a transformation of consciousness which, according to Beatrice Bruteau, calls for “a gestalt shift” in the whole way of seeing our relations to one another so that our feelings (energies) and behavior patterns are reformed from the inside out. This brings me to my second conviction which I believe is

closely connected with what I have been saying. All over the world people are running to catch up with the Spirit. We women and men religious are being invited to be a part of this larger consciousness of God's Spirit at work blowing where it will to make things new that never were.

As I read the papers delivered at the recent LCWR Annual Conference, I was fascinated by how often the speakers called for contemplation and transformation. Immediately Beatrice Bruteau's insights came to mind. She sees contemplation as an experience and a consciousness. To do justice to her incredible thought process, I would now like to invite you into a kind of lectio divina mode and ask you to listen attentively and with care to these smatterings of insight from her book, *The Grand Option*.

- We are living at the end of an era, on the threshold of a new ageWhat makes the coming age so truly new is that it will be ushered in by some genuinely radical rearrangement in our life experience. When we speak of "revolution," we do not mean something like a mere coup d'état whereby one set of rulers is replaced by another set while the structure of ruling itself remains basically the same - that is only a rebellion. A genuine revolution must be a gestalt shift in the whole way of seeing our relations to one another so that our behavior patterns are reformed from the inside out. Any revolution worthy of the name must be primarily a revolution in consciousness.
- There are many ways of approaching a speculation about the new consciousness, but one of the places in which the veil that hides the future from our eyes has worn thin and become partially transparent is the area of the rising feminine consciousness of the world. Indeed, perhaps of all the shadows that the coming age is casting before itself, this is the most revealing, for it touches all levels of our life from the materially biological and technological, through the economic and political, to the emotional and social, the artistic, the religious, and the metaphysical.
- What do we mean by feminine consciousness? Feminine is a polar word, significant by its contrast with its complement, masculine. The axis of polarity can be variously chosen and its orientation makes a critical difference in how we conceive ourselves and our world, submissive/dominant, dark/light, feeling/thinking, domestic/worldly. As a polarity generalized beyond the relations of female and male, these axes have characterized much of the perception, organization and operation of our world. We have only to think of racial discrimination, economic exploitation and political domination to

realize how the sexual paradigm has modeled many aspects of our lives.

- When those who feel themselves oppressed by these social patterns begin to resist, they frequently attempt merely to move from one end of the axis to the other...It is important to recognize that such a movement does not herald a new age. A significant future will not be born until the orientation of the axis itself has been shifted to represent the reality that neither pole is more valuable than the other. The method of feminine consciousness ... works not by excluding but by incorporating. And so the new feminine consciousness of the future can be expected to take up the masculine rational contributions into itself to hold and absorb them, embed them in the matrix of its own intellectual insights, and eventually to bring forth a new being, a new world.
- We need this new perspective in which to view our elementary personal, social and economic relations, and we need new images in which to represent them mythically to our imaginations, which in turn will direct so much of our life. If the sexual polarity is paradigmatic for larger social relationships, we will do well to explore alternative ways of experiencing it.

I read Bruteau to be saying that the new feminine consciousness is not a reclaiming of instinctual feelings and emotions, psychic sensitivities and magic characteristics of earlier times in human development nor the operation of reason and dispassionate objectivity so highly valued in recent times. This new feminine consciousness is something else - the next spiral of advance - an intellectual intuition or insight, an act of the spirit that integrates masculine consciousness which is focused, analytical and specialized with feminine consciousness which is general, synthetic and wholistic. This new feminine consciousness grasps what it understands as a whole - one large life circulating through all. Bruteau holds strongly that the only way to change the way we believe is to change our way of imaging ourselves in relation to all that exists. We must see ourselves relating to others not in terms of our complementary dependency, or lack of, but in terms of our abundance, our maturity and our overflowing energy. And we have this overflowing energy. It is none other than God's Spirit alive in our hearts.

At the beginning of the Religious Formation Conference's jubilee year, Gary Riebe-Estrella uttered these powerful words:

The Spirit, who from the beginning has been God's active presence in the world, drives Israel, then Jesus, then the Church to run after

Her, to catch up with Her vivifying and healing presence, to point to Her as She leads people to human flourishing and the reconciling of their differences to tread gracefully on the surface of the earth whose inner energy She is. It is the spirit, who, by her activity, defies God's mission in our world. And that is the mission of God that has been entrusted to the community of faith, the Church. ... The Church is the community charged with catching up with the Spirit. If running to catch up with the Spirit is the function of the Church, perforce it is the driving power (of/underneath) religious life. It is what produces the movement in hope.

I have been made to understand that the word spirit in the Greek is neuter, in Hebrew feminine, and only in the Christian era have we masculinized it. However we name the spirit in order to articulate God's unfolding self-revelation, the spirit remains ever dynamic, ever enigmatic, always healing and consoling, but also always disturbing. As I grow more convinced by Bruteau's insights, it seems to me that the Spirit is indeed luring us into some disturbing places of transformation.

For me, this consciousness of being charged with running to catch up with the Spirit is nothing short of a summons, a call that is related to the pervasiveness of God which gives freedom and distance and perspective in relation to all other concerns. I am here tuned into Walter Brueggemann's understanding that such a call is not simply a formal notion or an energizing experience. It is not simply a meaningful event. It is an ongoing dynamic of a growing and powerful claim on hearts that want to be faithful. As Brueggemann sees it:

An evangelical sense of call concerns the yielding up of our safe world... We need to recognize that such a sense of call in our time is profoundly countercultural because the primary ideological voices of our time are the voices of autonomy: to do one's own thing, self-actualization, self-assertion, self-fulfillment. The ideology of our time is to propose that one can live "an uncalled life," one not referred to any purpose beyond one's self.

This is certainly a call for conversion and it suggests an intriguing dance between human freedom and divine purposefulness. Divine purposefulness engages us in a struggle, a relational struggle to understand how ferocity and gentleness can co-exist, how hardness and softness co-mingle, how compulsion and liberation are compatible, how deliberateness and letting go interface, and how these boundaries have to be negotiated in the process of change, metanoia. And here we are in the belly of a paradox. Metanoia is not about what we choose to change so much as it is about being

changed by responding in faith to situations not of our choosing, and which perhaps of ourselves we would never have chosen from the beginning.

It is a big leap for many of us to understand that what God wants for us, what God desires for us, what we have so often termed “God’s will” abounds in our daily lives. It meets us around every corner, in very ordinary situations. And it is only when we surrender to pursuing God that something new can happen. Only when we yield all the way into the mystery of this divine presence that compels us towards the Beckoning Horizon and moves us towards the fulfillment of divine purpose can we know the deeper, more intense, more intimate revelation of the heart of God and the Spirit of Hope.

In conclusion, I want to admit that it is extremely risky, costly business to truly believe that God’s spirit is present and alive in our human history, enlightening and empowering peoples and their communities, and inviting them to participate in God’s enveloping mercy and creative acts of hope and liberation. It is risky and costly because we are summoned to a world in which the crucially spiritual issues of power and love, generosity and selfishness, violence and compassion engage us in the daily struggle of discovering what is God’s will for today. It is dangerous because it means involvement in the life of this world on terms that always mean risking death in some form. Great is the risk when we have to turn away from safety and walk into the fractured, dislocated points in our world where God’s spirit lures us to experience what someone has called “troubled faith” — when the absence of God is experienced as more real than God’s presence and the only tangible thing at hand is our powerlessness, anger and outrage at the suffering, greed, wreckage and intractable cruelty around us.

But we can take courage when we remember that we are in a participatory relationship with God who loves this world. God in Christ emptied himself of divinity to stand in solidarity with us so we may learn how to turn and walk with those who are living lives of resistance to the oppression created by our privilege. Jesus crosses over to show us how to love inside our fearful selves, inside our broken world. He crosses over to teach us what love is inside the cruel cold of a cave full of animal sounds and other things, among other travelers and strangers, in the painful, bloody mess of birth. As terrifying, strange beings pour out of heaven, men and boys and sheep are utterly dazed and sore afraid. Frightened people like you and I must now bear the message of love, tenderness, and justice to our world longing for hope.

And Mary treasured these things, pondered them in her heart and exclaimed: “My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord!”

In these days of Advent may it be for us to turn to Mary, virgin and mother and breaker of boundaries, who embodies the scandal of the incarnation. Who better understands watching and waiting, listening and receiving? Who better understands and can teach us the meaning of “crossing over” from fear to accepting an unseen, unborn, and unknown love? Who better understands and can teach us how to weave into the fabric of our lives the delicate threads of grace God holds before us in the fierce purposefulness of the Spirit?

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- Kosuke Koyama in his keynote address to the International Association of Mission Studies (Hawaii, August 6, 1992).
 - Gloria Albrecht, *Character of our Communities* (Abingdon Press).
Beatrice Bruteau, *The Grand Option* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).
 - Ibid. I hope I will be forgiven for taking so much liberty with Beatrice Bruteau’s work. I have quoted her freely, sometimes verbatim; sometimes I have edited and at times interpreted her words throughout this presentation.
 - Walter Brueggemann. *Hopeful Imagination, Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

*BAREFOOT BEFORE GOD AND WITH
PEOPLE*

*THIRD NATIONAL GATHERING OF VIDA RELIGIOSA
JOVEN (NEW GENERATION RELIGIOUS).*

Manuel Ogalla, CMF

Manuel Ogalla, CMF, is a young Claretian missionary who was actively involved in organizing the Grenada gathering of New Generation Religious. Born in 1983, he made his first vows in 2005. He is presently finishing his theological studies in Madrid.

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Original in Spanish

Two years after having experienced the folly of la Cruz, having renounced armour and masks in the outskirts of a Valencia transformed into a medieval castle, members of New Generation Religious who share life and mission in Spain met again for the third time. On this occasion, events took place from the 6th to the 9th of December 2007 in the city of Grenada where we were warmly welcomed.

The opening talk, fifteen workshops on various themes, liturgical celebrations and communal prayer, visits to solidarity projects, artistic creativity and a profound message presented with humour, and intercultural diversity woven into the daily rhythm: all of this occurred with the vocational experience of Moses at Mount Horab as backdrop. The sixteenth century heraldry and candelabra, background to our days in Valencia, were transformed into an ardent flame blazing at the top of the mountain.

With a simple but evocative theme (“Barefoot Before God And With People”) as a starting point, we, some hundred and sixty young people with a passion for God and humanity, shared our anxiety, our difficulties, our desires and hopes. As New Generation Religious at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we tried to discern new paths to take in being a prophetic presence in the world and in living out our mission in Church and society.

Barefoot Before God

God said to Moses: “Come no closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5).

Moses can be a shining icon for the life and work of women and men religious, and especially for the youngest members. While charisms and styles differ, religious share the same solid ground as that which held up the prophet of Midian in his weakness. This solid ground is none other than the knowledge of being enveloped in the infinite Mystery revealed to Moses in the burning bush. In the theophany of Horeb, Moses was overcome by vertigo at the proximity of a God who had thus far appeared so distant. The liberation project marked by a renaming began in the intimacy of a surprise encounter.

Clearly, our point of departure, founding principle and ultimate motive in facing up to the reality in which we live are rooted here. Like Moses, we, the youth of religious life, can look back and delight in the realization that, at the beginning, there was simply the gift of encounter. We may not find ourselves before a burning bush and our daily task may not be taking our father-in-law’s sheep out to pasture. The fact is, however, that our daily routine has been disturbed in a surprising way by a God who, barely asking our permission, undertook to shake the foundations of our particular ground and gratuitously make it sacred.

The transformative encounter with God urges us, as it did Moses, to *take off our shoes*. For going barefoot before God implies experiencing the coldness of the earth beneath our feet, an experience which reminds us of our poverty and weakness. Going barefoot before God means foregoing our disingenuous insecurities and identifying ourselves without compromise as beggars of Grace....

Moses took off his shoes, fearfully covered his face and admitted his littleness, but he would never have imagined by what response God would seduce him: “I will be with you.” Our God goes so far as to invite us into his “carpenter’s workshop,” or, what amounts to the same thing, to put on the shoes of his constant presence. This is a presence often veiled, almost hidden, but one that crushes and enlightens at the same time. The New Generation Religious which has experienced encounter with God in ordinary life, in the day to day, and has found itself barefoot, deprived of its securities and reduced to sleeping under the stars, knows also with certainty that God transforms silence into loquacity, crutches into trampolines, littleness into prophetic cry, cold into fire that burns and embraces.

This is what we wished to experience and communicate in Grenada. We, women and men religious who are beginning to follow Christ as consecrated

persons, have no desire to be forever relegated to the status of “the inexperienced” with the excuse that we obviously need to mature and learn from those who preceded us on faith’s journey. Because we wish to devote all our energy to the cause, we should not be considered superficial activists; because we invest in the new and are caught up in an energizing dynamism, it should not be thought that we do not passionately love both our tradition and our institute; because we dream of a religious life willing to be burned by the fire of the Spirit and we scrutinize the horizon for new proposals and styles, we should not therefore be tagged unrealistic or uninformed.... In the end, the vocation of religious life in general, and of the youngest in particular, may be encapsulated in the same foundational experience as that of Moses: “going barefoot before God.”

Barefoot With People

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters” (Ex 3:7).

The God before whom Moses took off his shoes is not and never was an impassible God distant from the concrete reality of women and men in our directionless society. The God before whom Moses removed the sandals from his feet is also the God who hears and sees the oppression of people. This is a God who has a mother’s womb and so feels the suffering of people as his own that he becomes intimately involved in their situation to the point of calling them *my* people. Moses was certainly neither blind nor deaf, anymore than we are, but in the moment of seeing and hearing God himself his vision became completely clear and his hearing acute.

The mission which God entrusted to Moses was quite clear: he was to liberate his people from the claws of oppressive power and break the dynamic of systemic injustice which was damaging the profound identity of the people, their identity as people of God and not people of Pharaoh. The God who suffers and cries with one who cries asked Moses to make his own the grievous reality of the Israelites. He was to live barefoot with the people.

One point emphasized throughout the Grenada gathering was the desire to hear and see, following the example of Moses, “the *Egypt*s” of today. This is a desire to open the doors and windows of each community and really experience the other as my brother, to be touched and moved by him just as the womb of God was moved by the reality of the Israelites. Living barefoot with people means, in its most radical and concrete sense, putting on another’s shoes and getting involved in the daily struggles of people around us. Heroic adventures verging on the snobbish have no place here. To put on another’s shoes means looking him or her in the eye, abandoning our set plans and

sharing a cup of coffee, agreeing to cross the delicate line between my comfort and the concerns of the other....

Going barefoot before God and with people: such was the leitmotif of this prophet of Median who renounced every kind of privilege and exclusivity in order to share the lot of his people (Ex 32-34). Going barefoot before God and with people is the constant call issued to religious life by a God who is incarnated in a particular individual, a God who has a name and a concrete history.

By Way Of Conclusion Or The Mission Of New Generation Religious Today.

Going barefoot before God and with people means making intelligible the stammering of Moses who prefigured through his words and actions the one who took off his own shoes to put on fully the reality of the other, that is, Jesus. In order to do that, we in New Generation Religious, those who were in Grenada as well as those who were not, proclaim fearlessly, celebrate without embarrassment and affirm without mask or armour that our hope lies in Jesus Christ.

If there is one thing of which we young consecrated persons ought to be convinced, it is that we share the same starting point and the same goal.

Surely a vital communion is created when we realize, as Moses did, that at the beginning of this adventure of hearing and seeing with the heart of God there occurs a profound and transforming encounter with God. This encounter shakes the foundations of our life to the point that we become little ones, beggars of God's grace, barefoot. However diverse vocations may seem, at their origin is the call of God who always sends forth on mission.

That is why the goal, like the starting point, is a shared one. The mission which unites us is that of openly making it clear that Christ, the true Moses, is our great hope, a hope which acts today as a real stimulus in the creation of true communion. It is believing in the "unbelievable" and hoping against all hope, something which makes us stand out. It is enjoying silence in the midst of noise and feeling the shivers in daring to speak when cowardice would demand silence. It is daring to search out in every possible way new languages and paths for prophetic proclamation. It is complicating our life for the reign of God by going barefoot before God and with people. It is entering God's shoemaker's workshop and asking paradoxically to put on the other's shoes.... That is the mission which gives wings to our feet. That is the mission which we shared in Grenada and wish to continue to live out in every corner of our globalized world. That is consecrated life, the mission of New Generation Religious today.

FROM CAMBODIA TO EMMAUS

Claire LY

Claire Ly, mother of three, has been living in France since 1980. A former professor of philosophy, she was a Buddhist from birth and then became a convert to Catholicism. Today, through her conferences, she invites us to share her human and spiritual experience and tirelessly encourages the two religions to move forward together.

*Claire Ly teaches Buddhism at ISTR (Institute of Science and Theology of Religions) in Marseille. Her first book, *Revenue de l'enfer* (Return from Hell), was published by Editions de l'Atelier and has been translated into Italian and Polish. In it, and in more than three hundred conferences given throughout France, she recalls the history of Cambodia and recounts her own exceptional faith journey.*

Original in French

I will divide my talk into three moments and will speak first of the displaced woman, second of the immigrant woman, and third of the woman disciple.

I would like to keep these three moments in a broad perspective. I will not dwell on my own suffering. Rather I will try to help you see how the thread can be rewoven after each painful break. I am of course alluding here to the poem entitled "The Weaver" which appeared on your website during your May general assembly in Rome. I liked it very much:

*Our life is like cloth in the making,
Cloth whose final shape is unknown,
But it weaves itself around us, little by little,
without pattern or design.*

In each of the three moments, we will locate together the breaking point and together we will analyse when the thread of life is picked up to begin anew the weaving process....

First Breaking Point: The Displaced Woman

From 1975 to 1979 I became a stranger in the land of my birth. Totalitarian regimes have for centuries used the massive relocation of people as a fearsome weapon. The Kmer Rouge made use of the three weapons currently favoured by all twentieth-century dictatorships: massive relocation of people, fear and famine.

The relocation of people was designed to break up any possible resistance cells. As a result, everyone lost his or her reference points. When they arrived in the countryside, those who had lived in the city felt that they were in a strange land. Those who already lived in the country found that, within twenty-four hours, their village had been invaded by strangers. No one knew friend from foe. A serious psychological unbalancing occurred.

The Kmer Rouge used this psychological unbalancing to create a paralysing fear and because of this fear most of us lost our moral conscience's clear-sightedness. We were therefore plunged into ignorance, and ignorance is considered by Buddhism to be the source of all evil.

Famine then heightened our fear beyond measure. We were afraid because we could no longer rely on reason. It was impossible to reason rightly when our body was starving. Every native-born Kmer familiar with Buddhist culture knows that meditation and reflection are not easily developed under conditions of extreme mortification.

How does one reason rightly, how does one arrive at a sound understanding when one's body is unjustly deprived of its means of survival? (Return From Hell, p. 51).

In this raging sea, the driftwood to which one clings is hate, anger, rebellion.... (Return From Hell, p. 52).

Breaking point: discovery that one is a stranger in one's own country; the major separation of city and countryside in Cambodia, a separation which enabled the Khmer Rouge to take advantage of class animosity; a loss of identity within the politics of what constitutes the true Cambodian....

Reweaving: use of the spiritual resources of my tradition; mental resolve to overcome bad feelings; naming of the Western God; stark cry of a woman who was not in any way trying to create an image. Paradoxically, the Buddhist felt accompanied...without having words to describe it; fear of illusion.

In fact, I do not know what I expect. The silence is total, disturbed only by the sound of my steps. But a profound tranquillity arises out of this silence. It is as though my heart had finally become reconciled with itself, after so many betrayals, so much hatred, so much vengeance....

This silence is so strange! I experience it not only as an absence of sound but also as a real presence. (Return From Hell, p. 102).

It is as though an inexpressible someone or something has irrupted into my life. The God of Love has come to walk with me in the midst of hatred.

Result: Life begins again in the awareness that I am not alone in suffering this hell. I am able to perceive the suffering of others, the suffering of a whole people....This strange God who accompanies me enables the former Buddhist to experience compassion.... I am conscious of belonging once again to a group, to a people.

Second Breaking Point: The Immigrant Woman

In 1980, I arrived in France with my three children, my mother and my little sister and brother. I was a political refugee. We were welcomed at Roissy by *France Terre d'Accueil*. This constituted a major breaking point for it was a cultural breaking point.

First, though, what is a culture? Let me quote the 1982 UNESCO definition: "Culture is what gives the human being the capacity for self-reflection. It is thanks to culture that we become distinctly human, rational, critical and committed." It is from the starting point of culture understood as the complex of spiritual, intellectual and emotional traits enabling self-reflection that I wish to share with you some points for reflection.

Immersion in another culture is first experienced as psychological violence. The attempt to learn another culture involves a major decentring. Florence Lacour-Fourgoïn has this to say on the theme of exile:

By its very nature, every type of emigration inevitably results in a kind of unbalancing. One has to have experienced it in order to understand it, but one loses a certain sense of standing upright when one no longer feels one's own ground beneath one's feet; one loses one's sense of security, one becomes less trusting of self. (Roads of Exile, DDB, 1999).

She also states: "Emigrating sometimes means setting out, in the midst of suffering, on the road to self-discovery"....

When making a short trip to another country we experience a certain disorientation, but for displaced persons, for immigrants, a rupture occurs, a rupture from the culture which has formed us. Because of this rupture, we lose our equilibrium, our sense of standing upright, because the most ordinary actions become a headache (for example, etiquette in meeting people, greetings, etc.).

Loss of balance is the result of psychological violence for which we are so little prepared. Take, for example, linguistic violence – I experienced it second hand through my children and my own mother. When learning a language, good will is not enough. A certain professionalism is required and psychologically it is important to be a student like everyone else. However, when learning another language one cannot help but be an object of charity.

To regain my balance, I first needed to acquire a sound knowledge of French. It was the necessary stage in gaining the respect of others. Yes, in order to be respected it is not enough to mangle French; rather one must speak it well enough to express one's ideas and reveal what lies deep within. I know very well that not every immigrant has this facility. I would note, by the way, that the best way to learn a language is by immersion, by living in a country whether permanently or for a period (for example, French citizens in Cambodia or foreigners in France).

There lies a fear deep within the heart of immigrant parents, the fear of a split between generations. We immigrants know well that our children will become "other," different from us. For the culture in which our children grow up is not the same as the one which formed us. Fear of the other results in communities closed in on themselves. Personally, I believe that it is much more realistic to accept this split, to bring it to light and analyse it in order to build a linking bridge. If the split is not accepted, there can be no planning for a bridge.

We are dealing with a fact. I must accept that my native culture will not necessarily be that of my children. They were young when they came to France and they grew up within the culture of France. It is within this culture that they are maturing. In their case, their native culture is the French culture. If they become interested in Kmer culture, it will be their adopted culture. My children are certainly immersed in French culture but they will never be French from birth. For they have after all received from their mother a certain perspective, a certain way of looking at what is essential in life. In their way of being French, a different melody is heard. This music comes from an encounter with their mother's native culture.

Breaking point: being perceived as someone who is embarrassing, who needs assistance; being totally transparent; loss of groundedness; split between generations.

Reweaving: the guiding thread which ensures that life fully begins anew is an introduction, an introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel gives me a kind of solidity. It is very difficult being an open book, being tolerated by others and the object of their charity.

Perhaps part of the Good News which Jesus Christ came to teach us is that we exist for Someone, we matter to Him, we are written on the palm of his hand (Pierre Claverie, Little Treatise On Encounter And Dialogue, p.39).

What struck me about the freedom of Jesus of Nazareth was his not being beholden to any group, neither family nor religion, his fidelity to himself, his ability to reflect critically on himself as in his meeting with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24), the awareness that God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is not a God who forces himself upon us but rather a God who respects humanity's grandeur.... The Good News expands the concept of the grandeur of God as understood in Buddhism.

Result: the desire to become a disciple; becoming an auditor for a year.

Third Breaking Point: The Woman Disciple

Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ entails a huge change, a change of spiritual path. I became a convert, something unheard of.

Upon arrival in a new community, one gets more or less tied down. Because one feels flattered by the welcome, one allows oneself to fit into stereotypes. People are delighted to welcome converts and to claim them as their own. In the end, one views one's conversion only through the eyes of the community. I found that I was expressing my faith in words belonging to the Catholic community in France. But unfortunately these words sounded empty to my ears because they had not been integrated into my life. I was living as though there were a disconnection between my daily life and my Christian faith. I saw my image reflected in a mirror created by the community.

In almost every religious community there exists an annoying tendency to consider conversion as a total change. More or less unconsciously, we believe that the convert has changed radically: evil before, he or she has now become holy. This is the famous radical reversal of the "philosophes." Even within Buddhism tradition, conversion is considered a radical change.

At the beginning, after I was baptized, I viewed myself in this mirror. I understood my conversion in the commonly accepted way as a change of religion, of tradition, the kind of conversion so pleasing to so many "religious" people in all mixed traditions, a conversion which reassures the welcoming community that its beliefs, rites and so-called truths are well-grounded. All of this I experienced under the critical and even mocking gaze of the Buddhist within. It was in fact this gaze which prevented my full idolatrous conversion. The idol for me at this time was conversion as a permanent state of grace. I had become a Christian and was therefore washed whiter than snow. However, this state did not last long. I was ripe for serious difficulties due to cultural shock.

I felt lost. I could not manage to make my own the occidental discourse of the Church. For, as Maurice Bellet has written in *Going through Fire*, (Bayard Publications): “We do not realize to what extent our Christian religion is the religion of the West, to what extent it is shaped by what, in fact, could well be in major crisis.”

In the midst of this turmoil, therefore, I allowed my own tradition, Buddhism, to call into question my Christian faith. Dialogue between the two ways of thinking within myself would, little by little, purify my “conversion,” my view of the world, my way of owning the truths of my life and of receiving the Word of the Lord. I call this dialogue ‘intra-religious’. This term is not mine but Panikhar’s. Intra-religious dialogue refers to the meeting of two cultures, two spiritual traditions within the same person. In my case, what is involved is the meeting between the Buddhist tradition and the Christian tradition. **I am not Christian and Buddhist but a Catholic Christian born Buddhist, an important nuance.**

This intra-religious dialogue was not the result of an intellectual, theological or missionary decision to sit and engage in argument concerning the two cultures, the two religions. No, I was not fortunate enough to experience the intellectual comfort of people who dialogue using philosophical and religious concepts. I was drawn into this interior dialogue by dis-ease, a sense of not living properly. I found myself totally uncomfortable intellectually and this uncomfortableness produced a forceful decentring, a going-out of myself.

To regain my personal balance, I had to accept a challenge, the challenge of finding harmony. Harmony is a value shared by all Asian countries. It is considered a true spiritual path, a path that does not cause fractures, one that ensures harmonious encounter as in a melodious symphony, a symphony of various colours. This harmony, this symphony is created in my life through dialogue between two cultures, two religious traditions, two religions.

Personally, it took me quite a while to dare to speak publicly about this interior dialogue, even though I was living it daily. What gave me the courage to go public was a return home. While reliving the tearing apart and the suffering, it was as though the Christian was offering a certain hospitality to the Buddhist I had been. I finally dared to listen with my whole being to the voice of the Buddhist.

The courage to listen to this Buddhist voice came, paradoxically, from a strong sense of belonging. Meeting Khmer Catholics helped me to realize that I am a daughter of the French Church. I have benefited from the solidity of this old lady. She provided a structure for the living out of my faith in Jesus Christ, even though her heaviness, her slowness occasionally irritated me. I enjoy the benefit of intellectual and spiritual comfort denied to Cambodians in my

homeland. It is this sense of belonging, accepted and interiorised, which enables then the Catholic Christian to engage the Buddhist in a dialogue on life.

This dialogue on life has created a spiritual hospitality shared by the Buddhist and the Christian. It is lived out in true respect one for the other. Neither tries to convert her travelling companion nor even to convince her of anything. This accompanying reaches beyond all facile syncretism and dissolute relativism. The road is a road to Emmaus where Cleopas converses with his companion before a third person joins them.

On this road to Emmaus, each of us experiences through our interchanges a broadening of horizons, and we sense something ineffable. The Catholic Christian might say that her heart was burning within her and the Buddhist might say that her entrails, her liver and gall, were moved. This heart to heart conversation with the Buddhist helps the Catholic Christian to understand the saying of Jesus: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). In all this, it is not a case of Christianity completing Buddhism but rather it is the Spirit of the Lord deepening my personal understanding of what is essential in life.

Breaking point: call to discipleship.

Reweaving: sending forth to engage the Buddhist in dialogue.

Result: spiritual hospitality.