

*MYSTICISM AND PROPHECY
IN EVERYDAY LIFE*

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PREFACE

Original in Spanish

We are convinced of the need for a mystical-prophetic religious life in order to be meaningful in today's world and the desire to move on along this road impels us to offer in this last issue of 2011, some articles that can help us keep alive the spirit of the Plenary Assembly of 2010.

Sr. **Janet Malone** offers us some ways to recreate today the mystical-prophetic tradition in practical life: the silence that unmask the false ego which seeks to take the place of God in us, and to learn how to live the present moment with gratitude. But in order to exercise prophecy, we must pass through the wilderness like John the Baptist and walk these foot trails everyday.

Fraternal life is presented as the true link between mysticism and prophecy and as the test of each one. Sr. **Josune Arregui** offers some tips for "Reinventing the art of living together", a daily task and which we can never renounce to this communitarian way of the sequela. It is a difficult undertaking, but it is our challenge which results to a daily style of life marked with fraternal acceptance, responsibility, dialogue and common mission. It is difficult but not impossible and it is a great gift.

"From Hospitality to the Visitation: Living the Encounter in Diversity" is the contribution of the White Father, **Bernard Ugeux**. He delved into the concept of acceptance of differences and made many references to interreligious dialogue. True acceptance means creating a space in the other's own inner space. Only in this way can one live hospitality as a spiritual itinerary. Abraham, Mary at the Visitation and the martyrs of Tibhirine are the proposed icons which give sense to interreligious and communitarian dialogue.

Environmental commitment springs from spirituality, says the Carmelite **Eduardo Agosta**, as the ecological crisis is deeply related to the crisis of faith. The human desire, always unlimited, is the basis of consumerism which in turn leads to ecological crisis. The drama of a world without God is to let the creatures try to fill in that space which only God can fill. The way proposed by St. John of the Cross aims to purify this desire through the night and recognizes that step in God's creatures whom God has clothed in beauty.

We also offer the conference which the Anglican religious, Sr. **Avís Mary**, SLG, delivered this year at the Interreligious Congress in Triefenstein, Germany on “*How the Scripture forms and informs the Religious Life*” and shows the strength of this common core that unites all Christians and religious. From the Anglican tradition, silence is the gateway to encounter the Word of God whether in studies, in the liturgy or through the Lectio Divina.

In this issue, we begin a new column dedicated to *Testimonies of Life*. This time, it is precisely Don **Joao Braz de Aviz**, the new Prefect of the Congregation of Consecrated Life who will tell us a stunning personal experience which in turn gave birth to a beautiful testimony of the Church.

“DEMYSTIFYING” MYSTICISM AND PROPHECY

THE CHRISTIAN OF THE FUTURE WILL BE A MYSTIC OR NOT EXIST AT ALL. KARL RAHNER

Sr. Janet Malone, CND

Sr. Janet Malone is a member of the Congregation de Notre Dame (CND). She holds doctorates in Organization Development and Pastoral Psychology. Poet, writer, author, Janet has recently written a book on transforming, in nonviolent ways, personal and interpersonal conflict and anger. She has been a mentor to leadership teams in religious congregations, and facilitates retreats and workshops on different aspects of change in consecrated life vis-a-vis the signs of the times.

Original in English

Background

The twin theme for the conference of some 800 congregational leaders of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) in Rome, May 7-11, 2010 was mysticism and prophecy. The resounding theme choice of the conference participants, they discussed, reflected on and listened to speakers explore its necessity. For example, Ciro Garcia, a Spanish Carmelite, citing the writings of the Spanish Carmelite mystic, John of the Cross, stated, “There is no future for religious life without mysticism and prophecy”, adding, “Today, we are called to recreate the mystico-prophetic tradition of our founders”.

How do we go about recreating (reviving?) the mystico-prophetic tradition? I am suggesting that in this 21st century where present models of religious life are changing and new models clearly demonstrating this mystico-prophetic tradition are still not evident, the challenge for each of us religious is to enliven in our daily lives the practical aspects of being mystical and prophetic. Only as each of us becomes more imbued with these two searing values, will our congregations resonate them. It is one thing to say that religious life is a prophetic lifeform but unless our congregations are actually mystical and prophetic, then we are in danger of losing the integral aspects of this liminality. Recently, when working with some women religious, the theme of the May 2010 UISG conference came up. One person, seemingly voicing the frustration of many in the group, said, “Will you please demystify mysticism (and

prophecy)? This article attempts to demystify these values in our lives.

Desert Journey into Mysticism

Mysticism is an experience of God that takes place without words, names, ideas, or any knowledge at all. Albert Nolan

Although we speak of both/and of the mystico-prophetic tradition, I am suggesting herein that there is a sequence in its nurturing. I think that any prophetic stance is always based on a strongly grounded contemplative, mystical life in which the individual and/or the congregation speaks out against injustices from a sacred God-space within, a place that has been honed of the false ego self and is truly imbued with God’s love, compassion and justice for all life. This contemplative, mystical stance is a journey inward, a pruning that we used to refer to as purgation, the stripping away of all that detains us from focusing on God in illumination and ultimately, union.

Mysticism is a daily discipline, a daily practice, an ongoing desert journey of soul wilderness. Therein, we gradually move from our kataphatic, discursive prayer of images, words, consolations, to that of apophatic prayer, in which we let go and let God in silence, emptiness, darkness, void. Through that daily prayer of silence in God, we learn to become detached from our ideas, reputation, education, health, skills. This is the desert journey to mysticism. It is a journey into stillness and simplicity as noted in, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

Stages into Mysticism

We have all travelled so we do know about the unknown, the unforeseen, the unexpected that can come up. However, the desert journey into becoming a mystic and then a prophet is a journey like no other, a pilgrimage of perilous proportions because we have no maps, no GPS, (global positioning systems), no trip outlines and most importantly, we are not in control. This journey into the wilderness of an interior sacred space “invites us to the unexplored landscapes of an inner geography where that which is most deeply ‘us’ is joined to what we experience as radically Other”(Annemarie S. Kidder. *The Power of Solitude*. NY: Crossroad, 2007, 59).

What might this desert journey look like? Stages (constructs) have been delineated to help us visualize our journey of walking across the emptiness of the desert “out there” to arrive at... the emptiness “in here” (Ruth Haley Barton. *Invitation to Silence and Solitude*. Intervarsity Press, 2004, 90). These stages as outlined by several authors, including Jean Shinoda Bolen (*Crossing to Avalon*. Harper San Francisco, 1995) and Ewert Cousins (*Christ of the 21st Century*. Element, 1992), are always similar: 1) the call to leave the known, the familiar, the comfortable and move into the solitariness of the desert; 2) the struggle and

challenge of the kenotic, stripping of the false ego self which takes place in the searing and pregnant emptiness of the desert soul wilderness; 3) the metanoic transformation into mysticism as the stripping clears out what is not of God; 4) finally, the coming back and sharing the New Reign of justice and compassion (prophecy). Kerry Walters explores this journey in his book, *Soul Wilderness: A Desert Spirituality*, (NY: Paulist Press, 2001, 10), adding, “... the wilderness transformation has named her/him a prophet, an emissary of God... (and) she/he returns to the everyday world...to share....”

Kenosis

Our soul grows by subtraction not by addition. Meister Eckhart

If we look at these stages to mysticism and prophecy in our own lives, we note a deep call in the desert space of our hearts, to let go of the familiar, what we have learned makes us a “good, holy religious”, and move into the unknown. Too many of our discursive prayer practices and rituals can make us feel in control, and in the doing, make us rather than Sophia-God the Center of our beings. In the journey to mysticism, we are called to silence and listening in order to hear the ineffable Silence of God speaking to us as perchance, “God passes by” in that sacred space of our hearts. Like Elijah of old, we learn in the desert that God is not in the furor of the wind, the crushing rocks, the earthquake, the fire but in the “sound of sheer silence” (I Kings 19:1-19). Elijah had to learn that his being “most zealous for the Lord” (prophecy) first had to be transformed in the silence, stillness and solitude of the desert. Once we let go of our controls reminiscent of our false ego self even in religious matters, then and only then will God use our prophetic imaginations of denunciation, renunciation and annunciation.

Metanoia

The desert came to be understood as a place of death, the place where one died to the false self.... Annemarie S. Kidder

At this point, one might begin to feel discouraged about being a mystic but we need to be reminded “we are all mystics at our core, since God’s own seed is within us”. (Frank Tuoti. *Why Not Be a Mystic?* Crossroad, 1996, 21). However, once we become serious about moving to our core, deep within in the desert space of our beings, one day at a time, we let go of all that is not God, all that is not our true selves which is God’s seed within us.

In this journey of stripping away my false ego self, I have found it very enlightening (and consoling) to understand better how this false ego self became so “entrenched”. Our false ego selves have been built up as defences to the hurts, rejections, fears we experienced as young children, at a time when we

had no inner sense of a more authentic self. In other words, over time, our defence mechanisms became entrenched as our personas, our false ego selves. However, as we become more aware of our innate goodness and loveliness buried underneath the false self, we can, through our daily desert spiritual practices of silence, solitude, contemplation, lectio divina, “bring into focus the false ego self that has absorbed the place of God in us, so we can... make room for the Spirit of God to move in and do its transformation” (Annemarie Kidder, 2007, 133). Gradually, we are stripped of our false ego self of ambitions, being recognized, being praised, being number one.

The Wonder and Awe of the NOW

The mystic stands in awe at the Mystery of God’s love. Albert Nolan

We have a real sense of our moving more and more deeply into mysticism as our true self, made in God’s image and likeness, transforms us to truly live just the NOW of our lives. We are grateful for this now; we respond in awe and wonder to the unity of all: oneself, God and the cosmos in a mystery of interdependence and communion. We feel grateful even in our not fully understanding this Mystery. In many ways, living the mystical life through the desert journey of leaving the known of the false self and moving into the kenosis and metanoia of our true self in God is a numinous experience of the holy. Illumination into this Mystery comes after the darkness and void of the purgative stripping of kenosis. More and more we recognize that true sense of union, of oneness with all and for all. Many of these unitive experiences are ineffable, beyond words and explanation, but our tears often express the reality of such mystery.

Moving into the unknown of transformation and living the now and wonder of mysticism require both discipline and practice. One of the great gifts of living the silence and solitude of the desert in our daily lives is we gradually are able to let go of many of our attachments built up over a lifetime, and experience a “now” sense of gratitude for what is, here in this moment, whatever it might be. Our daily desert rhythm of contemplation, reading, reflection (lectio divina) softens our ego defences and increasingly we recognize that “our need for a sense of achievement, of doing good, our secret desire for recognition and approval are all rooted in the false ego self” (Frank Tuoti. *Why Not Be a Mystic?* NY: Crossroad, 1996, 39).

With this kenosis and metanoia, this daily discipline and practice of receptive silence, our prayer becomes more and more a prayer of the heart, a prayer of unknowing as Meister Eckhart speaks of in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Thomas Keating, in *Centering Prayer* and John Main, in *Christian Meditation*. Prayer becomes a knowing in the not knowing. To become truly mystical, there

is such a letting go, "a kind of unknowing or darkness. Yet it is a reality, a real form of consciousness, related to awe and wonder" (Albert Nolan. *Jesus Today*. NY: Orbis, 2006, 124).

Models of Mysticism and Prophecy

The prophet is one who is critically outspoken about the injustices of one's time. Albert Nolan

Both John the Baptist and Jesus went into the wilderness of mysticism before they returned (the last stage of the desert journey) as prophets well grounded to preach justice and compassion for all. Jesus struggled with the deeply alluring temptations to power, popularity and possessions as detailed in Luke 4:1-13, all similar to our false self temptations.

We are familiar with both of their desert journeys; here, I will focus that of John the Baptist and his prophetic role at the time of Jesus. First off, in Luke 1:57-80, we learn of John's birth and his father's proclaiming John's prophetic vocation, "And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways..." (76). Such a prophetic call is only the initial aspect of this vocation because integral to its fulfilment is the individual response. We then learn John's response. "The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation in Israel." (80). John modeled for us religious the both/and call of mysticism and prophecy. He showed us from his own life their recurring "sequence" and interconnectedness. In the desert of silence, solitude, stillness and simplicity, John learned daily what mysticism is all about; he also learned about the signs of his time that moved him to speak out. We do not know the details of his wilderness experience but we do know the results of that experience. He modeled for us the prophetic requirements of a deep prayer life, freedom from any attachments standing in the way of this deep union with God, and the requisite resonance between his life and his message. "By their fruits you will know them" (Galatians 5).

Returning

Unequivocally, when he came out of the desert as a fiery mystic and prophet, John was "a voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths... The winding roads shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth... You brood of vipers... Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance" (Luke 3 :4-7). John didn't mince words; his message was incisive and clear! None of us will be prophetic like John but we are still called to be prophetic in our day, reading the signs of the times and recognizing that we must nurture our mystical groundedness as preparatory to

prophetically denouncing what we see as unjust and needing change in our congregations. Reading the signs of the times, we can then announce how we are called to respond in the urgency of a given moment. Being prophetic is God speaking in and through us in the Now signs of the times. Kerry Walters explores this journey, noting, “... the wilderness transformation has named her/him a prophet, an emissary of God... (and) she/he returns to the everyday world...to share....” Walters adds, “The mystic is also a prophet and the task of the prophet is to return” ((NY: Paulist Press, 2001, 10; 21).

In these reflections, I am suggesting that before any one is prophetic, there is the searing journey of desert wilderness, desert spirituality, a transformation into being a mystic. The physical desert journey can be one we take at certain periods of our lives for different lengths of time in our going to a hermitage, a poustinia; it can also be a powerful metaphor for the daily soul pilgrimage of kenosis and metanoia paramount for the role of prophet. As we have seen above, the prophetic call of denunciation, renunciation and annunciation comes from the interior desert of the mystical true self in which God demands of us to renounce all that is of the ego. Only then, can we denounce what is unjust, unfair, selfish, evil, in order to announce the essence of right relationships of all with all. It is critical for each of us women and men religious to realize the call to mysticism and prophecy is for each of us. While it may seem esoteric, at the same time, there is something quite mundane about this journey. It is the cumulative daily journeys we each take in our ordinary lives of answering this call, crossing over to the desert struggle of kenosis and metanoia and coming back to share how we have been called. The real challenge is our daily fidelity to enter into the silence and emptiness of the desert of our inner soul terrain and just be, before and with our faithful God who is always present in that apophatic Nada.

Fear and Courage

As we know, the prophet will be ignored, marginalized, rejected when she/he challenges the domesticity of the status quo in congregations, in politics, in society. In order to withstand such rejection and not give up, a grounded mystical interior is our sole (soul) mainstay. Being a prophet is not for any of us looking to be popular or accepted; rather the prophet has to ensure through her/his desert spirituality of mysticism that the hurt and hubris of the false self are transformed. The prophet must be a mystic. How else could she/he continue to be grounded and at peace in the midst of such challenges, going back again and again in nonviolence and equanimity for more marginalization and rejection?

Because each of us is human, there is a fear that if we speak out against what is unjust, we will not be liked appreciated, accepted, included. Joan Chittister says it well: “If I don’t parrot party line... will I ever again have a

place in the system, a seat at the table...? She cautions that we must go deep within for the courage to be prophetic, adding, “What am I willing to lose in order to have peace of mind, integrity of soul?” (*Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmann Publishing, 2003, 45).

Summary

Consecrated life as a lifeform, is designated part of the mystico-prophetic tradition. This was highlighted in the recent UISG meetings in Rome, May 2010. Such delineations as mysticism and prophecy are seen by many of us in religious life as esoteric and for a small elite. However, in our explorations here, I have attempted to detail aspects of living out both our mysticism and prophecy, personally and congregationally. They are calls that must be nurtured and fostered, calls that aren't for the fainthearted nor for those comfortable with the status quo of acceptance and security in religious life.

We are at a critical juncture in the life cycle of most of the present models of religious life. At the beginning of these reflections, I noted the words of the Spanish Carmelite at the UISG meetings, “There is no future for religious life without mysticism and prophecy”, and, “Today, we are called to recreate the mystico-prophetic tradition of our founders”. I am firmly convinced that there will always be religious life but present models are dying even with the small neo-traditional groups surfacing here and there. Our daily contribution to this unknown future in religious life is our **daily** ongoing desert journey to mysticism and our ongoing prophetic return to preach the Good News. Some may insist the time for individual mystics and prophets in congregations is over; now is the time for congregations to be such. I submit that only when we recognize the mystics and prophets in our congregations will we gradually become mystical and prophetic congregations. Not before.

Reflection Starters

1. Do you consider yourself a mystic, a prophet? Why/Why not?
2. Explore your mystical spirituality in light of kataphatic and apophatic prayer.
3. Reflect on your mystical and prophetic qualities as highlighted in this article.
4. Where is your desert of silence, stillness, simplicity and solitude? Have you ever gone to a hermitage for in depth desert time?
5. Is your congregation mystical and prophetic? Why/Why not?

REINVENTING THE ART OF LIVING TOGETHER

Sr. Josune Arregui, CCV

UISG Executive Secretary

Original in Spanish

Introduction

Many of us remember the UISG Plenary Assembly held in May 2010 in Rome, in which eight hundred religious women, leaders in their Congregations and from all over the world, gathered together in search of pathways to achieve the dream of a mystical-prophetic religious life.

The Final Declaration, which summarized the common discernment, focused on three points:

The first point referred to the *mysticism of the prophetic person*, who listens to “the whisper of the fountain that springs forth and flows”, and is concerned with savoring and sharing the Word and Bread, going to the source of one’s charism and inviting others to drink of this water...

The third point expressed the *prophecy of the mystical person*, who discovers the sparks of light in the night, offering a ministry of compassion and healing to the wounds of humanity, knows how to pronounce a prophetic word to a world striving to change the structures and to a Church in which the woman should have more space and recognition.

But there is a second point that speaks of *acceptance and hospitality* and, in my opinion, this is what makes the mystical-prophetic unity, which we desire so much, possible. If we try to enhance our prophecy or our mysticism, we always run the risk of self-deception. The fire test of both is found only in fraternal charity: “by this they will know you...”, Jesus said. Love is expressed both in interpersonal relationships and in social commitment. Religious life has a visible and audacious expression of this and that is community life.

I will refer to this in this article. I start by quoting two points of the Declaration that have inspired my reflection on the community as a place of

welcome and hospitality:

- Re-invent the art of living together filled with humanizing relationships, in reciprocal hospitality in a climate of listening, empathy and non violence in order to become witnesses of evangelical values
- Create a new style of mystical and prophetic life, open and hospitable, inclusive, respectful of differences and acknowledging the richness of other cultures and religions.

I find this expression “reinvent” very effective, because foundation structures alone are not enough, although much of their charismatic inspiration remains valid. What is being asked of us is to *reinvent it* because society has changed and people – not just the young – are no longer the same. Furthermore, anthropology gives us new models of human fulfillment of which we must not lose sight.

Just to give some examples: the current democratic trend challenges the old ways of exercising communitarian authority: the recognition of the dignity of the person obliges us to rethink the concept of humility; the essential autonomy of mature freedom invites us to reconsider obedience; the positive evaluation of emotional-sexual energy requires a new way of looking at celibacy and, in general, the enhancement of interpersonal relationships and dialogue over differences impels us to *reinvent community life*.

We cannot continue to drag on outdated community life styles, we have to reinvent. And to reinvent, techniques or knowledge are not enough. An art is required because it is a new creation which necessitates the soul of an artist, i.e. to have a sense of the beauty of harmony and find a way of expressing it in new forms of community life that are meaningful for the world today.

1. A difficulty that challenges

“All the fruitfulness of Consecrated Life depends on the quality of community life”, said John Paul II. We know that this art is difficult because it encompasses all the complexities of interpersonal relationships. Casaldàliga expressed this very well, with humor poetry:

There are two problems, two:

the others and me.

The difficult other and the difficult me.

The difficult we of communion.

We should not insist too much on this. We very well know what causes the difficulty: we are different in so many ways, we are all sinners and more or less immature, with some human elements not yet integrated and living together puts us in the exercise of shared power...

Sometimes the root cause of the difficulty lies precisely in idealism regarding the community, due to perfectionism or false expectations. We nourish an unattainable ideal of community which makes us constantly frustrated. Bonhöffer expressed this very well: “He who loves his own ideal of a community more than the real community, destroys the community.”

Certainly, the greatest difficulty in reinventing the art of living together in a religious community may lie in the weakening of faith, the fundamental core that unites us. If faith is weakened, religious life is wounded at its root and foundation.

Living in community is difficult and may sometimes seem impossible. It is said that this is the cause of most cases of abandonment of religious life and a major cause of distress and suffering among religious.

But community life is an essential dimension for us and at the same time, one of our greatest challenges. We know well that a challenge is a difficulty that tempts, attracts and at the same time discourages us.

The challenge follows its own dynamics: first we experience something that no longer works and we spontaneously feel a desire to give up, to turn back. But something within us compels us to react and so:

- We go back to the utopian dream which lies behind the difficulties, that which we would lose if we gave up
- We calmly analyze why it stopped working
- We seek new pathways, taking note of present signs and of the new life springing forth everywhere
- And we start anew, we reinvent pathways.

2. Return to the dream of utopia

The first commandment

Jesus, whom we want to follow, was a man who was always in company and lived for a mission which He entrusted to a group of disciples, open to universal brotherhood. At the end of His presence here on earth He said, “This is my commandment: love one another *as I have loved you*” (Jn 15, 12). The novelty lies in that phrase “*as I have loved you*”, to the extent of giving up His life in an extraordinary way.

Love for God and neighbor is our only and first commandment. It is the synthesis of Christian faith, the distinctive feature that He has left us, a sign that can make the whole world believe. It gives coherence and truth to our existence. “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”. (Jn 13, 35)

It is the proof of our faith: “If anyone says he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar”. (1 Jn 4, 20) And in the same letter, John adds: “Who does not love is a murderer” (1 Jn 3:15). This is not an exaggeration because it really prevents the other towards full realization, making life stop. This embodies the overwhelming truth which applies in community life.

The family of the children of God

Jesus tried to overcome the structure of the patriarchal Jewish family which is self-centered, and came to build a new humanity, the family of the children of God, formed by those who seek the will of the Father: “These are my mother and my brothers” (Mk 3, 35)

Religious fraternity wants to make this novelty visible in the Church, this family in which Jesus, Brother and Son par excellence, is at its center, as the generating power of brotherhood. “Being disciples” consists in inviting people to this discipleship of equals, where preference is given only to the weak and the small. All projects for personal growth, holiness and apostolic commitment that do not enter this logic is headed for another direction.

Our sign of identity

We cannot forget that, during our religious profession, we have been consecrated, that is, anointed and sent to be witnesses of Jesus (VC, 22). This action of God deeply marks our identity: we are consecrated persons.

But the other aspect of our identity is belonging. Identity and belonging are inseparable: “You cannot answer the question *who am I* without including in your response where you belong” (Toño Garcia).

Generally, we make our profession within a group or a Congregation and so fidelity to God passes through our belonging to this group, *through which* we respond to His call. The commitment in the community (sense of belonging) is the visible proof of our invisible identity (consecration).

The sense of belonging is the mark of our quality of life and the sign of our identity.

The tension between individual and community

Current anthropology emphasized the centrality of the person and this is indeed evangelical. The individualism that corrodes our society plagues us with an exaltation of the ego which borders on narcissism. A person bent upon herself becomes so stuck up in her personal fulfillment that she either does not have any self-esteem or lives in childish submission.

In considering fraternal life today, questions easily come to mind: what comes first, the person or the community? In the past, we would answer that the most important thing is the community. Today, there are many who assert the

primacy of the person.

But we must recognize that both the person and the community are dynamic realities which are actualized in a process, in dialectical tension, in progressive development. Herein lies the tension which must be maintained without removing any of the two elements.

It is true that the quality of life of a community depends on human maturity and the evangelical quality of life of the people who compose it. At the same time, a good community, in its organization and its style of relationship, encourages the growth of persons and allows processes of personal transformation, even if it cannot touch that inner core where every person grows.

“The person is like a plant, with its own vital principle which allows it to develop and grow. But it also needs soil, water, light and heat and these are offered by others, the community” (Juan Maria Ilarduia).

So, what comes first, the person or the community? The community does not replace or is it above the person. Its value lies in generating the dynamics that persons, alone, cannot achieve.

All this renews and enlivens our dream of utopia and stimulates the challenge. This is the form of life to which we are called and in which we have freely committed ourselves to follow Jesus. Fraternal life is our dream and this dream encourages us to still grope for new ways to reinvent, to analyze the changes... It's worth trying again!

3. Reinventing the community is a daily task

Thank God, our commitment is not measured by results – on being able to come up with a community which is, more or less, good. It is rather based on a life-creating communities all throughout, wherever we are, without forgetting to be elements of harmony in our own community. Reinventing the art of living together is a daily task and requires an ongoing exodus from ourselves “to become sisters”.

Let us now examine four aspects of this effort. They are like four pillars on which this daily task rests: acceptance, dialogue, shared responsibility and common mission.

Acceptance: open you heart and your home

We are a group of human persons gathered around the Lord in a real charismatic tradition and we find ourselves together without having chosen each other. Throughout our life, therefore, we do not choose but we accept.

Acceptance is not something reserved for guests only – or those going away – but also for anyone who lives with us. It is Christian love that impels us to accept the members of the community every time we feel they are strangers or foreigners. It is the “accepting according to the heart of God, the mystery of each person” (Javier Garrido).

To avoid disappointment, I always like to explain that love is not a feeling but a free choice to wish well and do good to people.

From the Greek word *pathos* (what one experiences, suffers or loses), words in Castilian (and Italian) with the suffix *pathy*, are derived – antipathy, sympathy, apathy. These are not free wheeling feelings that invade us and we must not moralize. “Every mature person must know that half of the community loves me and the other half tolerates me” the psychologist Mary Paul Ross used to say.

Here we speak of Christian agape which is love lived as a free and responsible choice and which is in turn sustained by the Holy Spirit. I call it “acceptance” to highlight this dimension of freedom and to avoid the word *love* and other words such as understanding, trust, etc. that often become equivocal.

The Declaration speaks of non-violence and I believe that it should be considered in this area. We must be very sincere and admit that violence springs from our roots as sinners which give rise to discriminatory judgments against those around us.

We can mention some elements of this acceptance that requires community building:

- **Respect:** is the reverent acceptance of the “mystery” of the other, like a room whose door opens only from within and therefore, we need to call, ask and search. We cannot enter (break in, dominate) without calling, nor can we judge or categorize without asking or stipulate and insist without searching (cfr. Mt. 7,7). It is just the way we would like others to treat us.
- **Compassion:** is acceptance of the weak: the elderly, the sick, the strange, the unhappy ones... or those going through a difficult situation. It is the preferential option for the poor lived from within. The parable of the Good Samaritan ends with the call to compassion: “*Go and do likewise*”, i.e. show compassion, become neighbors to those who suffer or who are at the margins of the road, without turning to the other side, to be concerned and involved.
- **Reconciliation:** is the acceptance that starts each morning and does not get tired of the 70 times 7 which Jesus spoke of, that is to say, forever. The clashes in the community may be occasional, but frictions may be frequent. Reconciliation is to open our hearts to those who offend us or even to those who are merely annoying. It means forgiving inwardly, to remove one’s sandals before the sacred ground and not allow judgments and prejudice

emerge and exclude others. Jesus, whom we follow, has come to save and not to judge. Reconciliation starts from within.

- **Service:** the acceptance which becomes personal commitment. It goes beyond menial domestic tasks or little favors shared in the community. Acceptance translates into quality service. Benjamín González Buelta argues that, as worship consists in devoting time and affection to God, true service is devoting time and affection to others.

This attitude, lived daily in the community teaches us to open doors and to be open and welcoming community to those who come to us and those who live with us.

Dialogue, a journey towards an encounter

Dialogue is the second pillar on which community life is built

In traditional religious life, silence is overestimated while in renewed religious life, communication becomes indispensable. To become sisters, we need to know and communicate in breadth and depth.

The truth is that human beings need communication and silence at the same time. In the community, we cannot eliminate any of these two. Silence without communication isolates the person and closes her upon herself. On the other hand, the communication of those who do not keep silence is empty and superficial. Therefore, we need to maintain a balance that integrates these two.

The exercise that blends silence and communication is *dialogue*. It is a word that comes from personal depth ready to be enriched by the word of the other. Dialogue bridges gaps, enriches us and leads us to fraternal meeting.

Community meetings: quality time for dialogue

Community meetings are privileged moments to talk in depth about issues of common interest. These might have been previously reflected upon in silence. The methodology must be considered carefully in order to encourage the participation of all, especially in big communities. Participation is an essential element in a renewed community. If some are not participative, something must be changed: the dynamics, the animation, the locus, the format, the timeframe... anything until dialogue can be established.

We should not neglect other informal meetings such as talks, outings, festive celebrations, etc. which can also be quality spaces for communication and encounter. Through them, we become sisters, day by day.

Faith sharing: key-element in a renewed community

The community is an important key element of the spirituality of the Incarnation. It is a sign that tells us if our spirituality is renewed or continues

to be vertical and intimist.

Some refrain from faith-sharing and reduce sharing of faith to “praying together”. But if we are gathered around Jesus, how can we not share His Word? If we live a spirituality of the Incarnation, how is it possible not to put faith and life together? If we are in search for God’s project, how is it possible not to discern together in community our own personal projects of life?

Each community must find the appropriate way of sharing their faith in Jesus who calls us.

Circular community

The third pillar upon which rests the building of community is shared responsibility. Many of us remember those pyramidal communities with monarchical structures (where only one person has the mandate and the “grace of state”) with only one person who conveys to all the will of God (there is no need for discernment). In this is the absolute and sacred mediation of the Superior, considering her as the direct and automatic transmitter of the will of God, forgetting or disregarding discernment and community mediation.

With the post-conciliar renewal, we have switched to a more democratic style and to what we now call *circular communities*. In these, more humanizing relationships can be established.

The power at the center and the equality of members

The circle has a center that makes possible its shape and the result is an equidistance of points. The Center of the community is Jesus. We are not casually united for convenience. Equidistance expresses equality of persons in rights, dignity, charism. The community, as E. Florence stated well is a discipleship of equals.

In a circular community all must have a voice and participate as mature persons in the journey of the community in making decisions together.

We are all responsible for the climate in the community, the richness of meetings, the depth of celebrations, the growth of each Sister

The exact opposite to this is passivity, submission or expectations and complaints from the outside. “Living at the margins of the community with a minimum of participation is not a legitimate option but a violation of the vow of obedience”, Sandra Schneiders said at the Congress on Religious Life in 2004.

From dialogue to discernment

We said that a democratic style must lead us to make decisions together. Because of this, information, involvement of all and dialogue are very essential.

But the community is not a simple democracy, it is much more than democracy because it has a Center who gathers us together and it is His will which we all desire to put above our own. This element changes the dynamics of the community: it is not enough to welcome each other and listen to one another and then cast our vote and accept the will of the majority. Here, we deal with seeking together the will of Him who calls us together and *obey* one another as a precious mediation of the will of God. This shared responsibility lived in faith is a challenge for the communities of the future.

Dialogue, when carried out in the light of faith, becomes *discernment* in a common search for the will of God. Otherwise, our decisions are nothing but “sensible reflections”.

Every discernment concludes with a concrete step to take and this is the attitude that puts the community in a continuous motion, in fraternal obedience and in missionary advancement.

The community project: energizer of a community in process

One manifestation of this growing circularity is the community project, an instrument that expresses this decisive journey by all and which gives vitality to the community. We are a group of persons gathered by the Lord, within a concrete charismatic tradition – neither satisfied nor disappointed – that looks deeply on the will of God and disposes oneself, like Abraham, to come out of the given situation to go to a land “that I will show you”. This is obedience in faith, an existential moving on.

The community project (unless it is simply a time-table or a theoretical proclamation of principles or a negotiation of personal interests) is the fruit of discernment and establishes itself as the “supreme authority” which awakens and mobilizes the dynamism of growth and fidelity which the members of a community possess within.

The community project is a means of participation and shared responsibility and is the principal mediator of a group to live in creative fidelity.

New profile of the service of community leadership

In the film “Of God and Men”, one of the monks chided the Superior: “We did not elect you to decide on your own”

Sociology and experience tell us that shared responsibility does not do away with the need for coordination or the service of authority, but gives them new features:

- Strengthen co-responsibility, spread the circularity. To do this, information must be provided, consultations offered, ensure that all will be able to express themselves and that the journey of the community is defined by all.

- Take care and protect the equality of all, especially of those who are “more unequal” or weak.
- Accept and be available to all, especially for the poorer ones (persons in crisis, the sick, those who are in certain difficult situation...)
- Supervise the community project which has been elaborated by all.
- Keep ever present the question: “What does God want from us in this situation (social, congregational, communitarian)?”

The common mission

The Mission is the fourth item in the building of an apostolic religious community. It is an essential element of this form of discipleship. In the spirituality of the Incarnation, apostolic work is not lived as a “precarious burden”, but as the source and stimulus of fidelity. This is true both at the personal and community level. The vitality and the continuing renewal of the community depend on the objective and the living out of the common mission. We are not a community *for* the mission, but a community *in* mission.

Distinction between platforms, tasks and mission

First we must distinguish between platforms (colleges, parishes, shelters, NGOs...) or the structures through which we evangelize. The mission can be carried out in various ways even if the platform changes or disappears. Related to this is the whole issue of the reorganization of the works in which we are currently engaged in the Religious Life in the west.

Many times, we identify the work or the task we accomplish with the mission. We must remember that only when the person and her work are marked by faith in Jesus can we speak of a Christian mission. I will cite just a few indicators of this difference:

- § We don't go on a mission out of our own initiative, but because we are sent by Jesus (the Church, the Congregation or the local community)
- § The goal of the mission is evangelization, the building of the Kingdom and not a payment or reward (be it monetary or other material or psychological compensation)
- § The qualifying character of the mission depends not so much on professionalism (a task well done), but on the lifestyle of Jesus that goes beyond what is merely professional.
- § The results of the mission are not always attained or made visible because they are at a different level and this, at times, requires the acceptance of failures.
- § We are not the protagonists in the mission. We are the instruments of the Spirit who alone can move hearts and is capable of transforming history.

- § There is no ranking or classification in the mission. It unites us together for an endeavor which belongs to the whole community.
- § A job has a schedule and timetable while we are always in the mission, but it is our life that becomes the mission.

Each one of us must be vigilant so as not to lose the mysticism of the mission. This is what we call apostolic spirituality.

The mission belongs to the community: the mandate

Generally we have a great sense of protagonism and ownership of our work. But the apostolic work which each of us carries out *belongs* to the community that accepts, approves and sends us in mission

Today, amidst the employment contracts and voluntary work of many retirees, there is a variety of tasks in every community and it is urgent that we find structures which can help us live this as a *unique and common* mission

- § Formulate the mission in the community project in a general way so that everyone may feel represented.
- § Before taking on a task, each member must inform the community and discern if it is appropriate.
- § Keep the community informed, formally or informally, about the activities of each person.
- § Provide moments of shared self-evaluation
- § Ensure that the various apostolic activities are present in the prayer of the community.

The sense of a common mission stimulates personal fidelity and builds the community, but this has to be nourished to become truly a mission, namely, a mandate of the community which is aimed at the building of the Kingdom.

4. Community is possible

Community is difficult, no doubt. Everyday, it helps or blocks our interior attitude, our creativity in the different moments of living together. But we also need faith to believe that community is possible. We must be convinced that the Lord is present in our efforts and alone, we are not capable of this utopia. God does not choose the strong, but He gives strength to those who make the choice.

In order not to get tired of building the community everyday, we need faith. Let us not forget the theological foundations that make it possible.

The imprints of the Triune God

We are made for relationship and encounter. We believe that God the Father, Son and Spirit, creating us in His image, has imprinted in us this desire

for relationship, family, communion. We need this love relationship in order to become persons in its fullness. This is also why we always feel homesick. The Trinity, more than being an ethical model to imitate, is the source of family, of relationship, of community. It is the Source who dwells in us, which constantly flows towards harmony and fraternal encounter at all levels.

Jesus - The Center who gathers and sustains

As already mentioned, the community has a Center that convenes and supports it. The origin lies in the convocation while the secret of unity lies in the bond of each member with the Center and in the community structures and moments which call to mind, express and strengthen this centrality. He who calls us continues to intercede for our fragile communion. Only if we believe that He is the one who sustains the community shall we be disposed to collaborate in this difficult task and, trusting in His renewing energy, can we continue to start over again.

The Spirit consecrates and empowers us

We believe in the Spirit who is given to us and empowers us – anoints us in consecration - to a love, an agape that transcends our capacities. We must ask for this Spirit as our daily bread, our everyday share of service, patience, commitment and endurance.

“That the Holy Spirit may bring together in unity all who share in the body and blood of Christ”, let us ask in the Eucharist to keep alive our journey towards the utopia of the community.

“Christ strengthens fraternal communion and urges those in conflict to hasten their reconciliation by opening themselves to dialogue and commitment to justice”, the Pope affirms in the exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, adding “only this constant striving towards reconciliation makes us worthy of receiving the body and blood of Christ in communion.” He ends by saying “I ask all consecrated men and women who radiate in their life the splendor and the beauty of belonging totally to the Lord”. This is the beauty which we have been sent to witness: to be bread broken and wine poured out for others”

5. The community is a gift

Finally, it behooves us to look at the great advantage which living in community offers for our human and Christian development. This way, we shall be filled with an immense gratitude.

It is a gratitude for everything that is given for our personal growth: living in company with others, in rapport with different people who bring out our values and limits, in contact with the weak, the sick or elderly who pull us out of our egoistic tendency and cause our tenderness to spring forth; they encourage

us by their example and, on many occasions, give us more reasons to be joyful and to celebrate.

It is gratitude for what the community does to uphold our fidelity in the following of Jesus: witnesses who encourage us, the formation we received in faith, the community sharing in meetings, in the liturgy which help us to daily renew our choice to carry on with our eyes fixed on Jesus...along a new and lively path. (Heb. 10, 20)

It is gratitude, also because the community sends us in an evangelizing mission and provides us with platforms we never even imagined. We receive the missionary mandate for various tasks in different countries and situations. This reflects and realizes the charismatic mission which permits us to commit ourselves working in different areas and always giving life in abundance. This way, our life becomes fruitful.

Finally, we thank the community for the sense of belonging which is one of the basic needs of the human person and is much more than a legal bond with its rights and duties. The sense of belonging is rootedness which gives us strength, emotional warmth, stability. Having lived for years in the Congregation, our living together as beloved persons becomes an ongoing process of renewal and helps us find answers to our crises, it renders us a lively ecclesial group, having offered our life, drop by drop in the many works we undertake at the service of humanity. This renders us fruitful and joyful in life.

The community is the greatest mediation to realize the dream of a mystical-prophetic religious life. The future of religious life consists in reinventing the art of living together

If at times, with the excuse of “soaring faster”, we are tempted to give up this arduous task, remember the verses of León Felipe:

*I go on taut reins
curbing the flight
because what matters
is not to reach early, or alone,
but together with everyone, and on time*

(León Felipe)



*FROM HOSPITALITY TO THE
VISITATION: LIVING THE ENCOUNTER
IN DIVERSITY*

P. Bernard Ugeux, M.Afr.

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Our Christian communities are invited to grow in trust and in real encounter so that their witnessing may be perceived as authentic: “See how they love each other” and “That you may be one so that the world may believe...”!

Since there are not only differences of character or personal biography but also differences in cultural backgrounds, social and generational, communities are invited to build a unit that does not erase one’s identity, but rather one that favors deep interactions in which everyone can share his/her own story and life experiences while keeping the necessary discretion.

Speaking at the heart of our differences, at a deeper level, is something that is learned. It is a human, spiritual and theological gesture because our God is Triune and, therefore is encounter, acceptance of differences in the fullness of communion. Because of this, I think we have much to learn from the experience of interreligious dialogue of contemplatives.

The Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

I take inspiration from the contributions of the long experience of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM). Here we deal with an old experience, because, following a Conference of Christian monks in Bangkok in 1963, several members belonging to the Benedictine and Cistercian orders decided to engage in dialogue with the monks of other religious traditions. This dialogue has gradually assumed the form of reciprocal invitations, where nuns and monks, Western and Japanese (Buddhist) were invited in turn to spend long periods in their respective monasteries. Thus inter-religious dialogue has become an outstanding opportunity for mutual monastic hospitality, which was then extended to other religious and spiritual experiences. Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM) has particularly increased since 1983.

The Hospitality of Abraham

Father Pierre-François de Bethune, who was for a long time General Secretary of DIM, explored the meaning of interfaith hospitality inspired by the hospitality of Abraham, in which the three monotheistic religions are linked, each in its own way.

Inspired by the story of Genesis (chapter 18) where Abraham welcomes three strangers in passing - as illustrated beautifully by Roublev in his famous icon of the Trinity - the monk observes: "In these ten verses, all the beauty and mystery of the whole hospitality is summed up. I know of no story that best describes hospitality and its audacity, discretion, generosity and transcendence on which it opens".

He stresses that it is impossible to know the "Totally Other" if you ignore the stranger, the distant one. And by "foreigners" he means "people, but also the cultural and religious environment, all that is strange and apparently irreducible to our traditional way of living and believing". Certainly, we are talking about members of other religious traditions, but may we not also refer to persons - other than ourselves - with whom we share our everyday life?

Fr. de Bethune continued, "Thanks to the interreligious dialogue we can now see that the Christian truth cannot be alive and radiant if the "other" does not find his place in it. Yes, it is fundamentally a welcoming, hospitable truth. On the other hand, it seems that hospitality must always be related to faith. The unconditional welcome, without faith, leads to enormous confusion, much the same as faith without hospitality can become a prison". So now we can say that, in Christianity, dialogue and hospitality imply that those who

welcome clearly refer to the One in whose name they are committed. In this way, the person who welcomes may find that the monastic hospitality - such as those in places of pilgrimage - is a concrete manifestation of the compassion of a God who never fails to keep His promises and Who does not have preferences of persons.

There is a close link between hospitality and humanity based on our common belonging to the human family. The declaration of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, founded the Church's attitude towards other religious traditions on common humanity. Paragraph 1, reads: "The various nations are in fact a single community. They have one origin, because God has made the entire human race to live on the face of the earth, they also have one final end, God, whose providence, whose testimonies of goodness and saving designs extend to all (...)" "To give hospitality is a way of expressing humanity and recognizing the dignity of the other in concrete actions and not just in words. We observe that in every culture, hospitality is a sacred duty and that the reference is, usually, transcendent. Clement of Rome wrote: "Abraham, by his faith and hospitality, received the Promised Child". According to an ancient Christian tradition (fourth century), the Desert Fathers of Egypt were convinced that: "We must venerate the brothers who will come ... because, in fact, we do not venerate them but God Himself. When you see your brother says the Scripture you see the Lord your God." Hospitality directly concerns God..

It took time to understand that the practice of hospitality in the name of humanity also implies respect for the religion of the other. For a long time, this principle was applied in spite of differences in religion. To welcome one in God's name does not necessarily imply respect for and recognition of the legitimacy of religions. The purpose may also be aimed at conversion. Today we have come to recognize that we do not really respect the other: the guest, the stranger if we do not also consider his/her religion (or spirituality), because it is part of his/her deepest identity. Fr. de Béthune states: "This is a profound encounter, on a spiritual level, because it is not motivated by a calculation of interest, but by religious reasons, that which actually motivate sacred hospitality. The encounter becomes right, without equivocation, because the guest is, by definition, an outsider, and must be accepted as such, in complete respect of the differences and with no intention of assimilation".

The condition to truly live hospitality is to have experienced the need to be accepted. As long as we are always in the position of somebody who welcomes someone else in his own home, we run the risk of having an attitude of superiority. When one experiences undeserved hospitality - and

I have often experienced this personally as a White Father during the 14 years spent in black Africa – one discovers the beauty of the mystery of hospitality. It is therefore important to accept the invitations from believers of other religions and to have, on our part, the attitude of the Christian monks who agreed to stay for several weeks or even months as guests in a Zen monastery, as example. In return, they became more aware of the richness of their tradition. It is an experience of poverty, risk, and even non-acceptance.

Abraham, the first biblical reference of hospitality, was himself a pilgrim, a traveler who often had to ask for hospitality. Deuteronomy reminds the Jewish people: “You shall love the stranger, because in Egypt you too were once aliens” (Deuteronomy 10:19). Or, in the Gospel, was it not really a traveling Samaritan who rescued the wounded traveler? (cf. Lk 10:33). And Jesus himself, who has pitched his tent among us, had nowhere to lay his head (Luke 5.98). As for the Rule of St. Benedict, he says that guests who arrive at the monastery are to be welcomed as Christ himself (Chapter 53).

To welcome others into your homes also means creating a place for them in your inner space. In this way, hospitality can be experienced as an authentic spiritual journey. Finally, as we saw in the icon of Roublev, where Sarah and Abraham have disappeared from the scene, it is the triune God, who, in His love of communion, welcomes us and reveals himself as the source of all hospitality.

The Christian mystery of the Visitation

Still referring to the monastic tradition, I want to recall the “mutual accommodation” represented by the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. The Prior of Tibhirine, Christian de Chergé, who was assassinated along with six brothers in 1996, is part of a tradition that preceded him together with Charles de Foucauld, Albert Peyriguère, Abd-el-Jalil and many others. He repeatedly reflected on the meaning of the mystery of Mary’s Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth for interreligious dialogue. Already in 1977, he compared the gesture of Mary to visit her cousin Elizabeth as an attitude of promoting interreligious meeting. Confident in the action of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all people of good will, he writes: “In recent times, I have come to believe that this episode of the Visitation is the true biblico-theological locus of the mission, in respect for the *other* in whom the Spirit already operates. I like this quote by Sullivan (in *Matinales*) that sums it up well: “Jesus is the one who comes when God speaks without obstacles in the human heart.” In other words, when God is free to speak and act without

hindrance in the consciousness of a person, that person speaks and acts like Jesus (...)". This is along the line of what Pope John Paul II wrote in *Redemptor Hominis*: "The missionary attitude always begins with a sentiment of deep esteem for what is in every man for what he himself, in the depths of his spirit, has unfolded regarding the deeper and more important problems, it is respect for everything that the Spirit, who blows where he wills has accomplished in him" (*RH 12, emphasis mine*) .

Why this link between the mission and Visitation? Christian de Chergé puts himself in the shoes of Mary after the Annunciation, who goes in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth because she knew she was six months pregnant. Mary does not travel just to go to the aid of an elderly cousin in her unexpected pregnancy. For Mary this gesture also means accepting and celebrating, in a sense, the mystery of her pregnancy, in reference to that - just as mysterious - of her cousin. Both keep a secret relationship with the salvific work of God for humanity, through the action of the Holy Spirit. Mary carries within her the "living Good News". But how can she reveal such a secret? She does not know the bond that exists between the Child being formed in her womb and the child already formed in the womb of her cousin. The Prior of Tibhirine here, compares Mary to the Church which also carries within her the Good News. This also applies to each of us, he said to the men religious in Morocco, where he preached a retreat in 1990. He told them: "We came here a bit like Mary... in the first place to serve ... in fact this was her first motivation ... but also to bring this Good News... How do we announce it? We know that the persons we have come *to meet* are also a bit like Elizabeth, bearers of a message that comes from God ... (...) And I go meet the Muslims without knowing the relationship [between Christ and Islam] ". Later, recalling the meeting between the two women, he says: "(...) this simple greeting [of Mary] has caused something to *vibrate*, *someone* in the womb of Elizabeth. And in that *vibration*, *something* was *announced* , that is the Good News, not all good news, but what could be perceived at that moment". And it evokes with sensitivity the startling movements of these two babies in the wombs of two women, as in persons who recognized each other.

From this, he draws an important lesson for inter-faith meeting: "If we are careful and situate at that level our *encounter with the other* - with Muslims - in attention and willingness to accept the other ... and are even in need of what the other is and what he has to say ... probably the other will tell us *something* which will touch what we actually carry (the Good News), showing that it is attuned to it, allowing us to extend our Eucharist" . Here we find the connection between the Magnificat and the Eucharist, two actions of grace in praise at the heart of the Church. In the same way that

Elizabeth has proclaimed the Magnificat of Mary, so the meeting in truth with another believer, in whom the Spirit is at work, causes in the Christian a Magnificat and a Eucharist for God who is much greater than his heart and his prejudices.

This can become a song in two voices, as it must always be two to dig a well. What is the connection? Christian de Chergé affirms, recalling his close relationship with a young Muslim who had asked to teach him to pray ... according to the Muslim faith. This gives us an idea of the trust that the monks had created in the neighborhood of the monastery in Tibhirine. One day, after a long period of absence, Christian finds this young man who says: "It's been a long time that we don't dig our well." This sentence of the other - the Muslim - has raised in Christian the Magnificat. This expression then stayed on with him until the day when the Prior asked the young man jokingly: "After all our wells, in your opinion, what shall we find: Christian water or Muslim water? ". The young man, taking the question seriously, replied: "We spent so much time together and you still ask that question? At the bottom of our wells we will find the water of God "... If we were to ask the same question to the believers of other traditions who come to Lourdes to drink the water there, we would receive the same kind of response.

We understand, then, how the Visitation has become almost a Patron Feast of the abbey of Our Lady of Atlas, as indicated by the Prior of the Trappist monastery of the same name, located in Morocco in Midelt. The statue of Our Lady of Atlas, which dominates the Tibhirine region, was placed first by the Trappist monastery of Staoueli and was donated by Charles de Foucauld. Now, the actual Prior Jean-Pierre Flachaire writes: "(...) this statue of Our Lady of Atlas (...) is a pregnant Virgin with the head of a little angel on her belt ... She is Mary who brings Jesus, Mary, in her Visitation ... *in haste towards the other* ... Our Lady in her Visitation... Our Lady of Atlas has accomplished her *mission* ... " and states that the seven monks were kidnapped the day after the celebration of the Annunciation and were found dead the day after the Feast of the Visitation, May 30, 1996.

Abraham and his hospitality, Mary in her Visitation to Elizabeth, Tibhirine with its martyrs: these are some of the faces that can help give meaning to Community Interfaith Dialogue in everyday life.

THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN CARING FOR ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

Nowadays we have in the Church an increasing and sensitive conscience in face of the phenomenon of environmental degradation as part of our mission in Justice and Peace that could have been impossible to imagine, or it has been at least suspicious to realize, one decade ago. Justice and Peace can no longer be devoted only to the promotion and fight for fair human rights to territory, food, fresh-water, health, work and education, or to the defense of minority and fight against human trafficking, as examples of many other problems still affecting hundreds of million people with undesired high occurrence in the world. Justice and Peace opens up a new horizon, as never done before, to take care of creation, to integrate the created things as an inherent part of the human dignity for all human beings. We have learnt that to take care of Nature, as the only space that receives human life – and the atmosphere, as the blanket that warms it -, is so important for evangelization as the care for every singular human life from the early stages of life until death. As a Carmelite I learnt that contemplation is not a static dynamism, but the inner human space where spirituality expands upon creation.

The whole reality, the spiritual and the physical, in turn, could be regarded through the Trinitarian dynamism: the Divine Power, the Humanness and the (other) Created Things (both visible and invisible), in mutual interpenetration, being the Divine Power, the Spirit of God, the enveloping

and sustaining source of reality. The contemplation of such reality is a call to discover or be aware of the empowering love of God within the humanness, concretized in every human being, and the created things. And such a process requires a deep human being's transformation through prayer, community and service that are the paths to Contemplation.

In addition, Ecology (oikos-logie, in Greek) is the human activity that is concerned with a comprehensive management of Nature, i.e. the Created Things, and Humanness, in order to regulate the inner relationships (logie) among them within the Earth, our house (oikos). The comprehensive management means to consider the often-forgotten Divine dimension as well. Thus, the expression *ecological crisis*, or environmental crisis, means that the comprehensive management of such relationships is at risk. Probably the crisis arises due to the implicit silence of the Divine dimension of reality that is present in the way we have been behaving in western societies. The roots of the current ecological crisis appear to be linked to the way that human relationships are developed towards the Divine and Nature. If so, Contemplation can be regarded as the essential manner to recover the Divine dimension of reality. Hence prayer, community and service may approach each other to mend Nature. That is the link between spirituality and ecology.

The spiritual roots of the ecological crisis

Understanding the link between ecology and spirituality requires, first of all, to consider contemplation as a spiritual path that is intimately related to the process of consolidation of the human beings' self-conscience, integrating both the dark and luminous sides of personality, within an endless journey towards the maturity of human affectivity, intellect and sexuality. These three factors of human life can be considered as parts of the human desire dynamism. Such integration needs and is performed by an ethical and existential proposal. For Carmelites, for instance, that ethical and existential proposal is *living a life in allegiance to Jesus Christ* (Carmelite Rule 1), and all its consequences contained in our rule of life. Thus it turns to be a spiritual itinerary towards growth in humanness. God has created us for this: for an ongoing growth in humanness while keeping harmonic relationships with all the created things and God, according to the Trinitarian dynamism mentioned above. Secondly, we need to understand that the roots of the current ecological crisis are human and not merely technical or scientific ones, as if ecological problems were only a matter of deep changes in technology according to each environmental issue, i.e., it is not just to change towards new "clean" technologies. If it were so, we would not be speaking about crisis.

The current ecological crisis, evidenced by climate change, energy resource depletion, increasing breach between the richest and the poorest,

among others, seems to have started with human being crisis. During the last century very deep social changes have consolidated. Especially our concept of human beings has change noticeably. We passed from thinking of ourselves as human beings equipped with reason, self-sufficiency and freedom, from which we could make options towards what we considered the best and proper for each of us, towards a concept of human being eternally unsatisfied; prior to which technology, as a caring nanny, comes to meet every need and desire.

Ever since mankind has undergone dissatisfaction, which emerges as an endogenous violence in the social level, or as an inner violence of rivalry and fight for survival. Likewise, oftentimes societies have to take care of such violence through diverse mechanisms that could channel the polarized power able to be self-destructive. For instance, the traditions and religions, with their rites and customs, would work to contain or limit the expansion of such violent forces, born within, due to the frustration of human desire in sexual, affective and intellectual dimensions.

When I say that technology appears like a consenting mother who grants us everything we wish without postponing it, I also mean that thanks to technology several human achievements have been reached, allowing us to make an extraordinary step towards new human capabilities to transform our nature and to enhance and embellish the quality of life. And this is good. We now can enjoy a vast technological development, which makes our lives more comfortable and healthier, thanks to the growing scientific knowledge (the luminous side). However, the technological development has been appropriated by economic and cultural models to consolidate a social and pragmatic program of living, which we can name as technocratic western lifestyle. The laws or mottos that rule out the western societies under technocracy are well known by everyone: “grow or die”, otherwise you will be out of the system; “go out and buy to fight unemployment”, unemployment is now the new taboo word; “quantity and acceleration”, everything must be done at the speed of computers and scales of machines; and so on. Thus the traditional human rhythms and cycles of Nature are estimated as outdated within the new codes. Apparently we are unaware that the technocracy model of human development is a human construction. It is indispensable to understand that it is not an uncontrolled natural force to which we must subject, as we often tend to believe even within our communities.

Furthermore the conventional economy belongs to the model of technocratic human development. It lies on the logic of dissatisfaction of desire, or in other words, the logic of inner violence. The western economy empowers the rivalry between human desire and greed, by producing abundance of goods to temporarily alleviate the tension of desire.

In addition, globalized societies, guided by the technocracy laws, have created their own myths, such as “evil is unreal”. The unreality of evil is understood as the absence of material goods, which is improper to be acquainted with all the pain and anxiety observed in real life (such as illness, death, social injustice, etc.). This myth implies from the technocratic framework that the human desire and greed are inoffensive because they emulate the relationship between producer and consumer.

Other beliefs of our globalized societies are: full is better than empty, much is better than little, big is better than small. Therefore, we must fill everything, have everything, know everything. They are translated into pragmatic behaviors such as the social premise that everyone must succeed professionally as synonym of accomplishment. In our culture there are no more places for experiences of gratuity, as the one we can experience during the bare attitude of just simply looking around without expecting more than to look around; since contemplation is an odd word.

So far we have seen that we have a social development model that is based on the dissatisfied-desire economy. At this point the first ecological dilemma appears: human desire is a psycho-spiritual dynamism that can be easily manipulated by external factors to the freedom and decision-making of every individual. This fact is observed within the phenomenon of globalization, where the changes in legacy towards social fragmentation (personally I think that current unexpected social laws, such as same-sex marriage, broken families, free abortion, common trade for a few fellow countries, etc., contribute to social fragmentation that is profitable to the dissatisfied-desire economy), and the fashion of goods and services for consumption induced by advertising, all become external forces that irresistibly control us from within. We no longer consume those things we need, but everything we are offered without distinction (how many cell phones have you changed, or been forced to change, in the last three years?). We have nowadays new needs that did not exist before. The technological novelties appear to be little paradises of illusion that are updated every day and suited to our increasing fragmented world. Hence, consumerism has been imposed as the only way for the development of western life. It has been imposed by the strong interests in the local economy of global enterprises. We are taught that the unique human goal in life is “profit” and every human action tends to maximize it. The maximization of profit is at the expense of whatever, i.e., against many people’s lives and the environment. The true cost of entropy (that regards the resilience, or the capacity for self-recovering, of every ecosystem, including that of the humans) is the existential mortgage of future generations. In the future, they will not have sufficient energy sources for living (as now we are consuming most of resources at the lowest cost and the maximum gain).

Another second human dilemma, anchored to the nucleus of human beings, is as follows: the *human desire is unlimited*. According to Saint John of the Cross, *the heart of human being is not satisfied with less than Infinite*. The infinite he refers to is clearly God himself. For this reason when the desire is released at global scales, natural resources are insufficient to satisfy it. The earth implodes. The physical limits of the planet, which result to be too small in comparison, are evidently the natural limits to the dissatisfied-desire economy.

There exists another human limitation between the unlimited human desire and the economy based on it, influencing negatively on the earth health: our daily concrete acts are performed locally, but their effects are global; and we are not aware of this fact. Therefore, the current ecological crisis can be summarized under the known issue of Climate Change as follows:

Global Warming is a symptom of the global social-economic model that is unsustainable in its origins. The planetary temperature increases because more Green House Gases (GHGs, such as CO₂, etc.) are constantly emitted. The GHGs emissions increments are due to energy consumption based on oil, natural gas and coal, mainly. Simultaneously, 90% of global energy consumption is provided by non-renewable power sources, most of them starting to disappear (it is said that oil-based energy will be available at most for 30 to 50 more years). The high demands of energy come from those highly developed societies (25% of global population) whose lifestyles are characterized by an exorbitant consumption (consumerism). The latter means that we consume more than we do need because of the manipulation of human desire through loyal novelties and suggestive experiences bombing our lives through the mass media (just do it!).

Moreover, as a consequence of current global patterns of development and consumption the social injustice is a common field in many parts of the world. Consumerism is a luxurious lifestyle, if compared with lifestyles associated to half of global population, i.e., only few technologically developed societies enjoy standard wellbeing by depleting global resources. According to FAO, a quarter of the global population irreversibly consumes 80% of the earth resources in order to sustain their high standard lifestyles.

That is why I consider that the spirituality may be both an ecological proposal and a personal itinerary towards a healing transformation. The teaching of our masters, such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, John of San Samson, among others, is mainly based on the traditional and Carmelite *vacare-deo* spiritual dynamism. According to this contemplative tradition, the spiritual journey makes human desire mature. In other words, in order to make this human desire mature we need to channel our inner strengths

towards healthy goals both individually and socially with clear healing effects on the creation.

The ecological and personal healing path

The *vacare-deo* (literally, self-emptying for God) dynamism, or living in God's presence dynamism, implies to recognize the relevant priority of God in our lives. John of the Cross would say that the deepest human desire is a *desire of God*. For this reason the human desire seems to have such odd characteristics that astonish psychologists of all times: human desire is such of infinitude of everything and nothing at the same time; being thus ambiguous. It means that we want everything right now and from everywhere but we do not know exactly what it is. The desire is that of the Impossible (Cf. Carlos Dominguez Morano, a Jesuit psychologist).

Therefore, the existential and spiritual path for human beings throughout their lives is to pay attention and give efforts to what really matters, as Mary did according to Jesus' counsel (Luke 2, 19). Only when a person is centered, i.e., when all the strengths of his/her desire are channeled in and towards God, then it is possible to achieve equilibrium and peace. John of the Cross' teaching is very clear in this extent:

"The discreet reader has ever need to bear in mind the intent and end which I have in this book, which is the direction of the soul, through all its apprehensions, natural and supernatural, without deception or hindrance, in purity of faith, to Divine union with God (2A 28,1)".

Thus, the Carmelite saint's main objective is to help people find their direction to God, by going within themselves, because *the center of the soul is God* (Canticle 1, 12). His poem "Spiritual Canticle" exquisitely defines the spiritual and existential itinerary of human beings:

Bride

- 1. Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
after wounding me;
I went out calling you, but you were gone.*
- 2. Shepherds, you who go
up through the sheepfolds to the hill,
if by chance you see
him I love most,
tell him I am sick, I suffer, and I die.*

3. *Seeking my Love*

*I will head for the mountains and for watersides,
I will not gather flowers,
nor fear wild beasts;
I will go beyond strong men and frontiers.*

4. *O woods and thickets,
planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
coated, bright, with flowers,
tell me, has he passed by you?*

5. *Pouring out a thousand graces,
he passed these groves in haste;
and having looked at them,
with his image alone,
clothed them in beauty.*

...

John of the Cross' Canticle describes the origin of the unlimited human desire: the wound caused by God (stanza 1 and 2), leaving the soul as *in a dry and weary land where there is no water* (Psalm 63). The Beloved's wound allows human beings to go out of themselves, developing their potentials to face reality (stanza 3 and 4). Physiologists argue that one of the functions of the desire/dissatisfaction dynamism is the progressing development of human physique, the personality, in interaction with the exterior. In the spiritual registry, we go out seeking to heal the wound, touring the overall creation and asking to every creature, persons and things: *has He, God, passed by you?* (Stanza 4). The major drama will be to be too demanding to creatures, asking them to occupy the place of God because we get confused by their beauty. That is always the temptation: to make the created things (either material or spiritual goods, such as success, pleasure, happiness, sex, power, science, etc.), as well as people, our idols or gods adequate to our desires.

However there is nothing nor nobody on the earth that can overcome God's dwelling in our hearts, the empty space reserved for Him. The divine wound is only cauterized by the Spirit of God. John of the Cross' doctrine explains that human desire always runs the risk of fragmentation in multiple desires attached immoderately to things and people. The Carmelite friar warns us about this affection through the purification of desire, which consists in orienting the inner strengths of desire toward Him who really can help enjoy human life with harmony and peace. "The Dark Night of Soul" has to do with this process. During the night, the addictions and unconscious desires are not obstacles to eliminate or to make disappear, but to face or

overcome throughout the emptying process of the night. The spiritual emptying does not mean the lack of things or material and spiritual goods (we need them because we are not angels), but it is about to contain the appetite for, or the exaggerated interest of, them:

“For that reason we call this detachment night to the soul, for we are not dealing here of the lack of things, since this implies no detachment on the part of the soul if it has a desire for them; but we are dealing with the detachment from them of the taste and desire, for it is this that leaves the soul free and void of them, although it may have them; for it is not the things of this world that either occupy the soul or cause it harm, since they enter it not, but rather the will and desire for them, for it is these that dwell within it” (1A 3, 4).

Hence, the Carmelite spiritual itinerary of the soul regards the interior human being as a recipient that must be emptied of things, i.e., to be liberated from heavy loads, so as to be filled by and with God throughout the human life journey. The passing through the nights will be the process of emptying or detachment of goods and loads, making the person mature his/her desire. As long as the person goes forward in the journey of maturing desires and approaching to the union with God, a new process of re-filling with the hidden divine reality will be activated. The soul’s union with God is, according to John of the Cross, the plenitude. Only when we empty ourselves from human securities (to know, to possess, to be powerful), can we discover our true value: it is not in knowledge, possession or power, but in God himself who fills the human life.

But our unsacred societies have no other ways to treat the unlimited human desire rather than with the stimulation towards consumerism. Nowadays we are clearly facing the consequence of a humanity with no God. The natural disasters, climate change, air and water pollution, social injustice, impoverishment of our peoples, among other environmental and social issues, all of them respond to unsustainable development patterns of production and consumption that are supported by the economy based on the eternally dissatisfied human desire that has no God.

Concluding ecological remarks

The spiritual call to contemplation, as given by John of the Cross’ itinerary of maturing human desire, is a proposal for healing both the persons and the planet. As long as human beings abandon the belief that their plenitude is found in materially filling everything up, they will be able to liberate the earth with the obligation to satisfy them infinitely as their released desire is. Such proposal is certainly not easy because it requires, as first step, faith in God, a sense of life transcendence, and acceptance of

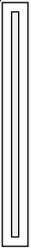
human values of gratuity and gift beyond the logic of immediate satisfaction and consumption. However, people's will would need *to experience another and a greater enkindling by another and a better love*, which is that of God himself; *to the end that, having its pleasure set upon Him and deriving from Him its strength, it should have courage and constancy to deny itself all other things with ease (1A 14,2)*. Hence the experience of the empowering love of God can help to re-orient the inner forces of desire towards a more austere and simpler lifestyle, so as to deny or put off the immediate needs of pleasure and satisfaction. Definitely, it requires sacrifice, in its most positive way, as a hope that is patient and a happy and complacent disclaimer for something greater and better that is coming to our lives.

In few words, the spiritual contemplative path of transformation through prayer, community and service would accomplish a personal, communitarian and planetary healing as long as these spirituality elements can help us be aware of:

- Few things are really important in our lives (austerity as a personal and community lifestyle).
- Little is often much and sufficient (sufficiency: God is enough!, Saint Theresa of Avila used to say)
- Dissatisfaction is part of our life journey (quiet acceptance of this fact).
- Human aspirations and desires are infinite because they are made for God.

There is no doubt that humanity faces its self-destructive capacity, that was limited by the sacred in the past, but now appears to be unlimited. Without a growth in awareness of the Divine dimension of reality the ecological catastrophe seems to be inevitable. It is the time for contemplation in order to discover once more that the unlimited human desire is a manifestation of the human vocation toward God, through people and Nature, in a few words, to growth in humanness.

In our communities we need to recognize that our actions, though they are local, have global effects. Therefore it is urgent to change our patterns of communitarian life affecting the health of the planet. We also ought to work for the development of a new economy of human needs, and not an economy of maximization of benefits that merely goes against whatever and whoever. The present time urges us to help other people become aware of the need to preserve the quality of life and existence of all the creatures on earth so that they, and we, could go on *telling that He, God, has passed by us, clothing us in beauty*.



*'HOW HOLY SCRIPTURE FORMS AND
INFORMS THE RELIGIOUS LIFE':
AN ANGLICAN CONTRIBUTION*

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Introduction: Silence and the Scriptures

In preparing this paper, a key word came to me: 'silence'—the importance of silence in allowing Holy Scripture to form and inform our religious life. And so I shall begin and end with the subject of silence. I shall also be saying quite a bit about Anglican heritage and tradition before I say something about three particular ways in which I see Holy Scripture as forming and informing Anglican religious life.

Last year, Fr Christopher Jamieson, a Benedictine of Worth Abbey in south-east England, was invited by BBC television to lead five very different people on a journey into silence. It was an experiment, to see what would happen. The story of that journey was told in three one-hour programmes in September 2010. The participants spent a weekend together at Worth Abbey, to introduce them to monastic silence and to the practice of meditation. They went home for one week to try to put what they had learned into practice in their busy lives—and all except one of them failed completely to do so! They then went together to St Beuno's, a Jesuit retreat centre in Wales, for an eight-day individually-guided retreat, where each of them was permitted to speak only to

the retreat conductor and a video diary. Each one was taken, by way of anger, boredom, frustration and loneliness, to experiences such as the facing of past unhappiness: unresolved grief, violence, family rejection, etc. Perhaps unexpectedly, *all five* came to see silence as a way to hidden dimensions in their lives. Each one admitted on camera that this had been a decisive and life-changing experience and made significant life adjustments as a result.

The experiment with silence was undertaken within the framework of the religious life—first within the Benedictine monastery at Worth, and then supervised within the Jesuit tradition—and the link with our subject is that Holy Scripture was central to what was offered to the participants. In the television series, we saw the participants responding to what they were reading and pondering in the Scriptures—often texts which were completely unfamiliar to them. One of them, David, went into the Welsh countryside, to ponder St Luke's account of the Nativity and of the angels appearing to the shepherds; and there he heard within himself a voice saying (as the angels had said): 'Don't be afraid.' Jon, a businessman who had been resolutely anti-religious, said: 'There's no need to fear the silence any more—the silence is like a friend. The fear is inside me.' He wept as he read on camera the verse of the psalm which says: 'Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God";'¹ and he continued in tears as he said: 'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.'²

Both Worth and St Beuno's are, as it happens, within the Roman Catholic tradition, but the series was intended to explore what the Christian religious life in general has to offer people in their busy lives today. I have taken this as my starting place because I think that there could be resonances here with the starting place for all of us, with what pushed us in the direction of the religious life. Some of us will have been familiar with, and have taken on, the Christian faith from childhood. Some will only truly have discovered it later in life. But I'd be surprised if any of us could say that the Scriptures, and particular words of Scripture, did not play a significant part in our decision to embrace the religious life. And I'd also say that some measure of silence will have been necessary to hear those words in our hearts. There may have been the familiar words of call, such as, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me',³ or, 'Here am I; send me!'⁴ Or there may have been words of total claim upon us, such as, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. ... You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'⁵

Pondering words of Scripture, letting them speak to us in silence, letting them shape the way we live, even to the point of making radical change: these

things are the foundation of our lives as committed Christians. Knowing and reflecting upon the Scriptures—or at least upon the biblical stories and what they can teach us—is the *sine qua non*, the essential thing, in serious Christian life. We are not, therefore, looking at something unique, as we explore 'how Holy Scripture forms and informs the religious life' and as we explore how this is experienced within the different Christian denominations. The Scriptures were basic to Christian life even in times when the Bible was not available in the vernacular. In the tradition of Christian spirituality, even teachers who had not been given great educational opportunities used for reflection what they had been able to learn of the Scriptures, and they passed on to others in their teaching and writing what they had received. The sixteenth-century Carmelite, St Teresa of Avila, springs to mind here. Being a woman, she had not had the opportunities for learning enjoyed by, for instance, her co-helper in the Reform of Carmel, St John of the Cross. Furthermore, at the time of the Spanish Inquisition, it was not safe for a woman to advocate knowledge of the Scriptures. She nevertheless longed for all Christians to know all the secrets of Scripture, and for her, the spiritual life *must* conform to the teaching of Holy Scripture.

The religious life, as a particular way of living out the Christian vocation, is a way which does contain particular aids to reflection, prayer and biblical study. In general, as religious we have more recourse to silence than do those with busy daily lives (even when it doesn't seem like it, as we cope with increasing needs and demands, both as citizens of a busy world and as members of ageing communities!) Our way of life is fed constantly by the Scriptures. We meet passages from the Bible as soon as we go to chapel with our brothers or sisters. Our rules and constitutions have sections on the importance of Scripture and/or of the Divine Office for our lives as religious, and we tend to have requirements laid down for us about study of, and meditation upon, the Scriptures. This is the framework by which we live.

The Anglican heritage

Turning now more specifically to the Anglican tradition of religious life, as a particular instance of this general Christian awareness of the importance of the Scriptures as the Word of God, I'll first say something about the general background to the Anglican heritage, going back to the time of the Reformation in England, because Anglicanism is very much the product of its own history. As most will know, King Henry VIII was responsible for the schism with Rome and the establishment of the Church of England. Yet the Reformation in England took a different course from that in Northern Europe, which was spearheaded first by the stand taken by Luther, then also by Zwingli and Calvin. Henry even wrote a book, in response to Luther, entitled *Defence of the Seven Sacraments*,⁶

for which in 1521 Pope Leo X gave him the title of *Fidei Defensor*, Defender of the Faith, a title still held and used by the British Sovereign to this day. Henry VIII broke with Rome primarily for political and dynastic, rather than for theological, reasons: the interference of Rome in affairs of State was resented, and this came to a head when the Pope would not give approval for Henry to divorce and remarry and therefore would not enable Henry to continue his efforts to acquire a legitimate male heir for the throne. Even after his excommunication by Pope Clement VII in 1538, Henry remained a believer in the central teachings of the Church.

Although subsequent kings and queens were troubled by religious divisions in the realm, the means by which the Reformation came to England had set the stage for the Church of England to consider itself *both Catholic and Reformed*. The religious settlement of Queen Elizabeth I in 1559 laid the foundations for the Anglican *via media* (or ‘middle way’), a reconstitution of the Church, an attempt to include everyone (whether Catholic or Protestant) in structures, theology and forms of worship forming a middle way between the extremes of the claims on each side. The faith of Anglicans is founded in the Scriptures and the Gospels, in the traditions of the Apostolic Church, the historical episcopate, the first seven Ecumenical Councils, and the early Church Fathers. The Old and New Testaments are regarded as ‘containing all things necessary for salvation’⁷ and as the ultimate standard of faith.

However, the actions of Henry VIII and his ministers had set in train a series of unstoppable events, and they then pursued relentlessly the goal of the complete Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-41), bringing to an end all religious life as it had been known hitherto. Until then, the country was rich in powerful monastic foundations, presenting some threat to State authority and often having substantial endowments and fortunes. Westminster Abbey, where kings and queens are crowned, and where the royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton took place on 29 April this year, was itself a Benedictine monastic foundation, as is clear from the fact that it is still referred to as an abbey church.

So how, and when, was the religious life restored within the Anglican Communion? The answer is that it was a consequence of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England (also known as the Tractarian Movement, from the *Tracts for the Times*, published 1833-41). This Movement was primarily clerical in character, and its members often had associations with the University of Oxford. It began as an attack, made in John Keble’s Assize Sermon in Oxford in 1833, upon the perceived secularization of the Church—but it soon became so much more. Anglicans were perceived as forming, together with Orthodox and Roman Catholics, one of three ‘branches’ of the one ‘Catholic Church’.

Tractarian interest in Christian origins led them to reconsider the relationship of the Church of England with the Roman Catholic Church. Blessed John Henry Newman was, prior to his reception into the Roman Catholic Church in 1845, a leading member of this Movement. In the last of the *Tracts*, number 90, Newman argued that the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, as defined by the Council of Trent, were compatible with the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the historic defining document of the Church of England (1563). The Oxford Movement began to have a considerable influence on Anglican theology and liturgical practice, pressing for the reinstatement of lost traditions. Many Catholic practices were re-introduced into worship, and the Eucharist became more central in Church life. In consequence, the Movement was subjected to attack for being 'papalist'—yet it endured, at least in the influence which it exerted within the Church of England.

Due to this Catholic Revival in the Church of England, interest was very soon awakened in the re-establishment of religious and monastic orders, for men and for women. In 1841, Marian Rebecca Hughes became the first woman since the Reformation to make vows of religion in communion with the See of Canterbury. In 1848, Priscilla Lydia Sellon became the superior of the Society of the Most Holy Trinity—not the very first Sisterhood, but the first one organized formally as a religious order. It is important to stress here that, although specifically contemplative communities were established for men and for women, yet most Anglican communities lived their consecration to God under vows in a *mixed life* of reciting the full Divine Office, along with a daily Eucharist, plus service to the poor. This mixed life, combining aspects of contemplative and active orders, remains to this day a hallmark of Anglican religious life. Again, perhaps, we see something of the Anglican *via media*.

Anglican religious orders flourished and spread throughout the world, mainly to English-speaking countries and to regions under British influence. Since the 1960s there has been a general decline in numbers, though there has been significant growth in the Melanesian countries, and in certain parts of Africa. Two features that we might note from recent decades are the establishment of some mixed communities of men and women and the formation of a number of grass-roots communities. These grass-roots communities live out monastic practices, but without necessarily having traditional religious structures, such as the traditional vows, and they are collectively referred to as 'Fresh Expressions of Church'. They increasingly take part in meetings of Anglican religious.

The Word of God

Making now something of a switch from the Anglican historical background, let us turn to the basis of our Christian faith, to the Word of God, to Jesus 'who

is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known',⁸ the one, definitive word given to us. To quote from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.⁹

And as Saint John of the Cross expressed it:

In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has no more to say. ... because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has spoken all at once by giving us this All who is his Son.¹⁰

I realise that I might not be the only one who will do so at this Conference, but I should like to mention at this point, and commend warmly to you, the 2010 Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church—though I have to say that the English prose translations emanating from the Vatican seem consistently turgid and at times nearly incomprehensible! In this document, particular emphasis is laid upon the Prologue of the Gospel according to St John,¹¹ in which the Word, who is from the beginning with God, who became flesh and dwelt among us, is revealed. To quote from *Verbum Domini*:

God makes himself known to us as a mystery of infinite love in which the Father eternally utters his Word in the Holy Spirit. Consequently the Word, who from the beginning is with God and is God, reveals God himself in the dialogue of love between the divine persons, and invites us to share in that love.¹²

We may note here the part played by Holy Spirit with regard to the divine word. The Spirit who acts in the incarnation of the Word through the Virgin Mary is the same Holy Spirit who guides Jesus throughout his mission, and who will teach the disciples all things, reminding them of all that Christ has said to them,¹³ that Spirit of truth¹⁴ who will guide the disciples into all the truth.¹⁵ The Spirit who spoke through the prophets is the same Holy Spirit who sustains and inspires the Church in the preaching of the Apostles, in the writing of Holy Scripture and in the proclamation of the word of God.¹⁶

The religious life is a reminder and a sign that we live, not 'by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'.¹⁷ In our lives of dedicated prayer and service, it is our task to meditate upon, and listen attentively to, the word of God. Three principal ways come to mind in which we share in 'the dialogue of love between the divine persons'—a phrase just quoted from *Verbum Domini*—through the Scriptures (an essential part of Anglican religious life), ways in which the Scriptures form and inform us. The first way is through *study* of the Scriptures. The second way is by *participation in the Liturgy*

(principally the Divine Office and the Eucharist, but also the other Sacraments), and the third is through *lectio divina*, or 'holy reading'.

1. Study of the Scriptures

I am referring here to serious *study* of the Scriptures, whether group or individual study, whether following some particular leading of the Holy Spirit, or under instruction, or following a set course or a particular book. This is important in the religious life, but not specific to it, and the amount of study undertaken will vary according to a combination of the ethos of the order, its other commitments and the aptitude and needs of the individual.

In the early days of the revival of Anglican religious life, a difference in attitudes towards the study of Scripture could be seen, between men's and women's communities. (I am not at all sure that this does not continue to exist in more subtle forms, but it is certainly less marked...!) The men's communities tended to include priests, who had received training in biblical study and who continued their studies. Part of their ministry and mission was to preach regularly. Scholars like Richard Meux Benson, founder of the Society of St John the Evangelist (1824–1915) and Charles Gore of the Community of the Resurrection (1853–1932), later to become a bishop, established a lasting tradition of study, and Barnabas Lindars of the Society of St Francis (1923–91) was to become Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the University of Manchester, with the distinction of being a scholar of international reputation in both Old and New Testament studies.

We may contrast this with the situation in many early women's communities, where there was an emphasis on social, rather than on academic, work. It meant that fewer Sisters were involved in biblical study, although the emphasis on the Divine Office in most Anglican communities which I have mentioned meant that most Sisters were conversant with scriptural texts. But even though serious academic study was comparatively unusual, many Sisters did teach at 'Sunday school', a familiar part of English church life for children, and so Scripture and scriptural stories were significant.

In time, it was possible for Sisters to become more scholarly. The Community of the Holy Family, for example, founded in 1898 by three graduates of the women's college, Newnham College, Cambridge, encouraged Sisters to engage in Bible study in addition to their experience of the scriptures in the Liturgy. The founder of the Community of the Sisters of the Church, Emily Ayckbourn, was also, from the foundation in 1870 onwards, very keen on training and study for the Sisters. As the twentieth century began, convent libraries contained mainly pious biographies and hagiography (lives of the saints). This changed in time, particularly as trained teachers joined the orders. A teaching order, the Order of

the Holy Paraclete which was founded in 1915, encouraged Sisters to read biblical commentaries. On the whole, though, it must be said that in the early decades of the twentieth century, orders focussing upon nursing and social work were not notable for encouraging Sisters to read at all, or even for providing any books to be read!

At the present day, although some differences of opportunity may still persist between men and women religious, I think that these probably have a lot to do with how much liberty orders have to provide time for individual study, given the ministries of the order and the ever-increasing need to care for elderly members. In fact, the ordination of women (permitted in the Church of England since 1994) has itself enabled women to study in the course of their preparation for the priestly office—and many women's communities do have at least some ordained members.

2. The Liturgy: Divine Office and Eucharist

The other two ways in which Scripture forms and informs us are more particularly characteristic of the religious life, because the way of life—for Anglicans too—provides the conditions for them. The first of these is exposure to the Scriptures in the Liturgy, that is, in the Divine Office and the Eucharist (and in the other Sacraments), and the second, to which I'll return, is the traditional monastic practice by the individual religious of *lectio divina* or 'holy reading'.

The tradition of the monastic way of life, outwardly lost entirely within the Church of England at the Reformation, nevertheless continued and flourished in a particular form as part of Anglican culture. The hours of prayer, which traditionally sanctify different parts of the monastic day, were prayed in parish churches and cathedrals. The Church's standard prayer book, the *Book of Common Prayer*, had the effect of putting the Psalter and the Office into the hands of the laity. Until the movement for more frequent celebration of Holy Communion got under way in the 1970s, most parish churches would expect the main Sunday services to be 'Mattins' (formed from Matins and Lauds) and 'Evensong' (formed from Vespers and Compline), as set out in the prayer book. There would often be an 'early' celebration of Holy Communion on Sundays at 8 a.m. Since then, the Eucharist or Mass has become the main service, and often Mattins and Evensong have fallen away—Mattins, because its place has been taken by the Eucharist; Evensong because evening services are poorly frequented these days, as people feel less safe out at night, and as the average age of congregations increases.

The *Book of Common Prayer* of 1559, introduced in the reign of Elizabeth

I, laid emphasis upon the importance of the singing of the Scriptures. It was provided that in 'quires and places where they sing...' the lessons of Morning and Evening Prayer, together with the Epistle and Gospel of the Holy Communion service should be sung. In the Elizabethan Settlement, the long choral tradition of many English cathedrals and monasteries was maintained by establishing choral foundations for the daily singing of the Divine Office. Consequently, some 34 cathedrals, collegiate churches and royal chapels were established with choirs in the late sixteenth century. Almost all of these have continued daily choral prayer to this day, with scarcely a break.

So, building on a long tradition, and also on the ideas of the Oxford Movement which began in 1833, most Anglican orders were founded with an understanding of a religious life which was shaped by the dual obligations of the Divine Office and the Sacrament of the Mass, and this is a constant feature in the ethos of Anglican orders.

A number of the nineteenth-century communities had priest-founders, or priests who were influential in their establishment, and loyalty to the liturgical use of the Church of England was stressed. (Anglicans differ from Roman Catholics in that orders have considerable freedom to devise their own form of Office.) For instance, the office book used by Canon T. T. Carter for the women's Community of St John Baptist at Clewer near Windsor, *The Day Hours of the Church of England* (1858), at first used scrupulously the calendar of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Authorised Version of the Bible. This seems to have become the version of the Office most widely used among the nineteenth-century Sisterhoods. Dr John Mason Neale, founder of the Society of Saint Margaret for women at East Grinstead in southern England, stressed the place of the Mass in the life of the Society, together with the place of the Bible (in reciting the psalms and reading of the lessons in the Divine Office, and in the private reading and meditation of the Sisters). John Mason Neale often taught about the help given by the Liturgy in understanding Scripture. Influenced by what he had seen in continental Europe, he produced an English translation of Matins for singing at night, namely a version of the Night Office.

I wrote much of this paper in Holy Week and the first days of Eastertide. At this time, even more than in normal daily life, we are presented with a rich diet of Scripture. The Easter Vigil, when we celebrate the first Mass of Easter, begins with seven lengthy readings from the Old Testament, tracing salvation history. The Psalter plays a significant part: on Good Friday and Holy Saturday we recite the long Psalm 119 each day during the Little Hours. Throughout Holy Week a recurring motif from Philippians is heard and sung in my Community:

Christ became obedient for our sakes unto death, even the death of the Cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the Name which is

above every name.¹⁸

Yet I would stress the importance of silence for taking in all of this. From *Verbum Dei* again, on ‘the importance of silence in relation to the word of God and its reception in the lives of the faithful’:

The word, in fact, can only be spoken and heard in silence, outward and inward. Ours is not an age which fosters recollection; at times one has the impression that people are afraid of detaching themselves, even for a moment, from the mass media. ... Rediscovering the centrality of God’s word in the life of the Church ... means rediscovering a sense of recollection and inner repose. The great patristic tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence. Our liturgies must facilitate this attitude of authentic listening.¹⁹

3. *Lectio divina*, or ‘holy reading’

I’d like to begin our consideration of *lectio divina* with a quotation from an Anglican divine, William Law (1686-1761), best known for his book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Just to explain: within the Anglican tradition, theologians whose works are regarded as setting a standard in terms of faith, doctrine, worship, and spirituality are sometimes referred to collectively as ‘the Anglican divines’. There is no authoritative list, but they have a common commitment to the Christian faith as conveyed by Scripture and by the *Book of Common Prayer* and a positive view of the Anglican *via media* (which I have mentioned). Here is the quotation from William Law:

The book of all books is in your own heart, in which are written and engraved the deepest lessons of divine instruction. Learn therefore to be deeply attentive to the presence of God in your heart, who is always speaking, always instructing, always illuminating the heart that is attentive to him. Here you will meet the divine light in its proper place, in that depth of your soul, where the birth of the Son of God and the proceeding of the Holy Ghost are always ready to spring up in you.

It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us, in the depths of the heart, and this is aided by attentiveness to the Scriptures. The Rule of my Community, the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God, states:

The study of Scripture to form the basis of their prayer should be the first charge upon the Sisters’ attention in the time set apart for reading. Nothing can take the place of *lectio divina*.²⁰

Origen (c. 185–254) maintained that understanding Scripture demands

(even more than study) closeness to Christ, and prayer. He believed that the best way to know God is through love, and that there can be no authentic *scientia Christi* (knowledge of Christ) apart from growth in love. In his *Letter to Gregory*, he counselled:

Devote yourself to the *lectio* of the divine Scriptures; apply yourself to this with perseverance. Do your reading with the intent of believing in and pleasing God. If during the *lectio* you encounter a closed door, knock and it will be opened to you by that guardian of whom Jesus said, 'The gatekeeper will open it for him'. By applying yourself in this way to *lectio divina*, search diligently and with unshakable trust in God for the meaning of the divine Scriptures, which is hidden in great fullness within.

Lectio divina is a traditional part of Christian monastic culture, a response to the injunction to 'pray without ceasing'.²¹ Both St Pachomius and St Benedict required their monks to learn to read. In the *Rule* of St Benedict, *lectio* is mentioned in a chapter devoted to manual labour, because he says that, to avoid idleness, the enemy of the soul, 'at fixed times, the brothers ought to be occupied in manual labour; and again, at fixed times, in sacred reading'²²—which does underline that this sacred reading is itself a work.

Many lay people also practise 'holy reading' in some form. There is currently an upsurge of books coming onto the market in English on this subject, intended for all Christians, together with a general upsurge of books on 'monastic spirituality' for all. *Lectio divina* is to be distinguished from our modern cerebral approach to reading, and indeed, the medieval monk followed the ancient practice of reading aloud. It begins with *lectio* (reading) of a text, reading and listening at a deep level, with a desire to understand what the text is saying in itself. This is linked with *cogitatio*, thinking about the text, and with *studium*, studying it.

Then follows *meditatio* (meditation), where we ask what the text is saying to us: here we are challenged and changed as individuals, and as members of our communities. Reading and meditation together have sometimes been described as *ruminatio* (rumination), chewing over in the depths of the soul what has been taken in and received as spiritual nourishment. Before the twelfth century, the text 'O taste and see that the Lord is good' was applied more often to reading Scripture than to the Eucharist. The Latin word *sapere* means 'to savour' or 'to taste'; to have a *discerning* sense of taste and therefore 'to be wise'. Like the Israelites journeying through the desert,²³ we are in religious life fed daily in our *lectio*. We gather what we can from what we are given, as with the manna in the wilderness, of which we are told: 'those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed'.²⁴

Following meditation comes *oratio* (prayer), and this prayer seeks to answer the Lord's word to us. Prayer—petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise—is the primary way in which the word transforms us. Then comes *contemplatio* (contemplation), where we enter a silent awareness of God's presence, resting in the gaze of loving awareness, with a heightened sense that God simply 'is'. In the words of Thomas Keeting:

Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and to rest in God.²⁵

In contemplative prayer, we perceive the presence of God in all things, and the Communion of Saints becomes a reality, as we participate in prayer in union with all. We encounter the Word beyond words; we receive as gift God's way of seeing and judging reality, and we come to know what God asks of us in the way of conversion of mind and heart, and in transformation of our lives. St Paul expresses it like this:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.²⁶

Finally, as an outcome of *lectio divina*, there is *actio* (action), the impulse to translate into our lives what has been received.

These stages may not happen in this precise order, and if we are drawn to prayer without having completed our reading of the text intended for this time of spiritual reading, then the process of *lectio divina* has in fact achieved its purpose, which is to draw us into deeper prayer. We recall how the hearts of the disciples were burning within them while Jesus was talking to them on the road to Emmaus and opening the Scriptures to them.²⁷ He again appeared to the disciples and 'opened their minds to understand the Scriptures',²⁸ explaining how 'it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day'.²⁹ Jesus was both the teacher and the meaning of all that was revealed.

And in all our spiritual reading, we have a model in Mary, the Mother of God, who 'treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart'.³⁰

Conclusion

Concluding where we began, with the place of silence: we have to make conditions of silence where we may hear and be responsive to the Word. This is common to the whole monastic tradition. Yet we may also have to accept that what we may experience may itself seem like silence. To quote again from *Verbum Domini*:

As the cross of Christ demonstrates, God also speaks by his silence. The

silence of God, the experience of the distance of the almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the incarnate Word. Hanging from the wood of the cross, he lamented the suffering caused by that silence: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'³¹ ... This experience of Jesus reflects the situation of all those who, having heard and acknowledged God's word, must also confront his silence. ... Hence, in the dynamic of Christian revelation, silence appears as an important expression of the word of God.³²

¹ Ps. 14: 1.

² Ps. 51: 17.

³ Mt. 19: 21.

⁴ Isa. 6: 8.

⁵ Mark 12: 30.

⁶ *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*.

⁷ Article VI of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion on 'The sufficiency of Scripture' stated (in the original English) that: 'Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.'

⁸ John 1: 18.

⁹ Heb. 1: 1-2.

¹⁰ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St John of the Cross, II, 22: 3,4, trans. Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, Doubleday, 1964.

¹¹ John 1: 1-18.

¹² *Verbum Dei*, I, The God Who Speaks, God in dialogue.

¹³ cf. John 14: 26.

¹⁴ cf. John 15: 26; 16: 13.

¹⁵ f. John 16: 13.

¹⁶ cf. *Verbum Domini*. I, The God Who Speaks, The word of God and the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷ Mt 4: 4.

¹⁸ Phil. 2: 8-9.

¹⁹ *Verbum Dei*, II, The Liturgy, Privileged Setting For The Word Of God, Suggestions b) The word and silence.

²⁰ Rule of the Community of the Sisters of the Love of God, Chapter 17.

²¹ I Thess. 5: 17.

²² *Rule of St Benedict*, Ch. 48.

²³ cf. Ex. 16: 13-36.

²⁴ Ex. 16: 18.

²⁵ *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation*, Thomas Keating, Continuum, 1997.

²⁶ Rom. 12: 2.

²⁷ cf. Luke 24: 32.

²⁸ Luke: 24: 45.

²⁹ Luke 24: 46.

³⁰ Luke 2: 19; cf. 2: 51.

³¹ Mark 15: 34; Mt. 27: 46.

³² *Verbum Dei*, I, The God Who Speaks, God the Father, source and origin of the word.

THE LOVE OF GOD IN COMMUNION WITH CHRIST CRUCIFIED

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I left the house after lunch to celebrate Mass in a parish which is about 130 km away. Halfway, where I had to leave the paved road and move on to a dirt road, I saw a car parked on a small bridge and two men bent over the engine. It was about to rain and so I stopped and offered help. The two turned around with guns in hand, asked me for the car keys, my watch and money and held me with them. They positioned the two cars in such a way as to block the traffic. A few minutes later, an armored car of a bank approached and a shootout in the style of “Wild, wild West” begun. The bandits were three. The van which was blocked couldn’t move on because they shot on the tires. But the thieves could not get the guards out of the van. They were defending themselves from the inside.

Then, one of the thieves, pointing his gun on me said: “Put your hands on your head and go to convince the guards to come out of the van.” I tried to let them see the absurdity of such an attempt but it was useless reasoning out to them: “Go, or die.”

I’ve just made the first steps when a few shots came from the van. They hit me from head to toe and threw me to the ground.

I felt a terrible pain in one eye - which was blurred – in my lungs and abdomen. Blood oozed out from my mouth and I could not move from the pain and also out of fear that they would shoot at me again to kill me. The robbers fled in the two vehicles and in another one which they stopped telling the driver: “let us not waste time because we just killed a priest.” They could not have thought otherwise. A fine drizzle began to fall.

At that moment I felt a deep sense of loneliness and the absurdity of what

was happening. But at the same time, I experienced the fatherhood of God that protected me. Everything seemed to be falling apart, but faith in His love remains. And God gave me the strength to offer everything to the Church, for the “Opera di Maria”... This sense of loneliness, this absurd human suffering, were the face of Jesus crucified and abandoned and I found the strength to embrace it immediately and as far as I could, with joy. At the bottom of my heart, I could not feel the anguish of living or dying, but rather the certainty that God would do what He deem best.

I stayed on the ground for two hours, in the rain, without being able to move. After two hours of intense prayer, during which I asked Jesus for forgiveness of my sins and forgave in my heart the thieves who shot me...

Finally, I heard the sound of a car: the driver stopped but went away quickly, probably out of fear. Another car stopped and I heard comments like: “Here, there was a violent shootout and there is a dead man” and left. Finally, four policemen arrived. They approached with guns in hand and I realized they could give me the coup de grace “to finish me off”, as is sometimes done with thieves, and I forced out a whisper: “I am a priest, do not kill me.”

The doctor who treated me at the hospital had this joke: “They seem to have exaggerated with the lead...!” In fact, the x-ray revealed 117 bullets, one of them was directly aimed at the heart but was deflected by a metal pen. I had a bullet through the eye from side to side, but did not lose my sight. Another passed through the guts and stopped near a vertebra, without touching the spinal cord! They spent three hours in the operating room to sew up my stomach and intestines, a tracheotomy to ease my breathing...everything was in God’s hands.

The doctor told me that I did not have much chance of surviving and things could be assessed again only after three or four days. Immediately after leaving the operating room, he spoke to my brother priest and to all my friends who have come. In great serenity, my brother administered to me the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.

Sometime later, I received a letter from a young man who was present then: “For a long time I had moved away from God, but that night in the hospital, seeing your peace, I realized that only God could do something like that. I realized that everything else does not matter – only God! And he who belongs to Him radiates peace! I came that night to offer some help and instead it was you who gave me God... for me, that was the start of a new life.”

News about the incident spread rapidly giving rise to a “contest of love”. Doctors, nurses, religious, parishioners, each offered something. Priests took

turns to assure that there was always someone with me.

My recovery surprised the doctors, but what surprised them most was the brotherly love among us priests. The head of the hospital told us: “I never imagined that there is a Church like this, where everyone loves one another as brothers.”

The Bishop was always present with his fatherly love. He came to visit me the day after the incident, bringing the greetings and prayers of the entire diocesan community. The Sisters and nurses of the hospital who felt so crushed by the violence reigning in those years, wrote to me after sometime: “What we saw made us think deeply and we said to ourselves – look how beautiful is the Church in unity.”



In this issue, we would like to give you some brief news on the life of UISG in these recent months.

- * The new Prefect of the Congregation for Consecrated Life, Don Joao Braz de Aviz personally visited the UISG Secretariat in Rome on March 30, receiving with much interest information on the Union and cordially sharing some moments with the staff.
- * In these last months, we were also visited by the Board of Directors of the Religious of the United States (May 4) and the CLAR officials (September 20). Both groups, passing by Rome, had wished to meet with representatives of USG and UISG for a fraternal sharing on their situations and concerns.
- * The assembly of USG, focusing on the Theological Seminar held last February in Rome, offered an open day (May 25) to all women General Superiors residing in Rome. The theologians Sr. Mary Maher and Fr. Paul Martinelli presented the riches from the Seminar which then became subject of reflection and dialogue in language groups. Both papers are found on the website of the two unions, www.vidimusdominum.org under the Document section of USG.
- * Talithakum, the UISG Project, International Network of Consecrated Life Against Trafficking in Persons has been working since September 2009 through the Training Courses for Religious in different parts of the world in which the member networks are involved in this field. The first Coordination Meeting of Talithakum was held from May 30 to June 1st in Rome. There are now 21 existing religious networks coordinating more than 400 religious women in their work of combating trafficking in persons especially in women and children. More recent courses have taken place in Nairobi, Kenya for religious women of East Africa (April and October) and Costa Rica for Central America (November).
- * Sisters Amelia Kawaji and Josune Arregui represented UISG in the Religious Interfaith Congress in Triefenstein, Germany. Religious from sixty different Christian denominations gathered from June 25 to 30 to pray together,

establish friendly relations and reflect on “*How God’s Word forms and informs our lives*”.

- * In view of the forthcoming Synod on the New Evangelization, the UISG mobilized the General Superiors in Rome, firstly by providing them with the text of the Lineamenta with a request for their reflection input. These came in writing, for some, while others were presented at a meeting held on July 5, which proved to be personally enriching. The output of this meeting is a document which will be submitted to the Secretariat of the Synod as the UISG contribution to this important ecclesial event.
- * The UISG Council of Delegates was held recently (November 28 to December 3) in Aparecida, SP. Forty seven General Superiors, delegates of their respective constellations and the UISG Board members had a festive and fraternal experience of religious life in Brazil. With the help of theologians Vera Bombonato and Lucia Weiler, they reflected on the theme “**Jesus transfigured, His face launches us on a journey**” and made decisions on the life of the Union. More detailed information on this will be given in the next issue of our Newsletter.