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**PREFACE**

Antonietta Rauti

*Original in Italian*


**Between Prayer and Life**

There is a very close relationship between prayer and life. This comes about when prayer, beginning with listening, becomes openness to communion with God, that is to say, with agape. The aim of prayer thus becomes charity and its dimension is that of a dialogue of love which proclaims the Good News of a God who is a friend of humanity.

Beginning with prayer as a means which makes us discover our most intimate truth, the story of this new number of the UISG bulletin unfolds, and will lead us through words and different aspects of life, and of consecrated life: Prayer, the Word, Proclamation, Service, Welcome.

*Father Xavier Dijon SJ, What Is At Stake When We Pray.* What are the challenges of prayer? The fifth common preface for Ordinary Time expresses what is at stake when we pray. In speaking of Christ, it proclaims: “Remembrance of his death stirs our love, word of his resurrection enlivens our faith and promise of his return sustains our hope”.

Father Dijon examines each of these three virtues. Because faith, love and hope have “God as object”, they are at the heart of our prayer. Thus prayer becomes light for us, but a light that also becomes light for others.

*Sister Mercedes Lopes, MJC, Women From The Bible In The Service Of Life – Challenges For Religious Life.* Sister Mercedes presents some women of the Bible as a call and inspiration for consecrated life. They are women who, in times of crisis, had sufficient faith and creativity to bring about new situations and to find alternative solutions for the society of their time. The freeing of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt became possible because of the illegal solidarity of some women who did not obey the orders of the Pharaoh. Solidarity is the manifestation of the presence of God among us. It is the expression of the love that leads religious communities to become a body which is in solidarity, structured and committed to changing society.
Father Bruno Secondin, O. Carm, From Jerusalem to Antioch: Rethinking the Biblical Models of Consecrated Life. Father Secondin seeks new ways of proclaiming the “Good News” starting from the example of the first Christian communities. Two of these communities in particular, Jerusalem and Antioch, are compared. He looks at the beautiful and famous icon of the first community in Jerusalem, with the aim of moving beyond it with a preference for another more dynamic community, that of Antioch.

Father Bernardo Olivera, OCSO, Authority in Monastic Life. Father Bernardo speaks to us simply and profoundly about the service of authority through his experience as a Trappist abbot. Here are a few extracts: The abbot as Father (and Mother). Your authority is a service to life, and this life needs your service more than your presidency. The abbot as Teacher: In order to be a teacher you must be always and above all a disciple of the Word of the only Teacher. The abbot as Pastor: If you are a pastor in such a way that the weak become strong, and you do not neglect the strong out of fear of being weak, you are a good pastor.

Sister Lucy Nigh, SSND, Living in Multicultural Community: Who Am I? What is culture? Culture includes the shared beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, etc. of a particular group, be that a nation, geographic area, religious group, class or tribe of people, even a certain period of history. Therefore, sharing on the topic of multicultural community living requires sensitivity, reverence and care. We need to remember that: Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on another’s dream. More serious still, we may forget...That God was there before our arrival.

As we can already imagine, the words stated at the beginning, Prayer, Word, Proclamation, Service, Welcome, one for each article, will resonate throughout the whole Bulletin, accompanying readers on this path of prayer and life, which holds together the demands of the Word kept in the depth of the heart and the charity of practical everyday acts.
WHAT IS AT STAKE WHEN WE PRAY

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The fifth common preface for Ordinary Time expresses well what is at stake when we pray. In speaking of Christ, it proclaims: “Remembrance of his death stirs our love, word of his resurrection enlivens our faith and promise of his return sustains our hope.” Let us look again, then, at these three virtues. Because God is their goal, faith, love and hope lie at the heart of our prayer.

Faith

Vulnerability and Powerlessness

Let us begin with two problems. First, prayer expresses our vulnerability. Prayer is a corner of ourselves where we come in contact with an intimate “zone” which lies somewhat beyond daily life and greetings like “Hello. How are you?” Prayer is the place where we get in touch with our vulnerability because it is also the place where we leave room for God. We do not much like to talk about it. Even within our Christian communities – indeed within our religious communities – inviting each other to pray is not always easy. Priests who have celebrated liturgy in their own families know just how difficult it is to get family members to offer a prayer intention. Modesty guards this secret garden. Hence the benefit within consecrated life of providing for ourselves places and times for prayer, not so much to do away
with vulnerability as to affirm ourselves as praying beings. Yes, this is an area of ourselves where we are sensitive to God and we wish to protect it so as to preserve it in truth.

A second difficulty is that prayer expresses our powerlessness. The great St. Paul himself acknowledges this when he states that we do not know how to pray. Bishops, whom we would have expected to be experienced in prayer, themselves tell us that, in this area, they are primarily disciples. Praying is difficult. Let us admit, furthermore, that it is the activity which we undoubtedly neglect the most readily in favour of other occupations where we feel more confident. If we devise all kinds of strategies to shorten our prayer, however, is it not often because of an unwillingness to face our powerlessness, our humiliating powerlessness?

**A Shift**

In light of the two difficulties we have named, that is, vulnerability and powerlessness, let us make the shift required by faith. This is a shift in the sense that it is a good idea, not to ignore these difficulties when we begin to pray, but rather to use them as a starting point. For entering into prayer always means being led into it by the Spirit “who intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26). To have a sense of life’s fragility and not to be able to pray are therefore very good experiences in that, at such moments, we give the Spirit the opportunity to pray within us.

Is it not true that prayer often entails this very shift? Is this not the case, furthermore, as far as our whole Christian life is concerned? We do not live it on our own but are inspired by the Spirit who ensures that we follow the direction of the Son. We enter the temple to pray but end up realizing that we ourselves are the temple where the Spirit prays. The authenticity of prayer, as we well know, does not consist in the intensity of the will’s effort to forget or vanquish our powerlessness but rather in the acceptance of this inability to pray so as to allow God to come to us.

One sometimes hears it said that one must pray in the context of life. That is true, but to do so does not only mean praying with the memory of faces seen on the bus (although this is, of course, a good practice) or in light of the news on television. Praying in the context of life also means praying in the context of our own life and our sense of not being able to pray, of being vulnerable.

Begin with a need? The Gospel often speaks of such a step. When Jesus came down from the mountain of transfiguration, he met the man who brought him his epileptic son. The disciples were concerned and humiliated
because they had not been able to drive out the demon. Having returned home, Jesus would tell them that only prayer can succeed in driving out this type of demon (cf. Mk 9:29). In the text, the father utters this prayer: “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us” (Mk 9:22). It is when the child’s father admits that he can do nothing more – at the moment of his powerlessness then – that Jesus used his own power, and he did so in light of the father’s faith: “I believe; help my unbelief!” The disciples’ inability to drive out the demon might be due to the fact that they did not push to the limit their powerlessness to do so.

**Beginning with hurts**

To develop further the idea of a shift, it is well to remember that, where faith is concerned, one should not be loath to begin praying from a place of sin or suffering. A consecrated person tends to think: “In order to pray properly, I will forget the sins and weaknesses of my life and its insignificant details. Is prayer not part of Christian perfection and so *a fortiori* of religious life? I will therefore leave my sin aside when I pray.” Is the psalmist not more clear-sighted: “My sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.” (Ps 50) Praying in the context of life also means praying in the context of one’s sinfulness because sin drives us to call out to God.

Let us recall that extraordinary parable (Lk 18:9-14) in which the Pharisee comes to the temple and lays out before God his own perfections: he behaves well, he gives to the poor, he fasts, he prays ... In the meantime, at the back of the temple, the publican does not even dare to raise his eyes to heaven. He prays as he is. Now you know which of the two was justified. If one were to give advice – although who would be presumptuous enough to give advice as far as prayer is concerned – one could only recommend that we be realistic: let us pray as we are, starting from whom we are, including our sinfulness.

One should not only begin to pray from the starting point of sinfulness but also of suffering. A question arises when we read the Gospel: why are there so many lame, paralytics, deaf and blind? We find them on almost every page. Are there that many in every day life? Statisticians would undoubtedly claim that the sick are over-represented in the Gospel compared to normal people. Do not believe it! Do people not also suffer from hidden wounds? Psychologists would certainly attest to this, as would spiritual companions. There are so many wounds, physical, psychological, moral, and within our communities as well. In the Gospel, people come to show their wounds to Jesus and he touches them. Why should we forget our
suffering in order to pray? To pray is to come before God as we are, our hurts included.

**A Home**

In their brochure entitled “Lord, Teach Us To Pray,” the Belgian bishops speak of prayer as a “home”. Prayer is a house, “a home”. It is a place in which to live, a place where we are completely ourselves, where we accept ourselves. For sometimes we cannot stand ourselves and prayer can help us to live within our own body, our past, our situation. It allows us to live in the world and in God (and God in us). As a place of relationships, this word “home” is very rich – as is the word “house”. Prayer is a house.

It is connected to memory. Prayer brings up past events, whether difficult or beautiful, sad or joyful … Prayer recalls events in trust. We are therefore able to discover who we are, we can dwell within our own house because we have opened it to the one who lives there “from my mother’s womb …” Prayer is protective of intimacy and develops an interiority where God already dwells: we let God in and find that God is already there. We are at home? So is God. This is the experience of faith lived out in trust. I believe in the sense that I open my door to the one who knows me better than I know myself and who reveals myself to me, who allows me to feel at home with my past, however painful, and live in the world.

In the Gospel, Jesus says: “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret” (Mt 6:6). A room does not only mean the space we take up in a building. It is also that intimate place where memory brings back all that has affected us. It does so to allow God to enter this house (where God already was) and to allow the risen Christ, moved by the Spirit, to carry what has affected us. In other words, we have no wish to live independently, outside of a relationship. This is what faith means in prayer experienced as an act of trust.

**Love**

**The Priority**

While a link has been established between love and prayer, we must recognize that love has priority. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus says: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21). Two chapters earlier, we read in the sermon on the mount: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and
first be reconciled with your brother or sister” (Mt 5:23-24). The pressing need is not the word (“Lord, Lord”), nor the rite (the offering at the altar). The pressing need is love. Staying with Matthew, chapter 25 solemnly pictures the last judgment. You know the question: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty, naked or a stranger?” as well as the answer: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:37, 40). This is the last judgment. There is none after it. We will not be judged on prayer but on love. Such is the primacy of love, whether it be in communal life for consecrated persons or in family life for married couples. Love has primacy also in the apostolate.

But since we have to recognize this primacy in Scripture, perhaps we should interpret it as an encouragement to neglect prayer? No. Because this primacy of charity, rightly encourages us to enter more in prayer. Indeed, it is through prayer that we recognize the source of charity.

**Gratuity has its usefulness**

So we are faced with a paradox. On the one hand, prayer is a gratuitous act. We pray to God for God’s sake, because God is. Adoration is the prayer *par excellence* of awe, expectation, silence, attentiveness, listening. “God is God, and that is enough,” saint Francis supposedly said. It is a question of purity of heart. On the other hand, and paradoxically, this totally gratuitous approach through which we expect nothing in return turns out to be the most useful and interesting one. Adoration is quite useful because contemplation, adoration, take us out of ourselves and into the realm of love, the very realm in which we will be judged. Disciplined and attentive prayer delivers us from all the excuses we concoct for not loving.

Prayer delivers us from those hidden recesses where we in consecrated life have sought shelter from each of our vows. We well know that poverty touches into very sensitive areas within us since owning things, such as a car, a mobile phone or all the clothes we need, provides security, an affective guarantee, a personal identity as we face life’s uncertainties. How terrible to be deprived of them! Chastity is another cause of tension, at whatever age: it involves not having children because we have chosen to follow the Lord as celibates, not having a partner, supporting others in community, including even the superior. Obedience, too, is a challenge. It is a commitment made many years ago perhaps and one that we know was not made once for all but must always be renewed since it deeply affects our freedom. In and through this offering, prayer puts us back into contact with love’s centre, Christ, and the Spirit leads us back to Christ offered up for us.
Prayer often results in our affectivity being touched into in such a way that we move from feelings arising from the renunciation called for by our vows to affection for Christ. “He loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). This will facilitate our applying the words of Scripture to our lived experience of poverty or the lack of it, chastity or the lack of it, obedience or the lack of it. We will then wish to live this consecrated life – including community life - as a life of love, with all the benefits that a sense of humour can bring to religious life. Prayer teaches us to leave aside our excessive worries and to laugh at ourselves. This is the usefulness of gratuity.

The Link to Others

As far as the relationship woven between prayer and love is concerned, the link with others is also important. It is forged, first of all, through the word. Undoubtedly, we should not put too much trust in prayer turned in on itself, in prayer during which we never converse with a third party. Without being indiscreet and without calling into question the modesty referred to earlier, let us recall that prayer is a relationship which, like all relationships, needs to change. It is true that one does not argue when God speaks for God brings God’s own truth to the heart of the person praying. That person, however, is a human being, and a human being is not always sure, not as sure as God in any case. The great theologian Karl Barth is quoted as saying: “All that I say about God, I say it as a man.” Given this fact, as much as God can give assurance in prayer, the praying person does well not to be too sure of self for fear of becoming presumptuous. Thus the usefulness of making prayer objective within the Church in one way or another, using appropriate discretion, let me repeat. A supremely personal act, prayer also affects, precisely through love, those of us who are part of the community, part of the Church. The more we pray, the more we will be led to intimacy within, certainly, but also to the mystery of communion symbolized by the Church. Now it is within the mystery of this communion that prayer is called forth.

Another way of looking at this link with love would be to associate prayer with fraternal correction. What would we think of someone who consoles himself or herself by saying: “What others tell me about myself does not affect me since, in prayer, the Lord recognizes that I am right.” It is true that we cannot dismiss such a hypothesis, but it is not a given. Prayer is undoubtedly a secret garden, but the garden is not entirely fenced in between God and the soul to the exclusion of the neighbour. A prayer like this would probably not be a Christian one. For, once again, prayer lived in truth brings us back to the Church’s mystery of communion: the second
commandment is like the first. Therefore, if our community life is hell but at the same time we tell ourselves: "at least I have the consolation of prayer" (or, what amounts to the same thing: neglected prayer but good community environment), don’t believe it! We have perhaps forgotten that the two commandments are similar.

Prayer works/acts as does Jesus in the Gospel: it opens our senses, our eyes, our ears, our tongue and thus makes us sensitive to others. It puts us right at the heart of love.

Without developing the idea at the moment, from this point of view one also understands the rich meaning of intercessory prayer as well as of community prayer which gives expression to the unfathomable superimposing of prayer and love.

The Church

One last point on the topic of love. As it did in the beginning, the Spirit moulds the person, the “I”. As we open ourselves to the Spirit, each person’s personality can develop and emerge. It is in fact one of the graces of community life – for community life fortunately does not only involve irritations – to observe to what extent personalities flower when united to the Lord, sometimes despite great suffering. This flowering through grace gladdens the heart. The Spirit forms the true “I” but it also create the “we”. It is the Spirit who gathers people together. We did not choose each other in religious life. Our commitment to community life shows that God is at work in this very gathering.

The “house” referred to in speaking of prayer is in fact the Church. It is not simply someone’s “home” but a big Church where the faithful are gathered. This gathering in prayer attests to the fact that God is the reason for gathering.

Is it not consoling to think that the sacraments are understood within such a movement? Is each sacrament not, in the end, a prayer which has been heard? This is particularly true of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we are certainly in prayer. We in fact speak of a eucharistic prayer or the prayers of the Mass. While it is true, however, that we do pray at Mass, it is still more profoundly true to say that prayer has been heard through the gift of the Eucharist. We might engage in the exercise of praying the requests of the Our Father, from “hallowed be thy name” through to “deliver us from evil” … in the thought that each request has been granted through the Eucharist or baptism or marriage or some other sacrament. Through each one our prayer is granted. For Christ’s love is made visible in it.
Hope

Discouragement

In addressing the topic of hope, the third element at stake when we pray, let us begin with the temptation which is an obstacle to it.

We have more than once experienced the gap between God’s grace at work within the Church and the reasoning of the world which acts as though God did not exist. On the one hand, we know of a treasure discovered in prayer: the glory of God, the compassion of Christ, the teaching skills of the Spirit, this pearl for which we have sold everything and with which we have been gifted. On the other hand, we can walk the streets for hours, go to the movies, listen to young people, and we will note that the world of God is another planet – although it is true that the pope means even less than God ... “it doesn’t make sense, it is no longer relevant.”

In the draft of the European Union’s constitution, the Christian heritage – which jumps out at us from every page of our continent’s history – is skirted, forgotten. Moreover, it has become very fashionable to bemoan the loss of ethical reference points in the defence of life or the family. Thus, embryos become living matter for the miracles of medicine. Contemporary judgment is therefore a little blurred in these areas. As for marriage, we are told that it is in crisis, as are vocations, at least in so-called traditional families. It is very tempting, therefore, to despair of the world or no longer to believe in young people. The great tradition which gave us Augustine, Francis, Theresa, Ignatius seems laughable at times, does it not? With the world as it is, what sense is there even to the prayer exercise just mentioned of reciting the Our Father in the conviction that in the Eucharist each of its requests is granted? Yes, one could become discouraged. So why still pray?

Christ’s Choice

To paraphrase a well known title, let us remember the idea of “making good use of crises.” When our hope is in crisis due to the unresponsive violence of the world, we would do well to bring to prayer the choice made by Jesus. If Jesus had despaired of our world, he would have brought about another flood to drown evil, as in the time of Noah. Or he would have granted the request of the “sons of thunder” that fire come down from heaven “on those who refuse to listen to us.” We know well that Jesus did not teach us the way of violence. The Lord chose the way of being with, of compassion. He chose the path of the suffering Servant.

If only for this reason, the psalms would already be an extraordinary school of prayer. Usually, the beginning (or the middle) of the psalm holds
up a mirror to ourselves. “When, Lord, are you going to destroy them?” This is at least a clear request! The psalm goes on to invite us to do some interior work, to take an additional step, a reversal similar to the one we spoke about in the context of faith. It is when this reversal has been accomplished that hope is born. If Jesus struck no one but instead accepted being struck, humiliated, crucified, how could we be anywhere but beside him, hoping with him in Easter? In our prayer, we could then hear, perhaps in a tone of gentle reproof: “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?” Mt 26:40).

Hope offers a vision of the reality of the world different from the obvious. Hope opens the eyes of faith and sees that Christ takes on the world in the light of God. Prayer picks up this paschal movement of Christ to renew our trust, trust not only in God but also in the world which God has created and where new seeds are growing. These seeds may not be growing with a lot of show or in our immediate surroundings. In any case, the Spirit continues to work, as prayer assures us.

The Role of the Elderly

Such is the role of those who keep watch. On February 2nd, the day devoted to consecrated life, we find ourselves at the side of old Simeon and the aged Anna when Jesus is presented in the temple. In religious life, itself often old as well with a few happy exceptions, the elderly can also be witnesses to this hope. It is true that there are no longer many vocations in a number of orders and congregations. However, God is God, and while maintaining a healthy concern about “vocation promotion” (as it is called), in the end we have nothing to worry about. Each day brings its own trouble. Christ who died on the cross continued to hope. We can live through our own decline in certain congregations in the hope that the Lord will build a house for God’s people. The Lord who is the rock will take care of us.

Hope in relation to our religious families can also carry over to old age. How cruel is that sense of leaving, of becoming undone, or not knowing what is happening! Anguish can overtake us in such moments. Are we not then summoned anew to prayer? Prayer sends us back to Christ and Christ sends us back to hope. We are surely destined to die but it is also true that, through his passion and death, Christ causes hope to rise within us, unshakeable hope. We undoubtedly go through highs and lows, as in the psalms, but we wish to surrender to Christ’s prayer hidden within the psalms so as to allow hope risen from the tomb to spring up within us as it did within him.
The Lamp Stand

In discussing faith, we spoke of the house, the place where we are “at home”, where God welcomes us into God’s home, our home. In the power of love, this house is vast like a great Church which gathers us. What does hope add to this idea? In the house, in the Church, it fastens on to the lamp stand. We do not place the lamp under a bush but on the table to provide light for the whole house, for the Church. Whether individual or communal, our prayer will shine forth, not like that of Pharisees who take the first places in the temple but like that of Jesus, in his way, that is, discreet and from within our room. Jesus liked to withdraw alone to pray. Now we profess Jesus to be Light for the world. Prayer is a light for us but light makes of us also light for others. “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). Christ must be the one to tell us this, he who is light. That is precisely what he is telling us. Our hope is his.

1 “We do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rom 8:26).
2 Cf. the Declaration of the Belgian bishops, “Lord, Teach Us To Pray” (2005): “We remain disciples to the end, just like the first Christians. Just before his martyrdom, the great bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote from prison to the Christians of Ephesus: ‘I am only beginning to learn, and I address you as to my co-disciples.’ As bishops today, we also feel this way. In this letter, we are addressing you as disciples to co-disciples. For it is true that we have ‘only one teacher, Christ’ (Mt 23:10).”
3 This explains the image of a house: “We might in fact call prayer ‘house of God among human beings’ (Rev 21:3). Those who pray belong to ‘the house of God’ (cf. Eph 2:19).” (Declaration, n° 28).
4 “A true ‘home,’ the bishops also tell us, is not only a place where we can express ourselves freely, but it is also a place of companionship without a lot of words, somewhere we can stay and be totally free.” (Declaration, n° 28).
5 In their Declaration, the bishops ask themselves: “Do we ever truly beg … cry out ‘from the depths’? Many prayer intentions are so well articulated that they resemble well polished and perfectly smooth surfaces. They are generally taken directly from missalets. But do they come from the heart?” (n° 60)
6 So the importance of common prayer fully engaged in by contemplative religious life for the good of the Church and of profit also to apostolic religious life.
8 In Samaria, people refused to welcome Jesus because he was journeying to Jerusalem. “Seeing that, the disciples James and John said ‘Lord, do you wish us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?’ But he reproved them.”
9 Was this a sleep of fatigue or of torpor? God is so great in the agony of Jesus, comes so near to humanity and we are so overwhelmed that to sleep is perhaps to honour the greatness of God, as did Abraham during the Covenant rite or Adam as woman was about to be created. Cf. Marie Balmary, The Monk and The Psychoanalyst, Albin Michel, 2005.
Introduction

Consecrated Religious Life (CRL) seeks to nourish the dream of establishing the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus as the basis of its life and organization, and it does so in the face of the serious questions presented by the rapid process of economic globalization. It is presently searching for more clarity with regard to the struggle it must undertake for the Kingdom of God to be real in the daily life of communities and the world today. One way to come to this understanding is to analyze the anti-Kingdom in depth and to strengthen resistance and hope through an integrated and committed spirituality.

An analysis of the anti-Kingdom reveals that CRL, too, is impacted by the culture of consumerism being imposed on society in a subtle and yet aggressive way. The lack of hope and the individualism characterizing society have also penetrated into its own house. Its members perceive, however, that there is new hope in action generated through witnessing, as in the fasting of Dom Luiz Cappio and the martyrdom of Sister Dorothy Stang. The evangelical posture of these religious has led to a critical discussion with regard to a “Christianity,” and to a “fundamentalism” that have impeded a clear-sighted and free participation of Christians in the building of a democratic country. At the same time, this discussion...
reaffirms the ethical imperative of the life of the poor as the criteria for judging any political project and the authenticity of a congregational plan.

Another problem affecting CRL today is the question of preserving cultural identities when confronted with the logic of strong transnational markets. The imposition of this new culture produces a fear of losing or wasting specific memories. Because of the fear of losing one’s identity, a lot of time is being devoted to creating spaces and centres for archiving the heritage of the founders, in order to display the history of each congregation in a creative way. It is certain that these initiatives will save an enormous wealth of historical data for our future. However, we run the risk of turning our gaze inward to our own congregations rather than to the ecclesial or socio-political context in which God is calling CRL to go forward and realize its mission in the world. On this point, the Document of Aparecida issues a strong call for us to adopt a posture of listening and openness with regard to the challenges of society today so that we may be truly “disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ,” and so that our mission really contributes to the life of the Latin-American and Caribbean peoples (Aparecida Document, no. 19).

Among economic issues, we have the global credit crisis, the financing of the economy as a whole and the legal requirements for congregational works and projects to function. Because of this, financial administration requires a great deal of energy and time. Competent people are taken from the specific mission of religious institutes for this work. On the other hand, members of CRL feel impotent with regard to changing tendencies in capital markets which do not consider human life or the health of the planet in elaborating their economic plans.

What are we to do? What initiatives can we undertake? With whom can we collaborate to produce structural internal change and interact with society, bringing about urgent social transformations since scandalous inequality, a clear sign of the anti-Kingdom, not only continues but grows every day? Because of inequality, illnesses related to poverty like diarrhea, malnutrition, malaria and tuberculosis kill about 33.5 thousand people in Brazil annually. The situation of women and sexual violence against children and adolescents present other challenges for CRL whose members are already so taken up with works and commitments.

Without pretending to have an answer to so many challenges, I merely want to present some women from scripture as a call and inspiration for CRL. They are women who, in times of crisis, had enough creativity and faith to bring about new situations and find alternative solutions for the society of their time.
Being an Indispensable Participant on the Journey

The liberation of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt was only possible through the solidarity of the midwives who betrayed Pharaoh’s orders (Ex 1:15-18) and who even had the boldness to praise the Hebrew women, saying that they were “full of life” (Ex 15:10).

Moses would not have survived nor the Exodus taken place without the creativity and audacity of Jochebed, his mother (Ex. 2:3; 6:20; Num 26:59), and the continuous and courageous care of Miriam who observed from afar and followed what was happening with the child (Ex 2:4). The bold transgression of the midwives continues in the courageous actions of Moses’ mother and sister, even including the involvement of Pharaoh’s daughter (Ex 2:5-10). In this way, they weave an intensely human and subversive story of the survival of a Hebrew child, under Pharaoh’s very eyes.

Moses is cared for and nursed by his mother who is even paid for this service (Ex 2:9-10). After a period of time of being nursed in his mother’s care, Moses goes to live in Pharaoh’s house where he receives the preparation necessary for the strategies involved in leaving Egypt (Ex 14). Through this betrayal effected in solidarity, the women determine not only the survival of Moses but also the liberation of a people. Moses, the child saved from the water, is a symbol of the new people who will be born from the Exodus experience.

The audacious action of the women who confront Pharaoh to save the Hebrew children remains in the memory of the biblical people. One of them, Miriam, continues to assume an important role in the journey through the desert. Her experience and insight win over the confidence and affection of the people on their march. She, Moses and Aaron organize and lead the perilous journey through an inhospitable region towards the Promised Land. While the three have different functions, all were important for the people fleeing captivity. However, there appear to have been conflicts in their leadership. The Book of Numbers presents Miriam and Aaron as criticizing Moses (Num 12:1-2) and asking: “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” As punishment for this criticism, Miriam is afflicted with leprosy (verse 9), and Aaron intercedes for her with Moses. He cries out to Yahweh in favor of Miriam. Then “Miriam was shut outside the camp for seven days. The people did not set out until she returned” (verse 15).

The reaction of the people in refusing to continue the journey through the desert without Miriam shows that she is very important to their march
towards life and freedom. This text from the Bible calls us to ask questions and to seek to understand the real basis for the conflict between Miriam, Aaron and Moses. If the three received the “word of God”\(^3\) (Num 12:2) and put themselves at the service of the people, each one with a role to play, why do they not achieve a united and egalitarian leadership among themselves? When the Hebrew people were living in slavery, women of different ethnic groups, ages and social conditions\(^4\) acted in complicity, allowing the flight to freedom. In Egypt, the women acting in solidarity were an indispensable factor in the realization of the Exodus (Ex 1:15; 2:1-10). Now, in crossing to the Promised Land, we have conflict among siblings rather than solidarity among people with differing views. Behind the criticism and the complaints of Aaron and Miriam, do we have the centralization of power in the person of Moses?\(^5\) Moreover, if there were two who criticized Moses and complained about his leadership, why was only Miriam punished? Why did Aaron escape this? We can find here a relationship that persists even today between gender and power, maintaining the stereotype of the woman who is blamed and thus is inferior.

This reflection can contribute something to CRL. We can look at Miriam and discover the importance of her presence on the journey of the people of God. What we discover helps us to deepen our reflection a little on the relationships of power and the causes of conflicts in community and among those who lead the people of God today. What are the causes of this conflict? Is power in CRL circular and is it shared? Are participation, collegiality and co-responsibility part of the new forms of governance in CRL? Are these new forms helping forward movement and are they generating new and bold solidarity on our paths?

**Celebrating the Memory and Opening New Paths**

After the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14), we see Miriam leading a celebration of the event which marked definitively the story of the people of the Bible. With other women, she sings and dances, celebrating the victory against those who enslaved her people, interpreting theologically the triumph over Pharaoh’s army, the flight from Egypt and the freedom from captivity. “Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’” (Ex 15:20-21).

With an instrument in her hands and moving with the music, she awakens the community to see the events in a new manner, showing the
liberating presence of God in the midst of God’s journeying people. It was not the courage or boldness of Moses, nor the combat strategies he learned in Pharaoh’s school, that made the victory possible. It was Yahweh’s arm that defended this group of slaves and transformed their lives. Instead of being slaves, they became an autonomous group, challenged to journey and build a new history. Thus, Miriam becomes a theologian interpreting the experience and revealing what is behind the events. She shows who is leading the community and confirms the importance of daring to proceed and advance in the direction of the freedom offered by Yahweh.

Like a prophetess, she shows that it is not enough to cross the Red Sea or flee slavery in Egypt (Ex 3:7; 14:30) towards a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex 3: 8,17). It is also necessary to build a new future. She inspires the people to go forward through a desert without defined paths, in the certainty of the power of God and a committed and daring involvement in a project bringing autonomy and a good life for all.⁶

Only this certainty that God is in the midst of the community can bring the courage and boldness to continue on, to gain the autonomy and the freedom of which they dreamed. In celebrating the power of Yahweh as she dances with her companions on the journey, Miriam is affirming that the only guarantee for progress and for weaving a historical testament is an active and creative surrender into the hands of God.

Miriam’s dance becomes a practice for women in the Bible. In the time of the Judges, we find Jephthah’s daughter waiting for her father’s return after his victory over the Ammonites (Judg 11:32-33). In a spontaneous celebration, she dances to the sound of tambourines. She praises the strength of Yahweh who brought about the victory over the enemies of the people. This celebration cost her her life since Jephthah had made a vow to offer the first person he encountered upon his return home as a sacrifice. “Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing” (Judg 11:34).

At this point, we might interrupt our reflection to question Jephthah’s view of God. He thought that God liked sacrifices and protected those who offer the lives of others in immolation and as worship. We might wonder about this culture and religion which produce this image of God and inquire if it is still present in our day.

While these are very important questions, I want to maintain the focus of this reflection whose objective is to show the way women in the Bible read theologically the events marking their history and their significance.
I want to recapture the strength of Miriam’s leadership at the moment of organizing the people, a leadership which brings forth a spirituality which was happy and committed to life for all. This spirituality makes use of the body and is not just words in commemoration, integrating through art all expressions of the body such as feelings, sexuality, sound, rhythm and movement to recall the experiences of the past and generate courage for inventing an unknown future.

The creative action of Miriam in leading the dance of the women beyond the Red Sea was so important that it was repeated through the centuries. We find this tradition of dance and interpretation of events about 200 years later. At the end of tribalism and the beginning of the monarchy, the Philistines invaded the territory of the Israelites and challenged them with the strength of Goliath. This saga shows a young shepherd, David, killing the gigantic Philistine with a stone from his sling, thus dispersing the enemy army. “As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they made merry, ‘Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands’” (I Sam 18:6-7; cf. also 21:12; 29:5).

These texts show that, following Miriam’s initiative, women celebrated the victory over enemies through a joyful theological interpretation of events, keeping the historical memory alive as well as securing the identity of the biblical people. Dancing and singing, full of strength and joy, were instrumental in advancing the journey.

Centuries passed and, around 150 years before Christ, we find the story of Judith. A powerful foreign army had surrounded the city of Bethulia and cut off sources of water for three months. “Their little children pined away, the women and young men grew weak with thirst; they collapsed in the streets and gateways of the town; they had no strength left” (Jdt 7:22). Their leaders had no solution (Jdt, 8). Then Judith devised a strategy, risking her own life. Beautiful, seductive and wise, she went into the enemy camp and vanquished them. Returning to Bethulia, she gathered the people and presided over a celebration of gratitude for the power of Yahweh who defends the life and freedom of all. “All the women of Israel, hurrying to see her, formed choirs of dancers in her honor. Judith distributed branches to the women who accompanied her. Then she took her place at the head of the procession and led the women as they danced. With all Israel around her, Judith broke into this song of thanksgiving and the whole people sang this hymn aloud” (Jdt 15:12-14;
Remembrance of these biblical women who kept alive the memory of their people, leading them to a new perspective on the events in their history, sheds light on the journey of CRL. I am led to ask questions about our creativity in relating and interpreting the founding experiences of our religious congregations. These witness to lives given in service to the Kingdom of God in freedom and love and offer a theological interpretation of celebration, a real and profound statement on the presence of God in the history of the community. Beyond this, the use of symbolic language and of the body moving with conviction in remembering generate new identifications and make our hearts burn, whether we are young or have already been on the journey for some years. When “our hearts catch fire,” we give our lives freely and lovingly “without fear or calculation.” The gift of lives in the service of the Kingdom assumes that we have a critical vision of the anti-Kingdom, of globalized domination and of the reign of death. A clear-sighted and bold self-giving of religious communities who realize in solidarity projects in defence of life that is threatened strengthens the resistance and the hopes of the poor.

A Persuasive Sign of the Presence of the Kingdom

In scrutinizing the horizon currently calling to the vision and the heart of members of CRL, the XXIth Extraordinary General Assembly of July, 2007 stated that, “in the midst of the profound transformations and great challenges involving humanity today, we hear the Word of God calling to us: march on (Ex 14:15).” The commitment in solidarity to the defence of life and care for the environment needs to be sustained through an incarnated and prophetic spirituality. The presence in solidarity of members of CRL among the people is witness, proclamation and sign of the Reign of God. Living this witness requires meeting many challenges such as recapturing the idea of the discipleship of equals begun by Jesus. To be signs and proclamation of the Kingdom of God, we need to “increase our inter-congregational alliances, networks and partnerships, in formation and in mission,” putting aside competition and ceasing to ask the same questions among the different religious congregations of men and women.

Going forward in the midst of the challenges of a globalized world that excludes assumes a conscious and passionate renewal in following Jesus who “went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were him, as well as some women” (Lk 8:1-3). They had also “followed him from Galilee” and were witnesses of his crucifixion (Lk 23:49). Mark uses three verbs to
describe the discipleship of the women at the foot of the cross: follow, serve and “had come up with him to Jerusalem” (Mk 15:40-41). It is interesting to note that the verb “had come up” (synanabainein) appears only twice in the New Testament, in Mark 15:41 and in Acts 13:31, where it is affirmed that “for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and they are now his witnesses to the people.” This affirmation shows that the disciples of Galilee are also equally apostles, that is, capable witnesses of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is something new in that cultural context.

Along with men, women are presented as true disciples who, liberated from what holds them back, followed Jesus unto Calvary. In Mark 8:34, Jesus makes clear that whoever desires to follow him has to take up his or her cross. Further on, he speaks of the persecution as well as the gifts to be experienced by all those who leave everything to follow him (Mk 10:28-30). This means that, in order to be faithful to the project of life in abundance for all, the disciples, men and women, have to assume the risk along with the Master of being assassinated by the powers of their time.

The witness lies in this passion which leads people who are full of life to abandon all and follow Jesus to the point of giving their own lives in the defence of fragile life, whether that of humanity or of the environment. It is a strong sign of the kingdom of God that the world needs today. This witness (martyria) has greater power when it is communitarian, realized in currents of loving, organized and clear-sighted solidarity freely given.

The question of vocations is much discussed of late. We fear that the small number of young people entering CRL and remaining in it is compromising its future. However, the key to our vocation and prophetic witness does not depend on the numbers of people living it but on the ability of the community to intervene in society and make real the project of Jesus.

Conclusion

In our society animated by the individualistic and excluding logic of neo-liberalism, the transgression in solidarity of the midwives in Egypt, of Jochebed, Miriam, Pharaoh’s daughter and the disciples of Galilee nourishes our dream of living an incarnated and prophetic spirituality centred in the Word of God and the mystique of a discipleship open to cultural, religious and gender diversity.8

Conscious of the great social and cultural questions of our time, we can only progress towards the unknown and open new paths for an
attractive and significant CRL if we cultivate a spirituality that sustains us on our uncertain journey. Faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ brings us to affirm with our own lives that another world is possible, that another CRL is possible, one more agile in proclaiming the Kingdom and freer from the weight of institutions.

If we renew our passion for the Kingdom of God and take on with freedom and conviction the struggle of the poor for policies that protect their lives and rights to housing, education, transportation, etc., and if, inspired by the Spirit that renews all, we build networks of solidarity instead of being overwhelmed by despair, we will be very important to people and we will find the meaning of our consecration to God in the world today.

We are convinced that the project of Jesus entails solidarity and includes the new relationships of the Kingdom: justice, generosity, respect, understanding, tolerance, support, affection and self-giving, thus creating unity among all human beings. Solidarity is the manifestation of the presence of God in our midst. It is the expression of love that leads religious communities to become one body in solidarity, organized and committed to the transformation of society. It is within this environment of engagement and clear-sighted solidarity that an integrated and humanizing initial formation⁹, generative of new persons and new spaces as well as significant expressions of CRL can take place in our world today.

Questions for individual study or discussion in community:

1. How do we see the anti-Kingdom? What are its manifestations today?
2. What would advance the journey of CRL in this challenging historical context? Where and how will we learn the new steps God is asking of us?
3. What mystique sustains our self-giving and makes our hearts burn? What concrete action does it inspire?
4. With what groups do we weave stories of liberation, effecting bold transgressions through solidarity, so that life may be more full and happy for all?
Being indispensable on the journey does not mean that society will not be transformed without our participation. It means that without this clear-sighted, committed and loving struggle for life in its many dimensions, CRL will not go forward. Taking steps together in the struggle will give us the necessary courage and creativity to advance.

The transgression through solidarity of the women in Exodus can be seen as the memory of a resistance, and we can ask if it perhaps resides in the memories of women. See Nancy Cardoso Pereira, “Exodus: Geography and Population” in Bíblia e Vida: tecendo com fios feministas (São Leopoldo: CEBI, Série A Palavra na vida, n.177/178), pages 18-29.

Note that Miriam is called a prophetess in Exodus 15:20.

In Ex 1:15-25, we see the action of the Egyptian midwives who act in concert with Hebrew women: the complicity of the adult woman (Jochebed) and the child (Miriam) who find a way for the child to survive; slave women and Pharaoh’s daughter work together to save the child’s life and name him Moses which means saved from the waters.

See Ex 18 for more on the centralization of power in the person of Moses.

According to the Book of Numbers 20:1, Miriam died in the Desert of Zin between Kadesh and Moab where she was buried. This means that she made the long passage with the biblical people, because they were already close to the Promised Land, south of the Dead Sea.
FROM JERUSALEM TO ANTIOCH:
RETHINKING THE BIBLICAL MODEL
OF CONSECRATED LIFE?

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Consecrated life has always sought to find inspiration from the Bible in different ways. At the beginning of monastic life, sources of inspiration were found in the great prophetic figures – Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist – or in certain general aspects such as the desert, mortification, continence, virginity, combat against the devil, community life, constant prayer, etc. Later, with growth in experience and its expressions, other elements appeared: flight from the world, manual labour, obedience to the abbot, sacred bonds that are the foundation of communion, pastoral service, evangelisation, catechesis, the sick, etc.

As far as the “evangelical counsels” and their radical nature are concerned, the first millennium produced numerous opinions and proposals, without their being rigidly schematized. Rigid schemata and binding theological-juridical judgments applicable to all were formulated during
the second millennium. This was particularly the case with regard to the evangelical counsels and the many words of Jesus of a radical nature: through a kind of reduction and concentration – the result of a certain standardized vision of the human person – the three classic “vows” of chastity, poverty and obedience were established, which, from the thirteenth century onwards, have been imposed as the three essential elements of religious life. It was said that they were tria substantialia.

Exegetes are not really convinced that there is a linear relationship between the three vows characteristic of consecrated life, and the many radical evangelical counsels. Furthermore, from a theological point of view, the distinction between precepts and counsels is somewhat problematic today and the tendency is to play it down. In spite of this, consecrated life continues to be identified as “the state of those who profess the evangelical counsels” (cf. can. 574, 1). And the major apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata*, while refraining from proving the biblical foundation of the three counsels, presents them definitively and without reservation as given. It even confirms their fundamental importance through a Trinitarian rereading: “The evangelical counsels are therefore above all a gift of the Holy Trinity” (VC 20); “these counsels express the Son’s love for the Father in the unity of the Spirit” (VC 21).

The Jerusalem church’s communal way of life has been a constant biblical inspiration up to our own times and it is evoked with ever renewed enthusiasm: it has been an ideal model, a dream and the standard for all Christian communities, but especially for monastic and religious communities, beginning with the “holy community” of Pachomius. At each historical stage of the renewal or refounding of religious life, the icon of the Jerusalem community has been reappropriated and imitated, praised and relived. New communities in recent decades have also adopted it as an inspirational model for their life.

**I. The Two Models Compared**

In this article, I would like to focus on the well known and beautiful icon that is the first Jerusalem community, with the aim of moving beyond it with a preference for another more pluralistic and dynamic community, that of Antioch.

**The example of the early Church**

Vatican Council II chose to refer to Jerusalem when it described the features and the spirituality of communal life in the first section of n° 15
of *Perfectae Caritatis*. The text of the conciliar decree begins thus:

“Common life, fashioned on the model of the early Church where the body of believers was united in heart and soul (cf. Acts 4:32), and given new force by the teaching of the Gospel, the sacred liturgy and especially the Eucharist, should continue to be lived in prayer and the communion of the same spirit. As members of Christ living together as brothers, religious should give pride of place in esteem to each other (cf. Rom. 12:10) and bear each other’s burdens (cf. Gal. 6:2). For the community, a true family gathered together in the name of the Lord by God’s love which has flooded the hearts of its members through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:5), rejoices because He is present among them (cf. Matt. 18:20). Moreover love sums up the whole law (cf. Rom. 13:10), binds all together in perfect unity (cf. Col. 3:14) and by it we know that we have crossed over from death to life (cf. 1 John 3:14). Furthermore, the unity of the brethren is a visible pledge that Christ will return (cf. John 13:35; 17:21) and a source of great apostolic energy.”

It can immediately be inferred from these numerous quotations that the Jerusalem model is not an exclusive one, as it is enriched by the addition of several elements from the Pauline and Johannine models. This is a sign of openness to pluralism and to the inclusion of values present in other models. There is no doubt, however, that the Jerusalem model remains central. Over the centuries there have inevitably been different forms and ways of appropriating this “archetype” and highlighting its inspirational values. Memorable moments occurred with Basil and Augustine (fourth century); with the coming into being of the friars (twelfth century), and again with the widespread presence of “new Institutes” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From today’s perspective, we know that it has often been seen as an “ecclesial” suggestion, valid for all: this was the conviction of Basil, Augustine, Francis, the first Carmelites and so many recent founders, including those of ecclesial movements. In the view of some, however, it was about a profile “reserved” for elite groups, for a Church with few members. The post-synodal exhortation *Vita Consecrata* renewed this tradition by using the technical expression “apostolica vivendi forma” (93 and 94): the Pope asks for fidelity to this tradition.

“I therefore exhort consecrated men and women to commit themselves to strengthening their fraternal life, following the example of the first Christians in Jerusalem who were assiduous in accepting the teaching of the Apostles, in common prayer, in celebrating the Eucharist, and
in sharing whatever goods of nature and grace they had (cf. Acts 2: 42-47)” (VC 45).

This is a very explicit reminder and it is emphasised in the paragraph, even in the heading: “In the image of the apostolic community”. Elsewhere, there are other more general reminders, such as a radical and generous following (VC 93) and a preference for a lectio divina of “the writings of the New Testament [which] deserve special veneration, especially the Gospels, which are “the heart of all the Scriptures” (VC 94). There is also an allusion to the organisation of cultural and pastoral life around Peter (VC 34). And that is all.

Moreover it must not be forgotten that, as the Council had already done, it is often customary today to complete these schemata referring to the apostolic community with insights drawn from other communities of the tradition, the communities of Matthew, Paul and John. These also provide great richness with regard to, for example, the increasing number of forms of co-responsibility, the content of the profession of faith in Christ, eschatological hope, the practical steps involved in the oikodomé (the building of the “common house”) through the charisms, cultural mediation, the characteristics of the domestic church, the struggle for fidelity, dialogue with other communities, etc.

Undoubtedly, however, the Jerusalem communities play a unique role, since their immediate memory of Jesus and the witness of the apostles, with their charism as “pillars”, produced the earliest form of community. Many New Testament texts which are normative for the Church down through the ages also came from them.²

The Value and Limitations of the Jerusalem model

In this initial image of faith, hope and charity, of interpersonal relationships, of the continuing development of languages and roles, many elements remain of great value. The first Christian community of Jerusalem undoubtedly shows great faithfulness to Gospel events in which it had participated with Jesus of Nazareth. There are direct witnesses among its members, and it is this community which makes the first attempts at evangelisation and experiences its first internal conflicts. Geographical, cultural and religious closeness to the life of Jesus gives unique importance to all that it says and does.

The Jerusalem community also provides moving and convincing examples of communion, charity, sharing, faithfulness to the Word and the breaking of bread, and mutual service, which have not yet been
standardized. Multicultural tensions arise later but they do not affect the ideal portrait drawn by Luke in Acts. That being said, if we look closely, we can see that what we have is in a certain sense a closed situation: it is symbiotic, narcissistic and – due to the hostile pressure of the Pharisees and religious leaders- suspicious as well. It finds openness to the new difficult. This is quite evident when “discontent” arises over the question of the Hellenist widows (cf. Acts 6:1-6) but especially when Philip the Deacon evangelizes in Samaria and Peter and John confirm him in his work (cf. Acts 8:3-25).

Resistance to the new is even more obvious when Saul, the newly converted persecutor, arrives. He is welcomed with wariness, in spite of the guarantees given by Barnabas in his favour (Acts 9:26-30). Paul has to flee and to remain in isolation for several years without anyone worrying about such a resource being left unused. Finally, when Peter baptizes the pagan Cornelius in Caesarea, he has to undergo tough questioning by the community and has to justify himself publicly (Acts 11:1-18).

Upon closer examination, the Jerusalem situation, which seems beautiful and idyllic, does not leave much space for the new, for creativity in defining roles or for cultural challenges. We could say that an ethos of complacency with regard to the normative memory is dominant in Jerusalem. Expansion to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) is understood more as expansion and building up rather than as creativity and exploration. Jerusalem seems to be unable to dialogue with others in a way that is respectful, liberating and mature. Once the explosion of Pentecost is over, the Holy Spirit seems to be more a conservative resource than a prophetic breath, and mission is more a question of fear and control than a fountainhead that encourages creativity. People try to stamp out conflicts which arise instead of managing them in a freeing way. Meanwhile, however, the complete opposite is happening in another city, Antioch in Syria.

The great metropolis of Antioch: a new model?

Would it be absurd to reflect on the possibility of changing models or at least of integrating this other kind of community in an organic and intentional way? In our view, Antioch on the Orontes, that great cosmopolitan and polytheistic city of many religions, is more relevant to reflection on the challenges which we face today. Even though we do not have many details, we find in the biblical references to the life of the believers of that city a model that is relatively complex compared to the early community in Jerusalem.
Today, in a context of restless change, of a disintegrating pluralism and of new demands for an inclusive synthesis that is not monocultural, could we not relativize Jerusalem in its role of inspirational model with a preference for the Antioch model? We will explain what we mean by this in two parts. Firstly, we will look more closely at a few significant stages in the history of this community, seeking at the same time to highlight how it might be a better model for inspiration. We will then apply our findings to consecrated life in the context of today.

Let us begin then with Acts 11: 19-26, a text which tells of the birth and stages of growth of the Antioch community.

“Some believers had been scattered by the suffering that came to them after Stephen’s death. They travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. But they told the message only to Jews. Some believers from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch. There they began to speak to Greeks also. They told them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s power was with them. Large numbers of people believed and turned to the Lord. The church in Jerusalem heard about this. So they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad. He told them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Barnabas was a good man. He was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Large numbers of people came to know the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. He found him there. Then he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church. They taught large numbers of people. At Antioch the believers were called Christians for the first time.”

Let us examine this adventure more closely

We can distinguish the following stages in this account.

1. The founding moment

The founding happens by chance, through a traumatic event. During the dispersion after the persecution which resulted in the murder of the deacon Stephen (cf. Acts 8: 1-4; 11: 19), a group of Christians arrives in this great city. Antioch was the capital of Syria and the third largest city of the Roman Empire, with a population of about 500,000. It was an important commercial and cultural centre and was fairly tolerant in matters of religion. Because of its location, it was known as “the beautiful one”. It was about five hundred kilometres from Jerusalem, a great distance given the means of communication at that time.
The first thing those who had fled do is to talk “only to the Jews”; this is a deliberate choice, as the text itself notes. It is a prudent choice, made with a concern not to arouse curiosity or cause confusion, and also because it was the only method they had learned and used until now. This is a stage which we might term traditional, because the paralysing damage of the trauma they had undergone held them within the confines of an unchanging methodology. They do not really have a desire to take risks.

2. The moment of exploration

They enter this stage when nostalgia and repetitiveness leave space for the demands of new languages and new interlocutors.

Some of those who had been dispersed take on a responsibility full of risks: they speak also to the Greeks. According to the text, it seems that those with whom they spoke were not Greek-speaking Hebrews but rather non-Jewish Hellenists quite uninvolved in Jewish religious traditions. They obviously had to use a different language, a different point of reference and a different presentation of topics and their development. The men who threw themselves into this adventure came from another culture. Originally from Cyprus and Cyrene (v. 20), they are therefore able to take up the challenge of proclamation, using other approaches, since they are less conditioned by the “Jerusalem” model.

The text alludes to a short process: “They began to speak to the Greeks also.” In other words, they do not exclude the initial way of doing things, but they want to start a new method by mixing with others in their activities and by learning and enquiring into language and relationships. The verb elaloun (“to address, speak”) probably reflects a series of attempts, adaptations and successes. However the substance remains the same. It was said earlier that they proclaimed the Word (v. 19), an expression which means to proclaim the Good News. Now it is said explicitly, referring to the proclamation to the Greeks: euangelizomenoi ton Kyrion Iesoun (they proclaimed to them the Good News that Jesus is Lord) (v.20).

The content is integrally and authentically the same. The interlocutors, however, have changed and so it is necessary to “begin” in such a way as to create almost everything except the substance. We might speak of a “creative filter” that selects what is cultural but not essential in such a way as to preserve the substance. The central meaning of “Lord Jesus” is not misrepresented but, on the other hand, in the Greek context, the title Kyrios (“Lord”) is more easily understood than “Messiah” (Hebrew).

The text also notes the consequences, and with some satisfaction: the
presence of the “hand of the Lord” and the conversion of “large numbers of people.” The expression “the hand of the Lord” is intended to show that if the initiative might seem to be that of a few, in fact this work is willed by the Lord whose mysterious hand is guiding them. Even though they are not aware of it, what these courageous people are doing is part of a divine plan. The large number of believers recalls the success of the first preaching in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 4: 4; 6: 7), and, earlier, the success of Jesus himself in his preaching. In other words, they are on the right path.

3. The relationship with Jerusalem is resumed

Luke relates a difficult moment with a certain irony: “The church in Jerusalem heard about this” (v. 22). This might seem to be a poetic way of expressing it but in fact, it indicates that there (in Jerusalem) they were on the look out and suspected all things new. Listening ears are present at every event, as we will see later in different circumstances when disputes arise about the question of the need for new converts to observe Jewish traditions. There is an immediate reaction: they send a delegate whose function is to watch over and control. This delegate is Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, but known as Barnabas in Jerusalem. He is wise and good-hearted, has an open mind and is conciliatory.

It is interesting to observe the attitude of Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 11: 23-25). First of all, he does not judge by hearsay; information may perhaps have been distorted, but he comes and investigates for himself. “When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced”. His first reaction is one of wonder and readiness to welcome what God’s hand has done. In Greek, a play on words indicates that this joy is also a gift of grace for him. Sent to control and supervise, he does not come with prejudices but rather allows himself to be attracted by the grace flourishing in that place and he admires and “rejoices” in it. Furthermore, he intervenes not to correct but to confirm the path undertaken. He does not emphasize things that are to be corrected, but rather invites them to persevere with “steadfast devotion” (v. 24). He is a true witness to the Spirit and becomes a mediator so that this work may be carried out effectively and without hindrance.

4. A new initiative

Barnabas does not remain imprisoned in this role of guarantor of the tradition; he does not confine himself to managing the situation, which undoubtedly had not yet fully developed. For his part, he introduces another change. He remembers a young convert, Saul of Tarsus, full of zeal for evangelisation. He tries to trace him because he realizes that he
could be a valuable resource. The text presents an undertaking which was not at all simple by using a series of verbs: “Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year, they met with the church and taught a great many people.” (v. 25).

What the Antioch community had achieved must not be underestimated: its far-flung presence in the midst of a complex and multi-religious society was a resource but it also exposed it to many risks. And yet Barnabas urges them on to other possible initiatives at that time, such as a more open and less fanatical mentality, religious freedom and diverse cultures, which could be a suitable environment for Saul’s healing.

A time of true communion is needed to allow genuine integration. Thanks also to this new presence, believers are so well known that they are called “Christians” (v. 26). This distinctive sign indicates that a certain language about the Christ has been recognized, which focuses their identity. This title will remain, and is also extended to the believers in Jerusalem: the new identity, distinctive for all, emerges from the periphery.

5. A new transition: the ministry of charity

This is also an important stage because at this time the community is committed to mutual charity through its readiness to help out in the emergency of a famine in Judea. Following the narrative of Acts, it can be seen that the relationship with Jerusalem is also resumed through the arrival of a few “prophets” who probably had no particular mission but were friends passing through (Acts 11: 27-30). They seem also to be instruments of the Holy Spirit: what they prophesy will nurture communion, not only a communion of material things but also one of hearts. The collection of alms is carried out according to each one’s personal means – the Jerusalem model but adapted here in a creative way to different situations – and it is Barnabas and Saul who will bring the alms. This is a sign of collective generosity rather than personal glory, as well as a sign of the desire to re-establish a less aggressive relationship between Saul and his acquaintances in Jerusalem.

6. A new missionary adventure

From chapter 13 of Acts onwards, the community of Antioch becomes the central character. It is now well founded in prayer and the ascetical life and composed of personalities from diverse cultures and different formative backgrounds. A new initiative of the Spirit is grafted on to this
peaceful and active base, opening up new frontiers for evangelisation: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13: 2).

This undertaking is born not as the result of the vitality of a few, but in the context of a life of asceticism and prayer, within a multicultural reality peacefully managed. Here too the true protagonist is the Holy Spirit: the community knows that it is facing an undertaking beyond its means and that is why it renews its prayer and fasting before agreeing and laying on their hands (Acts13: 1-5). This is a prayer which supports freedom and risk.4

It could have ended badly, led to failure, or become a fanatical and vain personal adventure. The risk was there, for Barnabas and Saul were two strong personalities and had a certain tendency to independence. They were, however, prudent and open. We see this when, on the return voyage, they “appoint elders in each church”, trusting in particular situations even when they were fragile and isolated (Acts 14:21-23).

There was a risk of developing an archipelago of fragile, isolated and immature communities. Barnabas and Paul were aware of this, as we see from the instructions they give before returning to Antioch after the long journey to Asia Minor. On their arrival in Antioch, they are greeted very warmly by everyone and, together, they look at the meaning of events and come to a common conviction: God has accomplished great things with them and through them, “He had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (Acts 14: 28).

7. The mission brings about a crisis for the whole system

The well known chapter 15 of Acts reveals another important transition in the life of this model. The new experiences will have repercussions within the community which had initiated them. The tension between the old and the new, between somewhat fanatical traditionalists and supporters of new communities among the Gentiles, reaches its climax. No resolution could be reached at the local level despite the good faith and the efforts of the protagonists. It is left to Jerusalem to find the right solution as far as faith and basic requirements are concerned, while being understanding about cultural sensitivity and mutual respect. We know what Jerusalem decided on the occasion of its well known first Council (cf. Acts 15: 22-29).

The Antioch model is also seen as the best in this difficult stage of upheaval, in so far as it is able to recognize that the question goes beyond the competence and the ability of the local community to dialogue. Furthermore, it understands that this is, in principle, a universal problem
and it can only be resolved through wide consultation. In fact, representatives of the two points of view are sent to Jerusalem and, in the process, other communities from Phoenicia and Samaria are also involved so that decisions do not come down like lightning bolts from heaven (cf. Acts 15: 2-4).

After discussion and decision – something with which we are familiar, and where there are no doctrinal elements but rather the requirement to respect particular sensibilities – the decrees promulgated are carried to Antioch by Jude and Silas, two men held in high esteem and who are not biased (Acts 15: 22f.). They do not just read the decisions and leave others to draw their own conclusions but they stay there. They are prophets who exhort and help people to take courage, to understand each other and be reconciled, after so much tension. They departed only after “some time” (Acts 15: 33) whereas it is noted that Barnabas and Paul “remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord” (Acts 15: 35).

II. Discovering ever new paths

Given its flexibility, creativity and integration of differences, Antioch seems to be a new model of a community of disciples. It does not negate the original Jerusalem experience but seems to constitute an alternative for those who want to remain faithful to their identity and also express a certain creativity, inventiveness and boldness in the face of new contexts. A dynamic and pluralistic model like that of the Antioch community, rather than the traditional monocultural model of Jerusalem, seems to be a better source of inspiration for us in our own socio-religious and cultural situation.

Toward a dynamic and inspiring reading of Antioch

Certainly in Antioch everything is always seen in relationship to the Holy Spirit and put under the guidance of the One who is seen as the protagonist in various attempts to act in a creative way (that is outside well-trodden paths). The innovative work of the Holy Spirit seems much more evident in events at Antioch than in Jerusalem where, after the exhilaration of Pentecost, the Spirit’s guidance is more conservative than open to the new.

Chapters 6-11 of Acts remind us of various ways of acting “outside the box”: the choice of deacons as a way of integrating Hellenistic culture, the meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch, the conversion of the centurion Cornelius which prompts criticism in a confrontation with Peter, and the first sermon of the newly converted Paul who provokes conflict and is
moved away. With the founding of Antioch, however, these attempts are no longer isolated but structural: a whole community is fully part of the new initiative and thus the periphery becomes a protagonist. Many values which we consider important for consecrated life today, such as openness to the guidance of the Spirit, emerge from the events at Antioch.

1. Moving from nostalgia to risk

It was in Antioch that the presence of natives of Cyprus and the region of Cyrene, as well as living daily amongst other religious and cultural traditions, enabled Christians to take the next step, at their peril, without compromising the whole system. The event of Pentecost in Jerusalem was brief: in Antioch, a large multiethnic and religiously pluralistic city, structures were affected by multicultural dialogue. In Jerusalem, the dominant culture was Jewish and traditional; in Antioch, believers found themselves in a minority and so had to carve out spaces for themselves and build solidarity.

We need to do this in our religious congregations: we need to enable communities, those which are less weighed down by tradition and more informal, to try new things, to take risks, to create services and ways of mediating and structuring themselves, even breaking with the usual model. We must also trust in diverse cultural gifts and make use of them in new, in new pluralistic and multiethnic contexts. These communities cannot be experiences established ahead of time or planned in an office, but must be the result of a process which takes shape and is defined while it is being lived out, through trial and error. In the beginning, they may seem improvised and the expression of one person’s passion but as they become successful, it will become obvious that truly the “hand of God” is in it.

Time is needed, however, and we must move beyond the fear of making mistakes, of losing something. What is important is that the main thing is not lost: it is for the Lord Jesus, to proclaim his Good News and saving presence, to spread faith in him, that all this is done. Therefore, this stage cannot succeed without a serious identification with the central core; if it is only a case of personal satisfaction and individualistic flight, it is sure to fail. The expression “to the Greeks also” implies that proclamation to the Jews continued at the same time. This is the sign that the two models coexisted for a while. Something new never crushes the old but rather gradually replaces the other, until a new balance and a clear new synthesis is reached. And the clear synthesis is found in the title “Christians” given by the people.
2. The importance of mediators

In Acts 13:1 we see that there were persons in Antioch who played a mediating role with intelligence and patience. We see Barnabas recognizing and encouraging the experience in process and then trying to bring back Saul who had been marginalized and hurt. Later on, we meet Jude and Silas who help to heal wounds resulting from heated discussions. These mediators have no desire to do everything, but they act in a way which builds a gradual understanding through working together and being present in a way which does not dominate but rather encourages.

This shows us the importance of choosing mediators who are not only experts in their own right but are above all sincerely honest and open to new directions of the Spirit. They must not be fearful or ambitious in putting themselves forward but rather interiorly free of personal interest and servants of the common good. Only in this way will they recognize “the grace of the Lord” and bring forth innovative communities which are creative and holy and open to new directions of the Spirit. Today it is not enough to be good and genuine witnesses. We must be prophets and create ways of understanding and proclaiming the Good News in our multicultural society.

Speaking of mediators, I would like to emphasize the importance of Barnabas’ work: he had not forgotten Saul, that new convert so full of zeal. At first he does not succeed in integrating him (cf. Acts 9:29-30) but in Antioch he is able to make a second attempt. A verbal or legal reintegration would not have been enough; what is needed is a long period of renewed acquaintance, mutual appreciation and trust. Many people who have had to go into exile cannot be healed merely by rules of readmission. What is needed is a welcoming strategy, a time to allow one other to return and begin a dialogue, that is a confident collaboration, not only on paper, and reintegration through co-responsibility exercised in an atmosphere of trust.

Tensions between the centre and the periphery

We have noted that “news reached Jerusalem”: those who are eager to know everything that is happening elsewhere are always listening intently. We also know that the traditionalist party was very strong in Jerusalem and did not hesitate to accuse not only Paul but also Peter (cf. Acts 11:1-3; Gal. 2:12-14). We should not be surprised by these conflicts; the serious problem is that of managing them. By its very nature, the centre is always distrustful, slow to change, and more concerned about
“holy tradition” in the name of fidelity, than about creativity while remaining faithful. Whereas the person who lives on the periphery, who travels along the frontiers of new cultural sensitivities, of new experiences and new demands, is anxious to change, is hemmed in by myths about safeguarding, by dramatic yearnings for the past, and by the hypocrisy of those who hide behind traditions so as not to admit that they are only defending their own point of view.

Antioch shows us that we must react, that we must take risks without falling prey to infantile fears or false dependence. Furthermore, it shows us that if the Spirit calls for new undertakings unpredictable in their outcomes, we must be courageous enough to listen. Long consultations with the centre through fear of acting without prior approval, fear of creating problems with the curias, prophecy set aside through human respect or petty calculations about career or convenience, all are contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit’s call. We will discover new paths by exploring, by going beyond borders, by trusting in the initial intuition and by facing obstacles through an inner listening to the wisdom which comes from the Word (as Paul did in Antioch of Pisidia: cf. Acts 13: 44-52).

Events clearly show the role the centre can play: not one of control and suspicion but rather one of coordination of resources and above all of discernment open to the new paths of the Spirit and respectful of diverse sensitivities. It is therefore not a question of monopolising truth and decisions but of welcoming and coordinating a creativity which is born elsewhere and develops better there, thanks to the creativity of the Spirit.

**Ascetical and liturgical intensity but also charity and imagination**

It is a question of a regular life of prayer and fasting, of a communion of hearts and mutual welcoming. These values are lived in Antioch, not in an abstract fashion, in a void, with a certain narcissistic flavour, as in Jerusalem, but always in a dynamic open to mission. In Antioch, it is while they are gathered in liturgical assembly that the Spirit asks them to “set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work” (Acts 13: 2). It is while they are gathered in assembly that they decide to rescue the brothers in Judea suffering from famine (Acts 11: 28); each person offers what he or she can and they entrust all these gifts to Barnabas and Saul to carry them to Jerusalem.

It is repeated several times that, in Antioch, they work together in the service of the Word and discern the directions to be followed: as when
Saul returns from exile (Acts 11: 26) and when they lay their hands on Barnabas and Saul and accompany them to the sea (Acts 13: 4). The same thing happens when these two return and tell “how God had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (Acts 14: 27) and “they stayed there with the disciples for some time” (Acts 14: 28). It also happens finally when they return from the consultation at Jerusalem and Silas and Jude, official delegates at that well known meeting (the first ecumenical council) stay for a long time, and together with Barnabas and Saul, offer encouragement as people who love community life and take part in communal teaching (cf. Acts 15: 30 - 35).

Rediscovering the creative consistency of memory

All the events at Antioch can teach us much that is useful for resolving our own problems and conflicts, and even for being faithful to our identity in a dynamic way, so that we may be truly open and ready to follow new directions of the Spirit.5

The work of bringing together people and communities of diverse viewpoints can never be done from the perspective of the centre, because it is always too concerned with finding a manageable and comfortable balance and it is afraid of the risks involved in the new. This work is carried out in frontier situations, in outlying areas, by distancing oneself from the allure of holy cities and their neurotic need to catalogue and administer everything, so as to eliminate problems. That is why Antioch, precisely because it is decentralized and multicultural, provides us with a special model.

The short period of nostalgia could not last: the desire to take risks, to move out, to have new interlocutors won out. And “the hand of the Lord” supports this first movement of widening horizons, and thanks to the mediation of wise Barnabas, this openness is strengthened. Thanks to his respect for diversity and his optimistic and reassuring vision, “considerable numbers of people were led to the Lord” (Acts 13: 24). With the return of Saul who also brought another cultural sensitivity, the community learns to open itself beyond its own projects, and to have a new identity, precisely that of “Christians”.

Certain consequences of mission involve coming to terms with one’s own life and unravelling some local and cultural knots that one had hoped to keep hidden. In this case, the mission brought revolution into their own house too, going to the heart of the community of believers, that is to say, to Jerusalem. Jerusalem cannot reproach others for having taken on an
outlying mission without a mandate. It must rather recognize its authenticity and act, at the same time, as mediator so that the new is welcomed, but does not disturb other sensitivities around secondary questions like matrimonial relationships and the eating of certain foods.

It is important today to welcome this unexpected openness to the new and to know how to manage it in love and wisdom. Exercising creative integration and a discernment which recognizes the Lord’s grace at work is as essential as the ability to organize communication and planned meetings or to promote solemn beatifications. These meetings would be a mere formality and hypocritical window dressing without the other aspects. Fearing tensions, we so often pretend that there is unanimity when it does not exist; at best, this amounts to a diplomatic conspiracy to remain silent. A silence that becomes infected!

We know that when differences arose in a dramatic way, there was certainly an outcry in Antioch (cf. Acts 15:2 in the Greek). The new truth was not accepted: “Truth is often a wound and almost never a balm” (F. Thibon). And such suffering lasts a long time, as we see from various allusions in Paul’s letters to relationships between Jewish traditions and the new freedom.

Where are Antioch, the Greeks, Barnabas and Saul today?

We are all overwhelmed by the great challenges of today – to sum them up: globalisation and its consequences, as well as a new religiosity, new means of communication, the search for meaning and more significant values, the new awareness of women, the new “great powers” like China, India, Brazil. We are afraid and we want to dwell on dreams of a glorious past, when things were better.

Great possibilities exist, however, in the new: they offer us an opportunity if we leave the centres and holy cities and relocate toward the periphery, in every sense. This is probably the first characteristic of a new project, like religious life: that is, rebuilding identity starting from the periphery, from improvisation, with the help of a minority gifted with wisdom and courage.

I am speaking of periphery in relationship to our established centres. This means that we must discover new Antiochs which are multiethnic and multireligious. We must run the risk and experience the adventure of speaking with the “new Greeks” just as we must do everything possible to heal the Sauls who have been marginalized and wounded, in order to integrate them into new processes of collaboration and dialogue. For this
work, brought about by the freedom of the Spirit, we need wise and generous Barnabases, honest of heart, who “detect grace in the new and are encouraging in its pursuit” (cf. Acts 11: 23ff). And all of us need to be open to take risks, and to free ourselves from unchanging moulds.

The “Christian” identity, which was not well defined in an inculturated way in Jerusalem due to the tight control of leaders tied to the dominant Jewish identity, became more evident in Antioch. That was where the typical name (Christians) was used and imposed. It applied also to those in Jerusalem who thought that they should control Antioch, and did not understand that traditions were not being profaned, but creatively relived. Because the periphery, out of control, was becoming impatient, desirous as it was of trying something different. And yet, that is where normative identity – “the Good News of the Lord Jesus” – is torn from the suffocating constraints of traditions and broadens into dimensions that gradually reach to the ends of the earth.

That is why, when Peter leaves Jerusalem because of Herod’s persecution, a definitive break occurs (cf. Acts 12: 19). If it had not been for Antioch with its Cypriots and Cyreneans who became “Greeks”, without Barnabas and Saul, the prophets and the doctors and the polemics and passions, the transition from a Jewish sect to the Catholic Church would have been much more complicated.

This is a lesson for many institutes where dominant sentiments are very similar to the pretentions of the “Judaisers” of Jerusalem who wanted the whole world to be like them. In many institutes today as well, people are all ears in a distrustful and reactionary way, listening for any newness. There is a widespread tendency to judge by “hearsay” and an inability to have a virtuous heart open to the Spirit, so as to recognize “the grace of the Lord and rejoice in it.” And unfortunately there are many who have nothing encouraging to say to fragile hearts; they only know how to pronounce apocalyptic warnings: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15: 1). They do not believe that we can be saved when we travel the paths of “creative fidelity”. Probably without knowing or desiring it, they are the tomb of the Spirit.

We must go beyond the acute pain of loss and overcome the constant temptation of looking back nostalgically and useless words of self-gratification. We must move from memory which consoles but does not inspire life to the exercise of bold and intuitive prophecy.

“Faced with complex situations and ambiguous changes, our answers
are few and tentative. We have many more questions than solutions. We must move through the crisis of imperfection, of provisionality, of uncertainty and partial solutions. What is important is that we bring to light the essential questions.”

It is by seeking new ways of announcing “the Good News of the Lord Jesus” and by celebrating his memory with the needy heart of a beggar that we will hear the call of the Spirit resonating, pointing out new paths for carrying out the Spirit’s work and, with him, opening “the doors to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27).

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6 USG, Verso una comunione pluricentrica e interculturale, Roma, Il Calamo, 2000, n° 83.
A ny monk or nun in the great Benedictine family who reads the recent Instruction “The Service of Authority and Obedience” will be in for a pleasant surprise. I hope that I am not freely projecting my own experience onto others but the number of familiar references in this text caught my attention: five quotations from the Rule of Saint Benedict, three quotations from the works of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and finally a long quotation from the Oratorio pastoralis of the English Abbot Aelred of Rievaulx. I am grateful to the authors for this and the whole document.

In this brief text, I would like to share with you the meaning of monastic authority as I learned it from Patriarch Benedict and my twenty-five years spent in this service. At first I intended to speak of obedience also but it became obvious that I would not be able to do so within the limitations of a few pages. It is not possible, however, to “exercise” authority without at the same time travelling down the path of obedience.
I will begin with two personal memories. The first goes back to the very beginning of my monastic life. On the day I entered my parents accompanied me to the monastery. Before they left, Father Prior very kindly told them that it would be good to wait two years before coming to see me again so as to make my experience of detachment easier and to allow me to get a taste of the desert ... The superior who was present tried to intercede by remarking: “Perhaps one year would be enough.” My father – who held at the time an important position of authority in a government department – replied without hesitation: “Before I was in charge of subordinates, I learned to obey.” Needless to say we did not see each other for two long years.

The second memory has to do with my election as Abbot in 1984. Taking advantage of the presence of our Abbot General who was presiding over the election, I asked him for a “word of life” inspired by the Rule of Saint Benedict pertinent to my new service. Without thinking about it for long, he said to me: “Never forget that from now on you take the place of Christ for your brothers. Be careful not to substitute for him. It is a case of making him present in your person and actions.” That said it all and I am learning this lesson little by little as the years pass.

So now, if we read carefully the text of the Rule referring to the Abbot, we note that his service is exercised in five different areas: fatherhood (father), teaching (teacher), pastoral ministry (pastor), correction (doctor), and administration (administrator). Obviously every Abbot will emphasize one or other of these areas according to his personal gifts and will enlist help in those to which he is less inclined (gifted) or in which he is most lacking. In general, when an Abbot’s mandate is on the wane, one of the main signs of it is the substitution of administration for fatherhood. At other times, such a substitution is precisely the reason for the wane. One readily notes, also, that Abbesses usually emphasize the maternal and pastoral dimensions to the detriment of teaching. In the end, very few Abbots and Abbesses, if any exist in fact, have all the gifts at once and so the need to rely on persons of good counsel and different abilities.

Finally, upon reflection I would dare say that the greatest danger and the insidious temptation at the beginning is to believe oneself omnipotent. It is my impression, however, that for Abbesses the main temptation is rather that of omnipresence.

Let us return in more detailed fashion to the five areas or dimensions mentioned earlier. To help me in my ministry of service, since I was after all but a young Abbot, I made for myself a list of relevant texts which I
retranslated and updated after a while for my own use. Mutatis mutandis, these examples can also be useful for other forms of religious life.

The Abbot as father (and mother)

- You yourself must be the first to believe that you are taking the place of Christ; this will help you to act as he did.
- The one who listens to you is listening to him
- Do not think that he is doing what you wish and what you say; you must find out what he wants and make it known.
- Your authority is in service of life and this life needs your service more than your presiding.
- The life you give and to which you are in service is not yours but the Other’s; to give and be in service of this life, however, you must die to your own.
- To be in service of life, you must take care of it and bring it into being, motivate and direct it. This service is both paternal and maternal. If you are not at the same time father and more, you will be neither.
- If you wish to be life giving, keep always in mind the basic needs of every human being for meaning (purpose and end), belonging and group identity.
- To stimulate and give life, you should always be present, though not omnipresent; your moral authority is proportional to the quality of your presence.
- The four scourges as far as monastic authority is concerned are: paternalism which misuses authority and confuses it with power; fraternalism which denies diversity and the hierarchy of services; maternalism which has the need to protect and envelop; and the infantilism of one who gratifies and reassures self by depending on others.
- A paternalism which takes jokes seriously and jokes about serious things is foolish and is also foolish if it takes the self too seriously.
- Blessed are you if you contemplate our Father to the point of becoming radiant in his light; the Lord will cause his face to shine on you for the glory of all!

The Abbot as teacher (and witness):

- To be a teacher you must be first and always a disciple of the Word of the sole Teacher.
If you wish to be accepted as teacher never cease witnessing not to perfection but to conversion.

If you live what you teach do not fear repeating yourself; you will never be saying the same thing twice.

Your teaching must be formative with transformation as its goal; if you limit yourself to informing, you do not form any one.

As teacher you must be able to articulate and communicate to others the essential values and goals proper to our life.

The purpose of your talks may be to 1) captivate: gain the attention and approval of the audience; 2) enlighten: with the help of doctrine; 3) motivate: by awakening feelings; 4) convince: so that decisions may be made.

You are a good communicator when you follow these principles: 1) clarity: you make sure that people can understand you; 2) methodology: you proceed step by step; 3) organic structuring: in your presentation, you establish a harmonious relationship between the elements and the whole; 4) vividness: you take examples from daily life to illustrate your points.

If you do not want your audience to doze, be brief; if you want to find favour, be natural; if you want to be boring, try to say everything there is to say on a topic.

Do not reserve teaching to yourself, unless you wish to keep others ignorant.

The goal is not to be witty but if you wish to get something across and reveal something of yourself, amuse them and amuse yourself.

Blessed are you if you add a grain of salt to what you are saying; everyone will perceive some gentleness in what they are hearing.

The Abbot as pastor (discreet)

You are truly a pastor when, in your relationships, you consider each person unique and without equal.

If you listen with your ears and your heart, you will be able to understand what someone is saying and feeling as well.

Listen to the one who is speaking; this is the best way to let him be and live.

The ability to identify with the person and to differentiate yourself, to enter into relationship and to detach yourself, is basic to any pastoral
ministry whatever.

· Others will listen to you if you approach them but not if you pursue them.

· We all react to others according to prior dealings with them.

· Communication is more of an emotional process than a cerebral one; it is therefore very important to begin by welcoming and to continue and end by welcoming.

· Pray for prudence; it will enable you to avoid the pitfall of excess through precipitous action and lack of due consideration as well as the pitfall of inadequacy through inconsistency and negligence.

· Search for and find the common good as you try to integrate the uniqueness of each person into a harmony which is better because it integrates without quashing.

· You are a good pastor if you strengthen the weak without neglecting the strong from fear of feeling weak.

· Life grows slowly so never despair; we do not make carrots grow faster by pulling on their tops.

· Blessed are you if you experience everything as grace; you will be filled with gratitude toward everyone, you will be gracious and look with favour on everyone.

The Abbot as doctor (merciful)

· If your neighbour’s struggles make you impatient rather than merciful, it is a sign in a way that you have not accepted your own struggles.

· Most of today’s problems began in the past and what you tolerate unjustifiably will become a chronic problem. If you let things go so as not to create problems, you are accumulating problems.

· The best correction you can offer is good direction: all that is well directed goes well.

· A small dose of preventative medicine can prevent many plagues and incurable diseases.

· A good doctor is not one who gives orders but one who attends to the sick organism.

· Do not forget that a sense of humour is moisture which relaxes and refreshes you when you are tense and your muscles hardened; it is also therapeutic laughter and is healing.
Authority In Monastic Life

Bernardo Olivera, OCSO

Blessed are you if you know how to differentiate a bit of dust from a mountain; you will save yourself quite a few useless worries.

The Abbot as administrator (prudent)

- Imitate the Lord in all things: consider persons first and then things, who a person is and then what he or she does.

- The personal responsibility of your collaborators grows to the extent that their duties are made clear.

- The strength of your programmes depends on the amount of participation involved in developing them and on the extent to which your collaborators and the community assumes responsibility as a result of them.

- Programmes are important but those for whom they are intended and those who carry them out are even more important.

- Evaluation and feedback are effective ways of improving what you have planned, said and done.

- Working as a team has real possibilities for increasing your ability to be present in a delegated and creative way.

- Respect intermediate authorities and they will respect you.

- If the way your community is organized works well, it will continue to work well even in your absence.

- The wisdom gained through experience will make you a good administrator and help you to avoid potential obstacles: 1) depending in servile manner on specialists; 2) having absolute confidence in organizations; 3) waiting for scientific evidence to confirm what common sense makes evident.

- “Presidentialism” in an organization amounts to filling holes with holes and pots of flowers.

- Blessed are you if you reflect and seek advice before acting and if you laugh before beginning it all; you will avoid going into debt because of your lack of financial prudence.

In conclusion, I wish to add a few very brief and general words on my experience in service of the “central administration”. To give a context, it is already eighteen years since I was elected Abbot general of our Order. In terms of canon law, we are a monastic congregation with 100 monasteries of monks and 70 monasteries of nuns, which brings our total numbers to nearly 4000 in 55 different countries. It is not surprising then that the Abbot general has under him 170 “autonomous” superiors whom he must
obey.

We usually claim to be a decentralized Order but that obviously does not mean that our Order is disorderly and disorganized or lacking in a “central” authority. This authority resides in the general chapter which meets every three years. Apart from these sessions, the Abbot general acts as vicar of the chapter and according to the constitutions. His service is mainly pastoral and is based on the right to make canonical visits and the option of making exceptional decisions in particular cases. This pastoral service of subsidiarity must not neglect three other equally important functions of being the link between communities, the guardian and promoter of the heritage, and the initiator of spiritual renewal. In other words, it is an authority appropriate to the nature of an Order or monastic congregation made up of “autonomous” monasteries connected by filial and paternal bonds.

Since it is a question of a “decentralized” Order, one can readily understand the seriousness of the temptation or accusation of “centralizing”. History teaches that it is easy to succumb to such a temptation, both on the central level and on the local level. History also teaches other lessons of which we are not always aware in the slightest, for example, confusing centralizing and pastoral-administrative effectiveness and directing accusations “to the top” without realizing that the fault lies precisely with a particular person in authority. Such is the case of an authoritarian Abbot or Abbess who accuses the canonical visitor or Abbot general of the same thing of which they are accused by their own community. To push the point further, this might well be the case where other higher government authorities are concerned. For example, there will always be people who accuse “Rome” of centralizing and who thereby safeguard a certain autonomy which is nothing but an illegitimate monopolizing of authority.
LIVING IN MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY: WHO AM I?

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I am born into a particular culture. Each one of us breathes in culture like breathing the air around us. My cultural identity is formed by multiple experiences and factors. Unconsciously we carry our culture within us. What is culture? Culture includes the shared beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, etc. of any particular group—be that a nation, geographic area, religious group, class or tribe of people, even a certain period of history. (For example, I am what we call in the USA, a baby-boomer.) Culture has been described as the collective soul of a people. It is a very sacred and deep part of who I am.

Therefore, sharing on the topic of multicultural community living requires sensitivity, reverence and care. We need to remember that:

“Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on another’s dream. More serious still, we may forget... That God was there before our arrival.” (author unknown)

Multicultural Community—it is a topic both vast and complex—not even a week’s workshop would be enough to deeply appreciate a group’s cultural diversity. Yet many of us enter into multicultural living situations,
trust in our relational skills, and soon find ourselves struggling with misunderstandings, issues of power and confusion about meaning. I feel that the most important thing we can do is to share with each other of our truth and from our experiences. With this kind of sharing we encourage and support each other in the adventure of multicultural living.

My plan is to speak about culture, reminding you what you probably already know. We’ll talk about our experiences of living in Rome, reviewing why the choice to live within cultural diversity is challenging. I hope that this sharing will energize you to continue the exploration of cultural diversity with the sisters in your home community. In our opening prayer we asked for the grace to open our souls, for when we enter the conversation of culture, we enter sacred space.

WHO AM I? I discover a little more about who I am whenever I meet someone who is different. Being in any relationship requires that I first know WHO I AM. In just a minute I will ask you to introduce yourself in your group, sharing your cultural identity. Think about the aspects important to your personal culture—perhaps not only your ethnicity & birthplace. For example, I identify myself as growing up with German catholic heritage in a small town of Midwestern USA, as the oldest of 16 children. (Pause for sharing…)

Figure 1 shows the reality of living inside one’s culture as a SAFE ZONE. Here life is predictable. We share the same customs and values. We understand and use the same rules and language. There is security and a kind of strength in this togetherness. Outside of this safe place there is danger—people who are different. THEY (those strangers) cause me to be AFRAID; being away from my own people is like entering the FEAR ZONE.

I’m sure that everyone has stories about a time of feeling different, of touching into that new territory beyond the safe zone. I grew up in a white-skinned world, where colored skin could cause fear. I invite you now to reflect upon a time that you felt different. The difference could be your race, culture, customs, language. How did it feel? Let’s take time now to share your experiences.
Eric Law offers the image of a GRACE MARGIN (Figure 2) to symbolize our process of transformation and growth in multicultural sensitivity! GRACE is a process of increasing the safe space and decreasing the things that cause fear, thus increasing our willingness to relate to what was unknown and to be open to what seems strange. Perhaps you can recognize how grace has been working in you as you’ve become more “at home” here in Rome.

With an increase of GRACE (Figure 3) (through time, prayer, greater openness, flexibility, vulnerability, honesty and respectful communication) I can begin to see value in a different person’s perspective, recognize and let go of my prejudices, as well as accept that there are a variety of understandings for the same thing, idea or situation. Many feelings emerge in this process and it is important to be attentive to them.

We are here in Rome and most of us are living in an international setting. I am hopeful that you are experiencing this margin of grace! This grace is absolutely necessary at any general chapter of an international congregation! (But actually it is necessary in the meeting of almost any group of people!)

In understanding the challenges of multicultural living, the Iceberg Analogy of Culture (Figure 4*) is very helpful. Like an iceberg’s external tip, there are cultural aspects that we can readily SEE, TASTE, TOUCH, and HEAR. When you think about living within the culture of Rome, what external elements come to your mind—the things we see, hear, taste and touch? (Sharing of examples)

The larger hidden part of culture is
internal. Deeply within lie our UNCONSCIOUS tendencies, thought patterns, values, myths, and beliefs, of which even we are sometimes not aware. These affect everything that we do. They are like the sunglasses we wear, filtering the way we perceive life, the way we take it in, the way we SENSE the world around us. (When I taste something in another culture, I judge the taste according to my culturally familiar tastes.) Culture FORMS us and CONDITIONS us. Culture teaches us things that we don’t realize we were taught—how to be in relationship with certain others, who I am in relationship to certain others. Culture gives me a sense of belonging, fitting in, feeling comfortable or “at home.” We tend to judge others’ actions and behaviors by the rules that come from our own deep and internal culture. Our ideas about what is considered acceptable or rude behavior are determined by our culture. (In Paraguay our SSND Postulant was rather scandalized by me and what seemed to her like a lazy sign of the cross, compared to the pattern of necessary small crosses that she had learned.) In some cultures it is desired behavior that people look each other in the eye when speaking. In other cultures it is totally unacceptable for especially a young person to look an adult in the eye when speaking. Misunderstandings can happen quickly and easily and OFTEN when we are in multicultural situations.

My experience is that when I am outside my own culture, being here in Italy, it is easier to become aware of some unconscious aspects of my own culture. Culture tends to hide things best from those closest to it. It is like a fish, unaware of its water until it finds itself in different water. I realize what MY water was like AND I notice things about the Italian water that those who’ve grown up swimming in it might not realize—good things and not-so-good things.

Take a minute to consider the differences you’ve noticed about your culture—its perceptions, thought patterns, values, etc…. while living here in the different culture of Rome. (share examples)

Sometimes our experience of cultural difference causes deep emotional reactions. It feels like a clash! It may catch you off guard, confuse, anger, surprise, or trouble you, as well as bring on feelings of loneliness or sadness. Most culture clashes happen at the internal level—like a crashing of two icebergs, beneath the surface. The felt sensation is that something is WRONG! We are often not aware of our internal culture until we experience someone of a different culture behaving in a way that causes such an internal reaction. Think for a minute about the cultural clashes that you’ve experienced, mindful also that there are different cultures of religious life. (share examples)
The language of a culture is buried deeply in the cultural iceberg. WORDS are an important part of this language and yet language is more than words. Words are the main tools that enable us to describe our perception of reality. Language creates understanding and connection, but words also limit our ability to describe the world around us. There is the color BLUE. “Blue” describes a certain reality, and every language would have a word for blue.

Now consider how many other words you have to describe a shade of blue: aqua, sky blue, cornflower blue, turquoise, robin’s egg blue, etc. Imagine having only one word to describe all the different shades of blue. The various words mean a slightly different shade of blue and give a very exact meaning.

Has anyone ever said to you, “We don’t have a word for that idea in our language.”? Many languages have words that cannot be translated because the perception of reality being described does not exist across cultures. Words reflect the values of a culture. For example, in one book on synonyms in the English language there are 56 alternatives for the word “war.” Yet in the language of the Nenan, a peaceful tribe in Malaysia, not a single word exists for “war,” for it is simply not necessary. Words or lack of words are a mirror of the values and needs of a particular society. The Nenan language did not NEED a word for war!

Because of the deep connection between words and values, we can understand why it is a great challenge to express deep emotion, speak about values, and pray from one’s heart in a language other than one’s own. If it’s not enough that WORDS, their various meanings and our sometimes limited vocabulary, can complicate communication between cultures, there are other elements that SPEAK or COMMUNICATE. Communication also includes things like tone of voice, emotions, gestures, physical space—each of which can have different meanings in different cultures. Indeed, we may use the same words, but we might not be “speaking the same language,” so to speak. One’s fluency and understanding of another language will always add to the complexity inside multicultural living!

A multicultural community is a “hotbed” for growing either sensitivity or frustration, misunderstandings, division and problems or new understandings, unity in diversity and cooperation. With cultural diversity we have DIFFERENCES, and very often differences create division and judgment and conflict. Multicultural living—with all its richness—is a challenge.
If we bring willingness to experience new and different things; if we have a spirit of adventure and are open to think in new ways and from other points of view, we can experience multicultural community as GIFT. At times it may be an uncomfortable gift.

Food is a typical issue in multicultural community. I may be missing my kind of food—there’s too much pasta, not enough rice. Without tortillas, there is no meal, or no potatoes, no meal! Eating my cultural food gives me comfort. In addition to food and differing traditions or rituals for celebrations, the use of various languages at liturgy and prayer, as well as in meal table conversations is a typical multicultural struggle.

Realizing that a community with different cultures is also a community of different personalities, we must keep in mind that differences are just that—DIFFERENCES. Usually they are neither right nor wrong, bad nor good. Often, however, a person speaks as though “The way that I …learned, live, eat, speak, (fill in the blank) is the RIGHT WAY!” We call this way of being in the world or looking at the world: “Ethnocentric.” Ethnocentrism, the assumption that the world view of my culture is central to all reality, is most often conveyed unconsciously. A listener might detect ethnocentrism within dogmatic statements and judgments, but also in another’s tone of voice. In multicultural community living, I am invited to let go of the perspective that my culture sets the standard and is the CORRECT or BEST or ONLY way to do something. I must let go of my ethnocentrism. This is a way to “take off my shoes.”

If I observe others and I interact with them only according to “my world view,” it is as though I am in a room full of mirrors. This limited perspective of seeing things according to my own cultural rules, values, and beliefs, only further divides rather than builds community. An example of this limited vision is demonstrated in this ridiculous story: Mom and Dad are taking their children for a drive and they pass a convertible, filled with naked people. One child shouts, “Look, mom! Do you see those people riding in that car? They are not wearing their seat belts!”

In contrast to ethnocentrism, there is “ethnorelativism,” the assumption that cultures are RELATIVE to each other. (It’s like being in a room full of WINDOWS.) With an ethnorelative mindset I am able to accept that there are different windows or perspectives and I begin to value different points of view. I learn that my world is in relationship to other different worlds, worlds just as important as my world. In multicultural community, we are human beings with different personalities, operating out of various levels of cultural sensitivity, experiencing feelings of anxiety, impatience, anger, fear, loneliness, and confusion, along with feelings of joy, gratitude,
compassion, and solidarity. It is healthy to dialogue about the cultural frustrations and confusions.

When I am beyond the “honeymoon stage” of multicultural living, if I am feeling hurt or annoyed by the actions, facial expression or words of another, when I find myself judging another’s difference, it is time for dialogue. I believe that we can learn from each other to the extent that we are willing to open our hearts and honestly talk to each other. In order to build trust, we need to ask questions, remembering that sharing from the heart in a language that is not your own, is difficult. We need patience, vulnerability, honesty, and trust in the good will of each other. It is always important to exercise respectful questioning and to ensure mutuality in the conversation. I might begin with: “Can you help me understand why you did….. You said…” It may also be helpful for me to step back “out of myself” for a moment and be an observer of myself when I am feeling confused. I might try to imagine what my different actions may look like from another person’s perspective, or hear how my words or my tone of voice might feel for another person. When I have feelings that are strong and troubling it is good to talk with someone or to take time to reflection or journal about the situation.

Who am I in the midst of multicultural community living? Healthy dialogue, genuine respect, honesty, an open heart, a desire for community and the spirit of love—these are the necessary elements for creating community and for discovering who I am—a culturally aware and unique individual.

*The Iceberg Analogy of Culture is based on materials developed by Edward T. Hall and Eric H. F. Law and used in workshops presented by the Mexican American Cultural Center, San Antonio, Texas. [http://www.maccsa.org](http://www.maccsa.org)


Rev. Eric Law’s ministry of training leaders for a diverse and changing world continues today through: The Kaleidoscope Institute: [http://www.ladiocese.org/ki](http://www.ladiocese.org/ki)
Suggestion for multicultural community discussion:

**Cultural Identity**

*(Culture, Ethnicity, Race, Class)*

1. How do you identify yourself culturally? __________________
   
   Name one or two examples of your own cultural heritage that are a part of your ….
   a. external culture:
   b. internal culture:

2. What do you want others to know about your culture?

3. What do you never want to hear others say about your culture?

4. What are some of your culture’s main underlying rules?

5. The person(s) who has had the greatest influence in my acceptance of “who I am” is…

6. Has your ethnic, racial, cultural heritage been a positive aspect of your life?

7. Reflect upon a time when you felt different. (The difference could be your race, culture, customs, language, etc.) How did it feel? Write about or draw the experience.