

# *LISTENING TO THE WORD*

**UISG BULLETIN**

**NUMBER 137, 2008**

<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>Sr. Raffaella Colucci, ASC</i>	
<b>WELCOMING THE WORD TO TREASURE IT TOGETHER A NEW IMPETUS FOR UNDERSTANDING MARY AS THE MOTHER OF LISTENING</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Bruno Secondin O.Carm.</i>	
<b>CONVOKED BY THE WORD</b>	<b>17</b>
<i>Sr. Dolores Aleixandre RSCJ</i>	
<b>CAN WE LEARN FROM THE "OTHER"? REFLECTIONS OF A WESTERNIZED ASIAN MIND</b>	<b>34</b>
<i>Sr. Amelia Vaquez, RSCJ</i>	
<b>THE FIRE OF CONSECRATED LIFE: A 21ST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE ON THE VOWS</b>	<b>46</b>
<i>Sr. Camilla Burns, SNDdeN</i>	
<b>THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD - ONE WORLD TO ANOTHER</b>	<b>60</b>
<i>Javier Melloni, S.J.</i>	

# PREFACE

Sister Raffaella Colucci, ASC

*Original in Italian*

**W**n this Bulletin: *Listening to the WORD*, there are five articles: two specifically on the WORD of God, and three others which consider the religious vows, the contribution to the experience of God and the possibility of learning from others, from other religions. All have a common perspective; an orientation towards God. They are articles to be lived rather than read, given that in our world orientated towards risk, oppressed by fear and anger, it has become difficult to be “authentic witnesses to the living God”.

The Bulletin aims to offer a preliminary contribution to the next Synod of Bishops: *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, which will take place in Rome in October 2008, and to indicate some approaches to the importance of the Word of God in consecrated and lay life.

**Father Bruno Secondin. O. Carm.**, in his article *Welcoming the Word to Treasure it Together*, offers new insights on the theme of the WORD in order to understand Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The canticle of the Magnificat, a composition shaped by many Biblical echoes, by evocative and effective images, outlines the role of Mary in the life of Jesus and her total acceptance of the service of the Word: “Let it happen to me as you have said”. The article is an invitation to live like Mary, who “listens to and lives the Word, lives with the Word, grows with the *saving* Word of the Son who is close to her.

The article by **Sister Dolores Aleixandre RSCJ**, *Convoked by the Word*, continues the previous reflection with some interesting and effective definitions. It draws attention to five Biblical icons which appear in the Gospel parables. The *gatekeeper*: to be vigilant and attentive to recognize the work of God in our hearts and in the world; *the sower*: to be still, to know how to discern when to be active and when to be patient and passive; *the workers of the eleventh hour*: to be fascinated by the free gift of God; *the unjust steward*: to be worldly wise in making friends and becoming an expert in humanity and listening; like *children...:*, dancing to the rhythm of the Gospel, that is to say, not being immobile and indifferent.

*Can We Learn from the “Other”? Reflection of a Westernized Asiatic Mind* is the article offered to us by **Sister Amelia Vasquez RSCJ**. Her experience of the continents of Asia and Europe make her article one to be appreciated. Sister Amelia’s great desire is that the next Synod of Bishops should look carefully at the situation of Christians in Asia, bearing in mind their basic religious identity, and should enable Christianity to rediscover the riches of its Middle Eastern past and adapt it to a new situation. Sister Amelia hopes that the Word can throw light on various situations, because, like Jesus, we can learn from “the excluded and the foreigner, including the ‘heretical’ Samaritans’”, and because the Church should be “...open to the new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus can be present in Asia today” (EA 20).

**Sister Camilla Burns SNDdeN**, in her article *The Fire of Consecrated Life: a 21<sup>st</sup> Century perspective on the vows*, presents us with the fundamental aspects of the accounts and their importance for life; the three challenges to enter into the story of the universe (cosmology). Religious life, she notes, is being born into a life in the context of the evolving universe. Starting from this context, she explains three cosmic principles which offer a new perspective on the vows: *differentiation*, which makes us explore the vow of poverty; *communion*, which leads us to consider the vow of chastity; the principle of *self-renewal or interiority* opens up for us the vow of obedience.

The reflection of **Father Javier Melloni SJ**, *The Contribution of the Experience of God: One World to Another*, is an invitation to become aware that our life is a gift of God. Our life, however, must embrace all human beings. The author, going through the four moments of the cycle of “breathing” – receiving, interiorizing, offering, detaching – explains that these four attitudes to life are common to all human beings and allow us to inhale/exhale together with other believers in the world and to share with them the life that is the gift of God.

To place oneself in a position of listening to the Word means having “attentive hearts”, allowing ourselves to be “fascinated by the Word” and being “assiduous and untiring seekers” of the beauty of God in a world which needs true and credible witness to God’s Word.

WELCOMING THE WORD TO  
TREASURE IT TOGETHER  
A NEW IMPETUS FOR UNDERSTANDING MARY AS  
THE MOTHER OF LISTENING

Bruno Secondin O.Carm.

*Bruno Secondin (1940), an Italian Carmelite, has studied in Rome, Germany and in Jerusalem. He is a doctor of theology and professor of spiritual theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.*

*He is a member of various Italian and international theological associations, has worked as a theological expert on the working document of the Congress in 2004, and is involved in conferences and articles on spirituality, pastoral work and consecrated life.*

*He has written many books, translated into various languages.*

*Original in Italian*

**B**enedict XVI wrote in his first encyclical: “The *Magnificat* is entirely woven from threads of Holy Scripture, threads drawn from the Word of God. Here we see how completely at home Mary is with the Word of God, with ease she moves in and out of it.. She speaks and thinks with the Word of God; the Word of God becomes her word, and her word issues from the Word of God.” (*Deus caritas est*, 41).

Pope Benedict XVI knows well, as we all do, that the *Magnificat* is the expression in prayer and praise not only of all that Mary had experienced at that moment and throughout her life, but also of the close relationship between herself and the community of believers. That is to say, this magnificent canticle is like embroidery done by many hands, like the rejoicing of a multitude of believers, like the echo of many sounds blended together. Mary, in her life and her adventure of grace, is the person most worthy to proclaim it, the one closest to the experiential theology reflected in it, and the voice of the whole Church which identifies itself with this canticle.

This is because such an elegant composition, with a thousand Biblical echoes, evocative and effective images, wide horizons and yet so close to the language, the terminology, the rhythm of praise of the whole of Scripture, is

both a personal and a collective compilation and resonates in Mary's feminine heart and soul in a unique way, echoing like thunder in the hearts of all who are children of Abraham, redeemed by the new Adam.

Luke has certainly shown his literary ability in these words, but the distance between the initial event and the writing of the text has also made it possible to blend together the initial feelings and the results of personal and collective living which are channelled into the text and its resonances. It becomes truly a song of longing and hope, and also a prayerful response of praise to all that had happened and had taken a full and definitive form. In fact the roots of the first Covenant are evident in the text as well as the truth of the new Covenant in its most authentic core.

## 1. From the parable of the sower according to Luke

I will begin with a broad theme. We all know the parable of the sower: the three Synoptics tell it with their own emphases (cf. Mt 13:1-9.18-23; Mk 4:1-20; Lk 8:4-15). But they also situate it according to the different structural needs of each gospel. I would like to base myself on Luke's redaction and draw attention to something which Luke does. (Lk 8:4-15) <sup>1</sup>.

Luke places this parable not by chance but in a very special context; before relating it, the evangelist recalls that there were women and men around Jesus who followed him and shared his journeys, his preaching and his concerns (Lk 8:1-3). Therefore the premise of the parable – different from that of the other two Synoptics, Mark and Matthew – is above all that there is a mixed group of disciples, women and men, and therefore the parable is immediately aimed at them. Furthermore, it ought to be they who are the visible form of the *bearing fruit* of the seed sown by the sower. Certainly there is also the “large crowd gathering” (Lk 8:4), but this is a stereotypical way of creating a context. Those to whom the true meaning of the parable is first of all and directly addressed are the women and men disciples.

After having told the parable, Jesus himself explains it, and we all know the explanation. However in Luke we note the absence of percentages at the end (hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold), and the more generic “yield a harvest through their perseverance” (*karpoforoùsin en hypomonè*), which is an expression of sensitivity and quality rather than efficiency. And Luke ends by recalling particular people, specifically the presence of Jesus' mother and brothers, who are trying to contact him, but do not succeed, “they were standing outside” (*exo stèkontes*) says Mark (Mk 3:31; cf. Mt 12:46).

The situation indicates the pressure of the crowd, but above all the difficulty, even for his relations, in understanding truly the newness that Jesus

brings. John too mentions that not even his brothers understood and believed in him (cf. Jn. 7:3-6). Now Jesus' reply to those who tell him that his family are looking for him, perhaps also suggesting a time of quiet, given that there has been so much disturbance, is: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God (*or logos*) and put it into practice" (Lk 8:21).

This radical response as to who can truly now be part of Jesus' family marks, as I have said, the end of the parable of the sower and its explanation. But we can also glimpse something else. His mother and all his brothers – like the rest of those who wish to be his disciples, whether women or men – must accept a journey of listening and discipleship, of new ways of acting and new horizons, and must bring their own lives into other relationships which will regenerate them, which will allow for a new "belonging to a family", truly a new *identity*. And this comes about precisely through an intense, obedient and regenerating listening to the Word of the Master, sown with generosity and received with a "noble and generous heart" (*en cardia kalè kai agathè*: Lk 8:15).

Therefore it can be said with certainty that these words of Jesus do not set up a distance from his family, but are rather an invitation – bearing in mind too the framework of the women at the beginning and end of the parable – to become the *fruitful womb* of the Word. Just as in a woman's experiences of motherhood, they need to watch with *hypomonè*, that is with loving and attentive steadfastness, over the development of the mysterious seed, in a symbiosis which transforms one into the other and becomes hope and a rhythm of life.

In order to speak of how to welcome the Word together in imitation of Mary and to incarnate it in one's life, it is necessary to place Mary herself on the horizon pointed out by Jesus: she herself, after having received the eternal Word in a mysterious pregnancy brought about by the Holy Spirit, after having brought him into human life, is called to undertake the journey of a disciple, to be in her turn a disciple of the son who has now grown and has become publicly a Master. A discipleship which consists not only of being present with Jesus, but also of a mysterious regeneration of the heart, thanks to the incorruptible seed of the new Word, living and eternal (cf. 1 Pet 1:23), to whom she herself had given flesh and a human identity.

This introduction helps us to enter into some reflections which I will offer, and which will be incomplete, because I am confining myself to reaching the threshold of the public life of Jesus. What interests me above all is discovering the way in which "the Virgin Mary is able to look around and to live the urgent issues of daily life... She teaches us not to remain outside a Word of life, but to participate in it, allowing herself to be led by the Holy

Spirit who dwells in the believer” (*Lineamenta*, Sinodo 2008, n. 12). And Mary is not alone in this exercise of keeping and reflecting. We see this in the gospel texts.

## 2. Mary of Nazareth, a Hebrew woman and the annunciation of the angel.

There is no doubt that Mary had a Hebrew identity, with all that such a statement implies. We sometimes proclaim her “daughter of Sion”, and this applies to lineage, to customs, to obligations and prohibitions, to religious practice and to a sense of identity, and also therefore also to her diligence in listening to and obeying the word. A Hebrew man or woman without an “intense listening” to the Word is inconceivable.

Luke does not go into detail about Mary’s life as a Hebrew woman, but there are aspects which we can emphasize, without distorting them, by using a little insight. Out of this emerge the typical characteristics of a Hebrew believer, who cannot be understood without the typical Hebrew way of living, with conviction and not by chance.

The fact that Luke starts from the situation of Mary betrothed to Joseph, and is not concerned to say anything about her childhood or any aspect of her religious experience at that time, does not mean that she does not have these Hebraic qualities. The *apocryphal gospels*, that is, non-canonical writings rooted in the popular sensibility of the time, took pleasure in filling in these gaps.

For a Hebrew person who knew the Scriptures, the phrase “do not be afraid”, that accompanies the confusion of someone reacting to a theophany, is normal. Mary certainly knew these stories and was aware of them. *Disturbance* is the normal reaction of a Hebrew in the face of an event of divine revelation. It is not therefore simply shyness, surprise, a moment of unease: in this prolonged disturbance, accompanied by asking herself – with a sense of fear and amazement – the meaning and the purpose of this particular greeting, we find the typical reaction of the Israelite. And the sense of a towering presence which calls someone to a task which always goes beyond their own ideas is also typical, so much more in this case in which to “The Lord is with you” – also a typical way of approaching someone – is prefaced a surprising definition: *kekaritomène*, we could say “impregnated with grace”, an expression which seems indeed unsuitable for a young girl of fifteen.

It could also be a polite way of speaking, for example: “how lovely, how beautiful how wonderful you are”, as some oriental traditions say. But in this context it means, as we all know, much more, more in quality and substance,

as is made explicit by the repetition “you have won God’s favour” (Lk.1:30: *karin parà tò Theò*). To find favour implies not only pleasing, but also: you have given joy, you have rejoiced the heart of God, in God’s eyes and heart you are loved and desired.

The reply of the angel could be commented on in many ways. No doubt it cannot be understood without a deep familiarity with Scripture, to which it contains many allusions, which would not escape a Hebrew woman who knew the Scriptures. I do not intend to go into this important aspect. I want rather to propose a complementary interpretation of Mary’s reply to the angel: “How can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?” (Lk.1:34).

### 3. Israel the bride has no husband, she is sterile

These sentences of the angel, the first and the second – repeated also in the annunciation to Joseph – (cf. Mt 1:18-25) - imply the whole history of Israel; dozens of parallel passages are alluded to. It was a language of hope but also of suffering, because of historical unfaithfulness and grave failings. Israel the bride had become sterile, because of her many failings, the result of political and cultic unions with neighbouring peoples. She was no longer fruitful as in the time of faithfulness, and it is as if Mary identified herself with the daughter of Sion, sterile and without a husband, without the joy of seeing a descendant of David, one of the house of Joseph, guide his people towards peace and holiness.

The deep disturbance of Mary, her intense reflection, and also her reply can be placed in this perspective, together with what Jesus will say of himself – or at least often allude to by his gestures and manner – as the *husband* of Israel. There are many occasions on which Jesus will take up the imagery of espousal, already developed by the prophets with regard to the loving marriage relationship between God and Israel, with its betrayals and its reconciliations (cf. Hosea, Deutero-Isaiah, Ezekiel and above all the Cantic of Canticles).

Mary feels this centuries-old sterility of the whole people as her own, she is immersed in it and she receives in her heart the suffering common to all, together with the steadfast hope of the pious, as will be seen later in Zachariah, Simeon, Anna and so many others. The reply or explanation of the angel can also be read within that same perspective: the symbolism of the Spirit, the holiness of God which takes form and becomes visible, the sublime dignity of the one to be born, which is humanly impossible, the reference to sterility (that of Elizabeth) miraculously undone by divine intervention, are all themes of the Old Testament which resonate and are linked to the concerns of “Israel the bride”- Mary because of her barrenness and her lack of an intimate companion.

We find however in Mary's final response her personal availability not only to give herself fully to the demands of the angel's word, but also to take upon herself the entire Word of the Father's covenant, because it is accomplished in her for the benefit of all. She declares herself willing to see her existence woven in a unique way into all that she knows and meditates on of the collective memory, of expectations, of hope and of faithfulness. In accepting to be at the service of the Word – "Let it happen to me as you have said / *génaitó moi katà tò r-má sou*" – there is an availability to be the place where the ancient hopes and promises are fulfilled. In fact *remà* is *word/event*, in the full sense, and not only in terms of vocabulary, expression, sound, terminology. I see a confirmation of this in the greeting of her cousin Elizabeth who cries out joyfully, "Blessed is she who *believed in the fulfilment* of the promise made her by the Lord" (Lk.1:45). This sentence is placed at the end of Elizabeth's canticle, where various symbols of the presence of the Lord in the history of the people are also alluded to (primarily the passage of the ark of the Lord, joy because of the womb become pregnant, unrestrained exultation, praise among women, etc). It is therefore to be interpreted in this context, and not as personal praise given to Mary *alone*.

In this case Mary represents the Israel of the pious and the just who have believed in the faithfulness of God, in spite of darkness and long waiting; she is the fruitful spouse, loved with an "everlasting love" (Isa. 54:8), no longer repudiated. Elizabeth expresses this certainty that God would be faithful to God's people: she sees and recognises that in Mary this faithfulness has become a gift for all, and that in Mary's availability her response is for the benefit of all.

Only two women who had believed, meditated on and lived the Scriptures, that is, who had listened, loved and had identified themselves with the ancient promise, with which the Word, handed on from generation to generation, was impregnated, would have been able to see that unity and to go beyond personal joy, however legitimate and intimate.

#### **4. A people of exegetes: Mary *reflects in her heart, together with her people***

We always meditate on the event of the birth in time of the Son of the Most High with amazed and contemplative hearts. Each one is struck by and savours so many aspects which are worthy of comment – and throughout the ages there have been many comments – because the events are "grace upon grace" as John says (cf. Jn. 1:16). I will limit myself to commenting, following the line I have taken up to now, with some emphasis, on Mary's silent and reflective manner throughout the *infancy* of Jesus.

Luke notes twice that Mary reflected and tried to interpret. After the visit of the shepherds it is said: “Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart (*synetèrei tà rêmata sycmbàllousa en tè kardìa*) (Lk.2:19); and after the finding of the child Jesus in the temple it is said, “His mother stored up all these things in her heart (*dietèrei panta ta rêmata*)” (Lk. 2:51). But around the mother who reflects and watches over her memories, with a heart that is amazed but that also searches for a unifying meaning, there are others who are doing the same.

For example, when Zechariah is able to speak again and give the name *John* to his son, the neighbours have a sense of surprise and fear, and “all those who heard of it treasured it in their hearts (*ta rêmata*)” cf. Lk.1:66. The shepherds, before going to Bethlehem, discussed whether it was worth going to see “to see this word/event (*to r-má*) which the Lord has made known to us” (Lk:2:15), and they then speak to all about what (*tou rêmatos*) they have heard and seen” (Lk: 2:20). We also have *amazement*: above all that of Elizabeth (Lk. :41-45) at the visit of the Mother of the Lord, who presents herself like the new ark of the covenant passing over mountain roads to come and share with her cousin the joy of an extraordinary motherhood.

Then there is the amazement of the relations of Elizabeth and Zachariah when their son is born: they rejoice with them (*synèkairon autè*) (Lk. 1:56). All those who heard the shepherds tell of their extraordinary experience felt amazement and astonishment: “everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds said to them” (Lk. 2:18). Even more in the temple, faced with Simeon’s joy, father and mother wondered (*thaumàzontes*) at the things that were being said about him” (Lk. 2:33).

This is with regard to the birth and the first days that followed. But it is said of Mary that she reflected with a watchful heart after the episode of the finding in the temple. Here too we have amazement and wondering (*existanto*: it can be translated as *they were dazed or stunned*) of the teachers in the temple (cf. Lk.2:47). But it is noted that the parents “did not understand what (*to rëma*) he meant” (Lk.2:50). And afterwards “his mother stored up all these word/events (*panta ta rêmata*) in her heart (Lk.2:51).

I would like to comment on this collective attitude of amazement and reflection, of incomprehension and keeping in the heart. As we have seen, this attitude is not only Mary’s, but that of many others. And this already indicates something really important: it was a holy custom of the Hebrews to place in the heart and watch over what happened with care and wonder. Because all events were both words and facts, objective happenings and mysterious signs, to be reflected on in order to find their connection within a perspective that would explain their meaning and purpose. Mary does nothing other than live

with the struggle to understand, accompanied for her by wonder, surprise, a sense of fear and amazement.

Because this is the true Biblical way of welcoming the Word and keeping it in one's heart. With the amazement that comes from the sense of one's own fragility and ordinariness, that is shot through with signs of God who comes close to us, who becomes visible and audible while remaining totally other, compels us to reflect in our hearts, to dialogue in order to understand, to reflect so as not to miss unexpected connections and echoes. An entire people of the humble who reflect and question, who are struck by amazement and together keep in their hearts *ta rēmata*, so that nothing should escape but should leave a lasting impression and become a discovery opening up new horizons.

I see Mary with this attitude, as the virgin mother who does not pass over things superficially, but also as the companion and heir to the best Hebrew tradition: that of allowing oneself to be amazed and surprised, to reflect and remember, to watch over and savour in order to draw out the true meaning and inspiration for one's life. This is life according to the Word and the Spirit: a *stabilitas mentis* that familiarises itself with events, remembers the facts well and looks for links that make them into a plan, a tapestry, a complete and unified event. A *stabilitas cordis* that becomes a sole concern, a single and coherent direction of love and desire, of values and expectations: this is the true heart of the Israelite, totally impregnated with the repercussions of the *remata*.

But there is another *stabilitas* on which I would like to dwell on: this is the *stabilitas corporis*. This completes the others spoken of and acquires particular importance during the three decades of Jesus' presence in Nazareth. Perhaps we have too often overlooked the theological importance of this long period lived in Nazareth by Joseph, Mary and Jesus. The statement about Jesus who grew in stature, age and grace and the reflective soul of Mary are all that remain and Luke has made this known.

Too little not to get the impression that perhaps these years were almost lost for the purpose of redemption: why this long, silent, ordinary, anonymous existence of the Redeemer, when the entire world was waiting for the fulfilment of the promises and the universal spreading of light to the peoples?

## **5. In the ordinariness of Nazareth: the Word puts down roots**

We know very little about the life of the Holy Family in Nazareth until the moment when Jesus begins his public life at about thirty: it is clear that everyone knew his father's work (*carpenter/tèktonos*, a title given to Jesus too

(cf. Mt 4:55; Mk.6:3). His mother did not stand out in any way, but took part with everyone else in religious practices, going on pilgrimage in a caravan every year with relatives and acquaintances. Luke alone refers twice to the growth of Jesus. When they return from the presentation in the temple for the offering and Mary's purification, it is said: "And as the child grew to maturity, he was filled with wisdom; and God's favour was with him" (Lk.2:40). When Jesus was twelve and began to be subject to the law (cf.Lk.2:42), he took part in the village pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. He then takes the unforeseen initiative of staying in Jerusalem without warning his parents, causing them great anxiety when they realize that he is not with the caravan. And when they find him and tell him of their anguish, as we know: "He went down with them then and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority...And Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and the people" (Lk. 2:51f.).

I would like to reflect with you on this long period of three decades, about which we know almost nothing, but we can make assumptions, without believing in the miracles of the apocryphal gospels. These are years which have no less redemptive value than the last three years of public life. They are rich above all because of what is said about welcoming the Word like Mary.

We can easily think that this welcoming is shown above all in the first part (the infancy narratives) and then in the public life of Jesus. In the first part of the gospel, Mary's words are few, perhaps thirty in all, excluding the *Magnificat*. Certainly there are many holy words pronounced by Jesus during his public life, but there are only nine words attributed to Mary (at Cana: Jn.2:3, 5) – but this is not the only way in which Jesus spoke, nor the only situation in which one can listen to and welcome the Word of God, as if the Word were word of redemption and salvation only when he acted and spoke in public. Thus in Nazareth we have a *parenthesis*, a time of waiting, a postponement until much later. Here I would like to embark on a new topic.

I think in fact that we must reevaluate this long period specifically in the context of the title of this talk: certainly it is the time in which Mary thinks and watches with a reflective heart over what she has seen and heard and which she has not succeeded in understanding fully (Lk. 2:50). She is like the rich soil on which the seed of the Word has fallen, and which will yield a harvest in whoever has a noble and generous heart (cf. Lk. 8:15).

But I would like to go beyond the vision of Mary pictured in a romantic way. During these thirty years Mary has not distinguished herself in any way from the other women of Nazareth, nor has Jesus' behaviour made his fellow villagers think that there is anything extraordinary about him. This can be seen clearly when they marvel at the wisdom and the energy he shows on that

famous sabbath in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk.4:16-30). And then where did he go to conclude that welcoming and bearing fruit of the Word: what did it consist of?

Mary was called to be the mother of the Word of God, in her womb, in a unique and unrepeatable way, mysterious and surprising. She had brought forth Jesus, “the one who is to save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21), she had introduced him, without his being aware, to the great Hebrew traditions of naming, of circumcision, of the offering of the firstborn in the temple, and to various Hebrew rites.

She had also lived with him, according to Matthew’s account (cf. Mt. 2:13-23), the pattern of the Exodus into Egypt and the return from Egypt. She had certainly lived with him the daily Hebrew practice of different forms of prayer, and every family had the duty of teaching their children this complex daily ritual. She had introduced him, at the appropriate time, that is at twelve years old, among the “sons of the law” (*bar mizpat*), with the obligations associated with it, like that of pilgrimage.

## 6. Where does wisdom and grace in daily life come from?

I wonder where the *wisdom* and *grace* in which it is repeated that he *grew* came from? And what kind of wisdom and grace is really meant? We cannot think that these are qualities “infused” from heaven, from which Mary was excluded. On the other hand, specifically in this brief reference, which we always interpret in a “Christological” sense, I would like to see a “Marian” note. We can discover what Jesus had learned about tradition, the wisdom of the people, about the Scriptures, God’s promises and the peoples’ waiting, from what he does and says in his public life. It is not necessary to give much explanation on this point; each person knows so much.

But who had handed on to him this *wisdom* and this *grace* before God and the people? *Talis Mater, talis Filius*: those long slow decades were a gradual education in listening and obedience to the great tradition in all its demands and shades of meaning, a mutual school of Mother and Son, handing on and rethinking, interpreting and remaining able to be free and flexible, above all meeting a new face of God. Mary’s exceptional motherhood had shaped her understanding of the image of God. The substance of this is engraved in the song of the *Magnificat*, but also in all the parables and the language, gestures and choices of the Son we see that the image of the Father is one of mercy and tenderness, and not one of a rigid law, of sacralized observances, of destructive threats. From the language of the son that of the mother can be known; in his gestures and way of being we find the mother. It is always thus.

The human personality of Jesus was formed in obscurity and silence, in an ordinary life, in the normal relationships typical of any village, in conformity with what the parents were able to hand on, taught by the way they lived, and celebrated with everyone else. This silent “growing within” the human temperament of Jesus, a life without difference, the relationships and humour, social marginalisation and religious duties – people from Nazareth were considered bad people, and Galilee itself was despised because of its mixed population – this is not time wasted, but the fruitfulness of the Word according to the Spirit, a time of redemption in a deep and original sense. Jesus’ living as a brother in Nazareth could appear to be a mere passage (however long) towards the full revelation of the Son of God in power. However we must see it as the truest radiation of the presence of God among us: labouring, hidden, fraternal, the human character of our human character.

I would like to dwell on this point a little longer.

## **7. Jesus *in* Nazareth is the eternal Son, he is an ordinary and saving presence**

Again I allow myself to be inspired by something I have read <sup>2</sup>. Pierangelo Squeri, analysing the experience of Charles de Foucauld, who was so radical in his choice of Jesus of Nazareth, writes: “Jesus of Nazareth is not in fact the ‘human part’ of the Incarnation. Jesus of Nazareth ‘is’ the incarnation of the only begotten Son. Jesus ‘is’ the Son. And reciprocally: Jesus of Nazareth is the only eternal Son of the only God. Jesus of Nazareth is not the ‘human effect’ of the incarnation of the Son of God, but is precisely the ‘human effectivity’ of his divine sonship. It is not the man that the Son takes on and dwells in, not the Son who passes through the human with a view to his redemptive mission and takes leave of it when his mission is accomplished. Jesus of Nazareth is always the Son of God. This same Jesus who is born of Mary and lived in long anonymity until the gift was perfected as *gift*” <sup>3</sup>.

A strange gulf has been introduced into theology and spirituality between Jesus of Nazareth and the Son of God, as if Jesus – especially in his hidden life at Nazareth – were only a passage, a means of arriving at the Son, and were not truly the Son of God himself who lives among us, the giver of life, the interpreter of Scripture. In harmony with Charles de Foucauld, Squeri the theologian invites us to integrate “Jesus in Nazareth” into the perspective of a holistic christology “Jesus of Nazareth”. He says: “Jesus in Nazareth *is* Jesus of Nazareth in reality and in the sacrament of his pure saving presence among humankind” <sup>4</sup>. It follows from this that the work of the incarnation is like the brotherly radiation of the saving presence; the pure presence of the Lord is the reason for this salvation and not simply a necessary condition of it. The

theological reality of the salvific being and acting of Jesus – the Son cannot be confined to the period of his public preaching, of the miracles and of his death on the cross.

And the experience of the Church itself can be looked at again : as the “radical sharing of the dark places of existence with a view to the *persuasiveness of the love of God*”<sup>5</sup>. We can call it, with the great French theologian Christoph Theobald, *hospitable holiness*, a *forma ecclesiae* in which the dignity of the human person becomes the content of the proclamation and the reality of the kingdom, even without words (cf. RH 12). The proclamation of the kingdom of heaven “already among us”, finds its truth in the salvific experience (and not just the living) in Nazareth, and is also the model which the Church should perhaps look at a little more in order to be the true community of brothers and sisters scattered among the nations (cf. 1 Pet. 5:9).

In the light of this theological statement, we can also rediscover the great importance of Mary, and speak of her as someone who listens to and lives the Word, grows with the *saving* Word of the Son who is close to her and is a saving presence while being anonymous, fraternal, ordinary, like everyone else. This is Mary’s “pilgrimage in faith”. And there Jesus grows up, together with her and all the neighbours, in full fidelity to the Father’s plan of “being in the midst of the people”, seeing himself as “God of the people” and making of the people “his family”.

What might happen if the new evangelisation could take hold firmly, in word and in act, of the “long Nazareth-moment of the incarnation of God among the people so that the *divine* proportion of the mission of the Son should acquire its full integrity again”?<sup>6</sup>. This *forma evangelica* of the memory of the Son *in* Nazareth, for such a long time, with such radical ordinariness and companionship of life and language, of feelings and experiences, was lived also by Mary, and she was the teacher and disciple.

Bishop Tonino Bello rightly sings of ordinariness as the building site of salvation: “Holy Mary, ordinary woman, free us from the longing for epic deeds, and teach us to consider daily life as the building site where the history of salvation is built ”<sup>7</sup>.

Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus loved so much the simplicity of Mary of Nazareth, where the simplest virtues were also the most lived and rooted. In fact a few months before her death she wrote in her last poem, entitled : *Why I love you, O Mary*:

*“I know that in Nazareth, Mother full of grace,  
you were poor and wanted nothing more:  
neither miracles or ecstasies or raptures*

*adorn your life, O Queen of the saints!*

*The number of little ones who can look on you without trembling  
is great upon the earth.*

*O Mother incomparable, you want to live a common life*

*And guide them to heaven”<sup>8</sup>.*

- 
1. This was suggested to me by reading a comment of Fr. Innocenzo Gargano: I. GARGANO, *Maria e la Parola. Una esperienza d'ilectio divino*, Paoline, Milano 2003.
  2. I refer in particular to the two papers of P.A. SEQUERI: *La cristologia "vissuta" di Charles de Foucauld* in AA.VV., *Charles de Foucauld. L'eloquenza di una vita secondo l'evangelo*, Qiqajon, Bose 2003, 77-94; e *Epilogo: Ripartire da Nazaret? Appunti su Charles de Foucauld e la nuova evangelizzazione*, in the same book, 149-174.
  3. P.A. SEQUERI, *La cristologia "vissuta"*, cit. 80s.
  4. *Ibidem*, 84.
  5. IDEM, *Epilogo*, cit. 159.
  6. IDEM, *La cristologia "vissuta"*, cit. 88.
  7. A. BELLO, *Maria, donna dei nostri giorni*, Milano 1993, 13.
  8. TERESA DI G.B., *Opere complete*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana –Edizioni OCD, Roma 1997, 725.

## CONVOKED BY THE WORD

Dolores Aleixandre RSCJ

*Sr. Dolores Aleixandre was born in Madrid and entered the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at a young age. In her early years of religious life Sr. Dolores taught in schools and served in various positions in provincial government. She was directress of formation and continues to work in this field as well as directing retreats for laity and religious.*

*Sister Dolores has specialized in Biblical Philosophy and in Theology. She has taught Sacred Scripture and is Professor emeritus of Theology at the Pontifical University Comillas, Madrid.*

*Sister writes for the magazines "Sal Terrae", Catechistas and ICTYS. She has published numerous books and articles.*

*Original in Spanish*

**W**ere the disciples, that handful of men and women who followed Jesus and were convoked by his person and his Word aware they were going to become icons upon whom we were going to fix our gaze? What would they have thought knowing that we were going to recognize ourselves in them, in the adventure of their journey, in their hesitations and enthusiasm, in the joys and fears of their discipleship?

If they had known it, perhaps they would not have argued among themselves about who was the most important; perhaps they would have felt ashamed of fleeing and would have remained near the Master in the garden; perhaps Thomas would never have said "*if I do not put my finger into the hole of the nails, I will not believe*".

But, luckily for us, they did argue, take flight, hesitate and were rightly reproached by Jesus: "*People of little faith, foolish and slow of heart to believe...*" And, luckily for us they were able to tell him one day: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life...*"

But, today, we are not going to fix our attention on them but on other important persons created by Jesus and his powerful imagination who appear in the Gospel. While Peter, Mary Magdalene, Levi, Zaccheus or Bartimaeus had their own life before encountering him, the men and women of the parables only came into being through his Word and were shaped by this

Word. None of them, except Lazarus, has a proper name, as if they were waiting to take on our names and become icons to be contemplated and learned from. And this is precisely what I propose to do with five of them:

*The doorkeeper in Mk 13, 34*

*The peaceful sower in Mk 4, 27-29*

*The wasteful steward in Lk 16, 1-8*

*The laborers of the last hour in Mt 20, 1-32*

*The children who play in the square in Lk 7, 31-35*

Every single one of them can reveal something about what it means to live CONVOKED BY THE WORD and something that Jesus tried to communicate by means of these stories that attracted the attention of his listeners.

From these narratives we can learn how to be and live in Consecrated Life today as:

*Experts in attention*

*Dazzled by God's gratuity*

*Trusting that the Word realizes its work*

*Shrewd in order to win friends*

*Dancing to the Gospel rhythm.*

## **1. Like the Doorkeeper charged with keeping vigil**

### **EXPERTS IN ATTENTION**

*The same thing will happen as it happened to that man who went out of his house and entrusted a task to each one of his servants and charged the doorkeeper to be alert (Mk 13, 34).*

The parable makes an interesting distinction between persons: before leaving, the owner of the house hands out two types of responsibilities according to the category of those remaining in the house: he entrusts a task to each one of the "servants", while to the doorkeeper, he confides something different: to be alert.

The doorkeeper is both a man of "within" and of "outside" and his mission is on the border and consequently liminal. On the one hand, he belongs to the "house" and even though he is not the owner, he knows its riches well. His responsibility is to guard and defend them. While the other servants carry out their tasks inside, he remains in his place which borders on the outside, attending to what is beyond, over and above the walls of the house, intensifying his attention to protect it and also to recognize by sight

and hearing the expected return of his absent master or the news about him that others may bring. His master has entrusted to him a task of responsibility, delegating to him the important task of opening and closing the door, of allowing or denying entry into the house. He has given him “the power of the keys”.

Can we not feel, like him, convoked by the Word to be “*men and women of the door*”—situated between the inside and the outside, entrusted with the task of being attention experts?

Attention to the interior life and expectant waiting are uncommon traits in our culture (I refer above all to the countries of the North). We are inclined to distraction and lack of transcendence, habits which, almost imperceptibly, model or shape our “centrifugal” lives because of haste, noise and stress thereby creating a generation of sleepwalkers, persons, deaf, blind and dumb, lost in something, and lifeless, deprived of significant orientation, prisoners in the empty nets of trivial matters, and rendered dull to interiority and compassion.

As Eduardo Galeano says: “the privileged minorities, condemned to perpetual fear, step on the accelerator to flee from reality, and reality is a very dangerous thing which lies in wait or threatens on the other side of the closed windows of the automobile”.

No one of us is free from this environmental pressure and the discipline of vigilance, and attention has become a difficult art, besieged and bothered, as we are by thousands of calls to extraversion, distracted by so many noises that come from outside or that resound within us. Sometimes, that bewilderment or thoughtlessness and that distraction seem to emerge with a “good purpose”: instead of being vigilant “doorkeepers” attentive to accept the Word, we abandon our guard post to run diligently from one course to another, or from one conference to another; we insatiably buy one book after another, accumulate notes and photocopies that we will never read again; feverishly or dutifully we record cassettes and CDs which will later sleep silently in the closet ... The words are then accumulated on the shelves of our heart, the ideas, discourses, reasoning, opinions and comments gradually occupy every corner, and eat up the space of desert and silence to which God always wants to attract us, and His Word remains on the threshold of our house, because the door is closed and nobody answers its call.

If we lose the habit of being attentive and the paths of desire atrophy, we will read texts but the Word will not surprise us, we will grow in learning but not in wisdom, we will be consulted as experts, but our answers will lack the profundity that allows others to intuit that they are the product of an enlightened heart.

What will the doorkeeper of the parable tell us, a man accustomed to wait and to watch?

Perhaps he would begin by inviting us to open the door which connects with our interiority, to discover once again that we are both aware of and live in contact with our heart.

*“When you pray go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen...”* recommended Jesus (Mt 6, 5-6). The text is marked by imperatives: *“go to..”, “close, pray...”* And that means that the initiative does not come from us but from another who is the one who calls, invites and attracts: *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him to me”* (Jn 6, 44). We secretly resist believing that we are desired by God and that it is God who looks for our presence. Nonetheless this is what the Biblical authors, beginning from Genesis to Revelation want to convince us about: *“They heard the Lord God walking in the garden, and they hid from him among the trees. But the Lord God called the man, ‘Where are you?’* (Gen 3, 8-9)

*“Listen! I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into his house and eat with him, and he will eat with me”* (Rev. 3, 20).

In this text as well as in that of Matthew there is a door separating two spaces: outside and inside. In the Book of Revelation it is the *“Amen, the faithful witness”* who speaks and who is “outside” and calls to “open” that door which separates him from the one who is “inside” (the Church of Laodicea), while in Matthew, Jesus invites to *“close”* the door. In both cases, the encounter takes place in the interior space and the images to express the intimacy are those of eating supper together, or that of an exchange of looks or of words.

The experience of attraction results in the discovery of being inhabited, and when we enter into contact with our heart, someone is waiting there for us. *“My daughters, do not be hollow”*, Saint Teresa used to say.<sup>1</sup> We are “inhabited”, not empty; we are not the first ones to get there, neither are we ever alone: *“My Father and I will come to him and we will live in him”* (Jn 14, 23). This is why we have the same experience as Jacob in Betel: *“Truly, the Lord was in this place and I did not know it”... (Gen 28, 16).*

Beginning from that conviction of faith, we can lose the fear of contacting everything which is darkness, disorder, disturbance within us: *“ For what you received was not the spirit of slavery to bring you back into fear; you received the spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out, Abba, Father (...) The Spirit too comes to help <sup>2</sup> us in our weakness, for when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that*

*cannon be put into words*” (Rm 8, 15.26).

The Spirit “*poured out*” in us makes it possible for us to accept our fragile and limited condition in a positive way, because “taking it into account” we are able not to consider it as an obstacle between God and ourselves. And we can even rejoice that we are not “just simply spirits” nor “pure spirits”, but something much better: children of the Father capable of having the same experience which made Ignatius of Antioch feel and be aware of “a source of living water which murmurs within my interior self and repeats to me: Come to the Father...”.<sup>3</sup>

Would it not be a mission of Consecrated Life today to offer paths and means to have access to interiority which are different from those of the New Age which saturate us with their sweet spirituality but which lack any kind of commitment? The mission of “*doorkeepers*” invites us to look outside to detect and perceive all those anonymous searches of unsatisfied and anxious or restless people, to open the door of our communities and offer them company to penetrate into the reality and “*pierce*” its apparent triviality.

Experience tells us that, when we open the door, many people enter, those wounded by experiences of failure, solitude, fragility and lack of love. That world apparently satisfied and saturated by consumerism, is inhabited by many men and women possessed by fears of madness, sickness, suffering, old age, death or silence.

Today, more than ever, the Word convokes us to open the doors and to offer attentiveness, acceptance, warmth and company to a world stiff with cold. From past times we can inherit the unhealthy idea that Consecrated Life can lose its charism if it opens itself too much and mixes up with groups or persons who have different lifestyles, and we forget that it is much more important to inherit the Biblical tradition of a People who learnt from the exile to dialogue with the non Jews as a necessary condition for their faith to become universal. Israel was always a culture of dialogue with others: Canaanites, Greeks, Romans... It never maintained itself “pure”; it opened itself and became universal, at the same time that it kept its sensitivity for God’s project.

The doorkeeper responsible for watching could tell us:

*“Stay awake and expecting, do not allow your attention to die out: only in doing that is the immense and silent work of God in our own heart and in the world revealed.*

*And leave the door half way open so that those who live out in the open may enter: the Lord whom you are waiting for will enter hidden among them”.*

## 2. Like the peaceful sower,

### TRUSTING THAT THE WORD DOES ITS WORK

*“This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, at once he starts to reap because the harvest has come (Mk 4, 27-29).*

Since the interpretation of the parables changes very much according to the title that we give them, I propose to call it that of *“the peaceful sower”* to put the text we usually call that of *“the seed which grows by itself”* in another light (Mk 4, 26-29).

Jesus seems to say, *“Look at that man, he acts and decides to intervene just at the moment which corresponds to him: “he sows” the seed and, at the end, “he reaps” when the time of the harvest arrives. But he knows that there is a period of time during which he has nothing to do, but it is the earth “which on its own accord produces”, makes the seed germinate, grow and bear fruit. And all that takes place “without his knowing how”, while he “sleeps and when he is awake”, peacefully, without insisting on directing some rhythms which are beyond his control”.*

This balance is difficult in a culture of efficiency, planning and immediate achievement. It is a difficult challenge for Consecrated Life in which the concern to measure and control everything continues to persecute us. In our work we are usually serious, disciplined and responsible people and it is difficult for us to manage to alternate between action and quietness, between effort and abandonment. The majority of us has been formed in a certain *“hero logic”* and in a overvaluing of work and of pastoral effort, accompanied by something which we could qualify as *“apostolic anxiety”* which makes us confuse *“zeal”* with accounting, efficacy with short-term success.

We continue to have an on-going lesson: to discern when we should be active and diligent in the tasks of the Kingdom and when to be patient and passive; when it is the moment to get involved and help and when others will be grateful if we get out of the way; when the situation requires us to be vigilant and to intervene and when the only thing that we can do is to go to bed; when we are to analyze and discover causes and when we have to fit together incapacities and ignorance and recognize that we do not know everything and that there are many *whys and hows* which will continue to escape us. The disciple who *“approves”* or passes the examination in that subject is the one who, after doing everything in his power, remains peaceful knowing that the process which God himself has initiated, will make the seed

continue to grow during the night, while he sleeps.

Also, at the moment when we live listening to the Word and convoked by it, we need to have the same disposition of the “peaceful sower.” “Do not push the river, it flows by itself”, the Oriental wisdom advises. Do not insist on controlling the dynamism of the Word, it knows its work well; and it will carry it out if you do not hinder it too much. The Lord tells us in the Deutero Isaiah:

*For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky  
And do not return before having watered the earth,  
Fertilizing it and making it germinate (...)  
So it is with the word that goes from my mouth:  
It will not return to me unfulfilled  
or before having carried out my good pleasure  
and having achieved what it was sent to do (Is 55, 10-11).*

Tasks are not to be confused: ours is to make room for the Word, reread it, study it, meditate it, accept it with an open, free and needy heart, whisper it like the person reciting Psalm 1. Its task is to nourish, challenge, lead, enlighten, transform.

To allow oneself to be convoked by the Word requires a basic receptivity, the same which is given by a mirror, or a crystal, or the peaceful water of a lake which reflect the light of the sun or moon; they “do” nothing so the light may reflect on them; they only remain there quietly, just like the earth, which neither does anything so that the seed will grow in its depth.

To go frequently to the Word, to penetrate it and honor it, to familiarize ourselves with it, to keep in our memory, as a treasure, those brief phrases of the Psalms or of the Gospel which at a given moment have enkindled our heart: “*Your love is worth more than life*” (Ps 63, 4); “*The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want*” (Ps 23, 1); “*Come to me all you who labor and are overburdened*” (Mt 11, 28); “*You have words of eternal life*” (Jn 6, 68); “*Blessed are the merciful*” (Mt 5, 7); “*Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me*” (Mk 10, 48); “*Treat me with tenderness and I shall live*” (Ps 119, 77).

It seems that this sowing is useless and unproductive, but, sometimes, unexpectedly, we are given the experience to verify that this seed has grown “*by its own impulse*” (Mk 4, 28), and we feel that those words have begun to form part of ourselves and have become our breathing. “*You cannot serve God and mammon*” (Mt 6, 24), we suddenly remember these words with greater strength or intensity than the calls to comfort and consumerism. “*Do not*

worry about your life and about the future” (Lk 12, 22), and our anxiety, our fear and obsession will flee. “Do not fear, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16, 33), and we feel the strength to courageously face life. “I was a stranger and you made me welcome” (Mt 25, 35), and we cordially place ourselves at the side of the immigrants and are concerned about their problems.

If we are ready to leave behind the old ground which supported our “I”, we find ourselves anchored in another center and breathing another air.

*“My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior*

*Because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant”*

Mary sings in the Magnificat (Lk 1, 48), recognizing that it is in God’s gaze where she finds the source of her joy. But without stopping there, she turns her eyes to where God has fixed his look, and contemplates the history with the same look in which she has felt that she was enveloped. The Word listened to so many times from the lattices of the Synagogue of Nazareth, has done its work and makes her see the reality with new eyes. This is why, together with a conscious realism of the precariousness of things and of the harshness of life (there are people who are hungry, poor, humiliated and ambitions and oppressing powers which are the cause), she does not allow herself to be deceived by appearances, she is able to pierce through reality and sees persons, things and relationships, just as God sees them. And this is why she advances to contemplate the hungry who have been satisfied, the humble and oppressed who are exalted and the rich and powerful sent away with empty hands.

Like her, and “without knowing how”, we can find ourselves reacting according to criteria, desires and inclinations which do not proceed from us, but from the One who has been engraving his Word as a seal on our heart and our arm. And with amazement we become aware that, even though fleetingly, we have been in tune with Him, we have shared His sentiments, we have experienced what happens when the Spirit breathes in the sails of our ship.

### **3. Like the laborers of the last hour**

#### **DAZZLED BY GOD’S GRATUITY**

Let us imagine that, after listening to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard and being alone with the master, the disciples asked him to explain it. Perhaps one of them reminded him that in the version of that story circulating among the rabbinic circles, when those of the first hour protested in receiving the same salary as those of the last hour, they received this answer from the Master: “In an hour, these have worked more than you did during the

whole day”. That was a just and satisfactory ending showing reward for work, merit and effort. While in Jesus’ unusual version, all that is barely taken into account and the Master, in whom God appears in a veiled way, offered no other justification than: “*Have I not the right to do what I like with my own? Why should you be envious because I am generous?*” (Mt 20, 15).

Let us venture the Master’s response. “Imagine that you belong to the group of those contracted by the Master of the vineyard at the last hour, and that you received the same salary as those who spent the whole day working. On the following day, would you not arrive earlier than the rest, not to gain merit, but just out of pure gratitude, because the Master’s goodness had captured you in a spiral of gratitude?”

What is new in this reaction is that it made the interior murmurings of the others (and probably ours as well) appear measly in their thinking: “If I had been one of those who earned one denarius by working only one hour, on the following day and because my salary was assured and the Master is so generous, I would arrive the latest possible...”

The same as for them, the Word tries to push us beyond the limits which we have imposed upon ourselves and it overwhelms us with its novelty. When we read the Gospel, what is extraordinary touches our existence like a comet enlightening another dark planet with its orbit of light, and what is “reasonable” remains challenged by strange proposals which, like an epiphany, break through our narrow horizon and give us a glimpse of passionate and unheard of possibilities. We could compare it to bait that tries to “catch us like fish” and take us to breathe different air, because the previous environment in which we were moving is now unbreathable for us.

Inexplicably, Jesus, who so many times expressed himself according to a lucid realism and sometimes even with a hint of pessimism (“*Jesus knew all people and did not trust himself to them*”)( Jn 2, 25), seemed, at the same time, to be possessed by a limitless confidence in the human heart’s reaction capability and, as if he had not lost the naiveté of a child, he dared to propose utopian behavior. His proposals contain a powerful transforming potentiality: “*To those who received him, we could say looking at the Prologue of John, he gave them the power to become disciples...*” In them lies the possibility of continually transforming our ideas about God in order to make them coincide with his, even though with difficulty.

If the Word had done its work, we can imagine that those laborers of the vineyard who worked only one hour and received a disproportionate or enormous salary, began to know the good heart of the Master. We let one of them speak so that he can help us to familiarize ourselves with the unusual

practices of God which appear in the parables:

“Allow yourselves to be surprised by that God deprived of the attributes proper to divinity (immutability, equidistance, impassibility...) and on the other hand, dominated by emotions which are proper to human beings: the same restlessness and anxiety of a greedy person, avid to keep what he possesses, what belongs to him (a sheep, a coin...), without tolerating even a small loss in his possessions and rejoicing depending on whether what was lost is found or not (Lk 15).

It is not strange to see him as a father who is disturbed, upset and restless, who neglects the affairs of the house and is always outside waiting or searching, as someone who is disorientated and unhinged. (Lk 15, 11-32)

Look at him as a king without power or authority, unable to convince his guests, greatly exposed to deception and failure before their rejection of his banquet, amazingly happy to have people from the road sit at his table (Mt 22, 2-14; Lk 14, 16-24).

Be amazed to know that he is a bold and hasty investor who runs the risk of distributing his property, his talents or his administration among those who do not offer sufficient guarantee of administering them well (Lk 15, 12; Mt 25, 14-30; Lk 16, 1-8). Or like a weak, excessively patient landowner fluctuating in his decisions, who at one moment refuses to listen to his servants who want to go and weed out the darnel (Mt 13, 24-30), but at another moment allows himself to be convinced by the gardener not to cut the fig tree which bore no fruit (Lk 13, 6-9).

Let us open ourselves to the consequences of the fact that God is a partial observer, with his eyes fixed where hardly anybody is looking: the ditches of the roads (Lk 10, 30); the threshold where Lazarus is lying (Lk 16, 20); the places where the weakest are battered by the strong ones...” (Mt 24, 49).

Possibly, just like Jesus with his clumsy and resisting disciples at the time of their adjusting to the novelty of that God, the laborer who experienced what absolute gratuity is will need much time and much patient insistence to get rid of the old ideas about God which we have in our imagination and to be able to accept that God is always far beyond what we think about him.

And if we allow Him to continue with His work, the Word that we listen to will reveal through him who we are for God:

Do not fix your eyes on your own merits, efforts or work: allow God to surprise you with his immeasurable love and fill you with a love which surpasses our merits.

You are earth sown with seeds destined to bear fruit (Mk 4, 3-9) and in

you there are shoots of life which the Father's gaze discovers (Mk 13, 28-29). What he has planted in your earth possesses the dynamism of growth, which germinates and grows beyond your control (Mk 4, 26-29). Do not be concerned about the mixture of the darnel which you find in your life, what is important for your Father is all the good which he has sown in your heart (Mk 13, 14-30).

It is true that you are small and insignificant like a mustard seed, but that smallness hides within it a force capable of transforming itself to become a great tree where the birds can make their nests (Mk 4, 30-32). Perhaps you will arrive at the banquet hall, ragged and dirty, but you are a guest and have been invited and desired, and the King who has invited you is waiting for you at the table that has been set (Mt 22, 1-14). Rejoice that you possess talents and resources to be invested (Mt 25, 14-30); you are on time to make friends with those who are going to open the eternal dwelling for you (Lk 16, 9), because you hold in your hands everything that is at stake: bread, water, a roof over your head, clothes, shared with those who lack these (Mt 25, 32-46). Your characteristic is to get lost (Lk 15, 3), go away, (Lk 15, 11-32), go to sleep (Mt 25, 1-13), harden your heart (Mt 18, 23-35), contract debts (Lk 7, 41-43)..., but there is Someone who believes in your capacity to allow yourself to be found and to return home, to watch, to be merciful, to transform your debts into love. And, if he desires you, pursues, searches and waits a long time, it is because you have value in his eyes".

We are convoked to accept those new names which baptize us with their novelty and to believe that these are also ours. The Gospel continues to give them to us, like that little white stone in the Book of Revelation (2, 17) on which our true identity is engraved.

#### **4. Like the spendthrift steward,**

#### **BEING ASTUTE TO WIN FRIENDS**

*He also said to his disciples: There was a rich man and he had a steward who was denounced to him for being wasteful with his property. He called for the man and said: "What is this that I hear about you? Draw me up an account of your stewardship because you are not to be my steward any longer."*

*Then the steward said to himself. "Now that my master is taking the stewardship from me, what am I to do? Dig? I am not strong enough. Go begging? I should be too ashamed. Ah, I know what I will do to make sure that when I am dismissed from office there will be some to welcome me into their homes" Then he called his master's debtors one by one. To the first he said, how much do you owe my master? 'One hundred measures of oil', he said. The steward said, 'Here take your bond, sit down and quickly write fifty.' To*

*another he said, 'And you, sir, how much do you owe?' 'One hundred measures of wheat', he said. The steward said, 'Here take your bond and write eighty'. The master praised the dishonest steward for his astuteness. For the children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light.*

*And so I tell you this: use money tainted as it is, to win you friends, and thus make sure that when it fails you, they will welcome you into eternal dwellings (Lk 16, 1-9).*

This is a peculiar story in which, contrary to the exemplary accounts so helpful in pious spheres, we are to learn from a person characterized by wastefulness and extravagance (Saint Jerome in the Vulgate qualifies him as *diffamatus*, leaving unresolved the truth of the accusation against him). Jesus shamelessly disregards any judgments about his conduct to pay attention only to something which he believes is worthy of admiration and imitation, his astuteness to *win friends*, even by using reproachable means. Here, Jesus does not encourage the simplicity of doves but the astuteness of serpents. Intelligence is shown precisely when one knows how to use goods, while foolishness is just the opposite.

Let us imagine that we offer the astute steward the place of “special counselor” in our government team: most certainly he will remind us that the good functioning of our Order or Congregation does not only depend on what we usually call “spiritual themes”, but also on the use that we make of our concrete resources. And to convince ourselves by means of the Word, he will give us a particular “*Lectio Divina*” of the parables: the “eternal dwellings” are opened by the friends whom we have won over through riches; the entrance to the nuptial banquet of the arriving bridegroom is conditioned by the provision of oil for the lamps which the virgins who are waiting have with them; entering into the joy of the Lord asking for talents depended on whether the servants had risked to negotiate with them (Mt 25, 14-30); the place at the right hand of the Judge will be reserved for those who shared their bread, water, home and dress with their poorest brothers and sisters (Mt 25, 31-45).

We will be reminded that we never find in the Gospel the call to disregard and have nothing to do with money, but rather to relate to it in a correct way. And the same thing must be said about any human resource, whether intelligence, culture, time or any available possibilities, whatever type they may be:

“Act with intelligence, he will certainly tell us, take responsibility for what you have received, use it intelligently, using both head and heart. Do not think that spirituality consists in being indifferent regarding material things or in escaping from the earthly things, to a separate sphere: the “house” of the

world has also been entrusted to our talents, ability, competence and work”

Perhaps when getting up from the meeting hall he will leave us thoughtful, wondering and asking ourselves what to do in order to “win friends”.

We have improved very much, but in Consecrated Life we still have some unpleasant aftertastes of ancient messianism, illuminist ideas and old habits of a secret superiority when relating with people. We usually seem to be more ready to give than to receive, to offer help than to ask for it, to teach rather than to learn. We are accustomed to look at others more as potential “sons and daughters” than as true brothers and sisters with whom to relate mutually. “To win over friends” is not usually a “specialty” of consecrated persons, who are more formed to be pastors, teachers, preachers or councilors (much more men than women, we have to acknowledge this...).

And nevertheless the Word gives us instructions to win friends: it convokes us to be co-disciples with others in the Christian community and to listen to it not like experts or those well-versed in it, but like men and women who have an open and humble heart.

The best initiation course to the reading of the Bible that we can have is offered to us, free of charge, by the Gospel which initiates us in Jesus’ “art of listening”, in his way of recognizing the “Father’s dialect” in the persons devoid of significance among his people. Listening to his silent voice, Jesus gradually familiarized himself with the “code signals” with which the Father communicated with him and tuned into his “frequency”: he heard his voice calling him through that woman who was bent and he responded by straightening her (Lk 13, 10-17); he felt his voice was calling out loud to him in the shame of the woman with the hemorrhage, and his response was to make the healing force he had received from the Father flow toward her (Mk 5, 21-34); he was filled with joy in hearing in the accounts of the disciples the preferences of his Father toward the little ones (Lk 10, 21-22); he discovered in the plea of the Syrian-Phoenician woman that His Will was sending him beyond the lost sheep of the house of Israel and he obeyed by curing the little girl (Mt 15, 21-28); he allowed himself to be attracted by the silent call of the small man who observed him hidden behind the branches of a sycamore tree and invited himself to go to his house (Lk 19, 1-10).

Contemplating each one of the encounters of Jesus with the people, we learn from him, little by little, what it means “to know the Scripture” and to “be nourished with his Word”. In each case, we see him behaving like a true “scribe”: his task consisted, not in scrutinizing ancient manuscripts, but in translating, understanding, discerning, having an intuition and in decoding the word of the Father which reached him encoded behind the silent screams, the pleas, the lack of hope, thanksgiving or complaints carried within those

who got near to him. His role was to be for them someone capable of understanding and of responding to them, to be the wise hermeneutist capable of interpreting what they were not even able to express.

If we want to be received into the “eternal dwellings” like the spendthrift steward, we can already begin to become experts in humanity, in listening, specialists in gazing and in selective attention to *win over friends* in those places where so many people without learning or fine appearance can teach us to babble the secret language of the Gospel.

They are the ones who will help us to listen to the Word, precisely because they are anonymous bearers of it. And this resonant version of Matthew 25 will resound within us: *Come blessed of my Father because you discovered me in the voiceless and you listened to me; because I spoke to you in those without the right to speak, in those without rights, and you responded to me”*.

## 5. Like the children who played in the square

### DANCERS FOLLOWING THE GOSPEL RHYTHM

*“What comparison, then, can I find for the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children shouting to one another while they sit in the market place: ‘We played the pipes for you, and you would not dance; we sang dirges, and you would not cry’” (Lk 7, 31-32).*

This is how Jesus complained. By using a popular saying he was trying to shake off the incapacity of those who listened in order to get them out of their stagnant situation and begin to move in a different direction from what was paralyzing their minds. Madeleine Delbrel said:

*“Lord, I think that you must be tired  
of people who always speak about serving you  
with the air of captains;  
to know you with the pretension of a professor;  
to reach you through the rules of sports;  
to love you as an old married couple loves one another.  
And one day when you desired something else  
you invented Saint Francis  
and made him your jongleur.  
And it is up to us to allow ourselves to invent  
So as to be joyful people who will dance their life with you”.*

The ethical aspects of Christianity, together with the remains of “tendencies to perfection” and to a certain legalism which we believed we left behind, may

continue to be latent in secret corners of our lives and shaping us as rigid and joyless persons. Commenting on the consequences of fostering only the “imperatives” instead of the “indicatives,” says Klaus Berger: “it is probable that this “spirituality,” perhaps not necessarily blessed, will need the help that can come from the model of love and joy. Then, probably, this is why the mystics of the twelfth century speak so much of love, friendship, embracing and kissing, contagious joy and tenderheartedness: because the seriousness of an austere life is always in danger of failing the message of the Gospel. (...) Possibly, there are two fundamental expressions of Christian spirituality. One is directed to Good Friday, just to mention a common place that centers on sin, fault, guilt, the vicarious condemnation of Jesus and the verdict of innocence. The other one is oriented toward the Passover and focuses on joy, beatitude, transformation and laughter which has as its object death and the devil. And it is not a question of opposing one another but rather of recognizing them as complementary forms of piety”.<sup>4</sup>

The calls to be radical and to conversion in our Consecrated Life with an imperative tone can have an effect contrary to what is intended and we can become frustrated people because we do not attain the high goals of perfection or, following the metaphor of the children who did not dance, squeezed timidly together on the bench of the market place, with clumsy feet and deaf to the music that tries to seduce us with its rhythm, incapable to dare to enter in a dance that we do not know where it will lead us.

I have often done the test of beginning the narration of the parable of the treasure and having the group complete it. Everyone remembers how it begins: “*The Kingdom of Heaven is similar to a treasure hidden in a field...*”, and also the man who finds it and goes running to sell everything he has to buy the field. When I say: “Something is lacking”, the details begin, some are real, others picturesque: he hid the treasure again, he was digging, and the treasure was in a chest or casket... Only as a very rare exception does someone remember the phrase on which the parable turns and which sets its whole dynamism moving: “*and because of the joy*”.

I wonder why, after twenty centuries of preaching and catechesis that we are really clear on the question of renunciation, of sacrifice, abstention, covering ourselves with ashes and imploring God “Do not be eternally angry with us...”, while joy remains on the sidelines like a minor, optional virtue.

We speak about letting ourselves be convoked by the Word but we have an abundance of written, preached, proclaimed, learnt, explained, commented and expressed words, and perhaps we need to go back to the simple melody of silent gestures which existed in its origin.

Many people (ourselves?) are saturated, fed up, skeptical and impervious to speeches, documents, exhortations and declarations and if our spiritual health depends on the right relationship between our spoken words and the real transformation of our lives along the lines of the Gospel, it will be necessary to recognize that our situation could be characterized as a “disaster zone”.

Let us imagine for a moment that we make the drastic decision of committing ourselves (one day?, one week?, one month?...) “to a treatment of silence.” This treatment would consist in substituting our spoken or written words for a given period of time with an attempt to be like Jesus of whom it was said that *he went about doing good* and that from that way of living he choreographed the dance with which he responded to the rhythm set by the Father. Each one of us would have to apply this “doing-good dance” to our concrete circumstances, and think and manage to do something so that our whole body, look, hands, feet, all our expressive ability would replace these words which, in turn, many other times in our life, have replaced the bare sincerity of love.

Let us imagine also that one of the children playing in the market square addresses himself to us, tired of seeing us, just like his companions, motionless, blank-faced and resistant to go out and dance:

“Do you not remember that in Jesus’ life everything began with the hymn he heard in Bethlehem: “*Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to people of good will, to those he loves*”?

That was the first sound he heard and it became a symphonic overture to his whole existence, the sound of the flute which gave the rhythm to the dance of his life. Your Master did not remain quiet, still nor rigid: the hymn of that night made him drunk, brought him out of his mind and now he only knew how to live enraptured and changed, unable to live at a rhythm that was not extravagant, generous, lavish, and capable of breaking down boundaries. The Word heard from the angels on that night which sang to God’s *Glory* and to humanity’s *peace* made Jesus so enthusiastic and invaded him so totally, that he lived de-centered and off kilter, because his center and his support were his Father and his brothers and sisters.

Recall what was said of him: “*He is out of his mind*” (Mk 3, 21) and probably they were right, because his love lacked all sense and all measure, he who began the formation of his disciples taking them to a wedding feast (not to a school of the Talmud, not to the desert...). What would he say to you seeing you so guarded, circumspect, so uptight because of your judicious caution, your reasonable transactions and your calculated equilibrium?

Get close to his Word, keep silent and listen to it because it is only when your ears have grasped the music that your feet can begin to dance. Allow the melody of his flute to reach you: “*Glory to God, peace to all people*”. Let yourselves be drawn along by this melody, croon it to yourself, whisper it in the silence of your heart.

And if you are able, begin to dance to its rhythm, even if this be madness”.

- 
- 1 “There is another precious thing, Teresa of Jesus used to say, within us, which is without comparison, from what we see from outside. Let us not imagine that we are hollow inside, in our interior, that, I think is impossible if we were careful to think that we have such a guest within us that we would be so much given over to vanity and things of the world, because we would see how low they are in regard to what we possess within. (*Camino* 48, 2).
  - 2 The verb used by Paul , *synantilambanein* is that which LXX uses in speaking of the words of the father-in-law of Moses when he recommends him: “*The task is very burdensome for your strength (...) Look for some capable men... and in this way you will share the burden...*” (Ex 18, 22). The preposition *syn* expresses proximity while *anti* has the sense of “instead of or in the place of”.
  - 3 Letter to the Romans, Ignacio of Antioch, VII, 2.
  - 4 ¿Qué es espiritualidad bíblica? Fuentes de la mística Cristiana. “*What is Biblical spirituality?. Sources of Christian mysticism*”. Sal Térrea, Santander 2001, 2002-204.

CAN WE LEARN FROM THE "OTHER"?  
REFLECTIONS OF A WESTERNIZED ASIAN  
MIND

Sr. Amelia Vaquez, RSCJ

*Sr. Amelia Vasquez, is a Religious of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ). She has been district superior of the congregation in the Philippines, and has worked in various institutes of formation and theological training in Manila for religious, priests, seminarians from Asian countries.*

*Original in English*

**T**he theme of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops, "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church", elicits diverse reactions from many cultural and geographical contexts of Catholics around the world according to a wide spectrum of theological positions. This paper is a "wish list" of an Asian religious woman from the Philippines whose people are racially and temperamentally Malayo-Polynesian, predominantly Catholic-bred in a medieval (or some would prefer Baroque) form of Spanish religiosity, and formally educated in a residually American type of education. Added to this, I joined a religious congregation with an originally French-Anglo spirituality, trained in theological and religious studies in a post-Vatican II mode of inquiry, have lived in several Asian, Western, and Latin American countries, and have ministered for years to Asian priests, sisters and seminarians.

Limited as my personal perspective might be, my identity is the product of a confluence of diverse cultural and religious streams. I find myself enriched by the historical and contemporary religious currents of both East and West, and hope that my Church will begin to integrate all the riches of its past historical journey in Eastern and Western cultures and now accept the invitation of "new" Asian lands to an even richer and more refined spiritual banquet. For those who have been aware of the censure of theologians or spiritual writers who have attempted such an integration in recent decades, it is seen as a source of tension that puts to a test the creativity and integrity of

those on the theological cutting edge and those placed in official positions in the church.

The names of those involved, both the theologians and the church functionaries, could come and go, but the tension is as old as Christianity, and we could conveniently name the two poles of that tension: Christ and culture. History is full of manifestations of this perennial tension: the "Council of Jerusalem" in the persons of Peter and Paul, the Fathers of the Church of the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools, pioneering monks in the "barbarian world" (often happily resolved by church leaders like Gregory I and Augustine of Canterbury), early modern missionaries like Bartolome de las Casas and Matteo Ricci just to name a few. Since it is of the nature of Christianity to translate itself, its nature flowing from the spirit of Jesus himself, tensions will always be in the interface between what has already been "Christianized" and what remains outside of the purview of the acceptable.

Today, the tension is most felt in theologies influenced by interreligious encounters in South Asia and East Asia particularly in the areas of Christology and theology of religions, and charges of "syncretism" and "relativism" have sometimes been leveled against creative pioneers.<sup>1</sup> This vast geographical area is home to cultures grounded in religious worldviews more ancient than Christianity which have spiritually nourished and transformed peoples over millennia. The Catholics of these countries are indelibly marked by their inherited cultures and no amount of ecclesiastical sanctions or definitions will erase these elements from their identity. To deny this heritage which has shaped their minds and sensibilities is to go against the provenance of God the Creator. Multitudes of Catholics have been faced by the problem of having to choose between their religio-social belonging and their basic identity.

A worldwide synod on the Word must then ponder this issue with seriousness, listen to the groaning of the Spirit in the hearts of Asian Catholics whose fidelity to Jesus Christ is evident in lives of orthopraxis, often in holiness, and who hold fast to the inherited spiritual traditions of double belonging.

Before entering into a discussion, it is helpful to note that the terms "Asian" and "religion" are terms loaded with misunderstandings, both being labels coined by "Westerners" as convenient handles for unfamiliar and remote realities. But at the risk of running into contradictions and generalizations, I will use these terms simply to [put] my points across, using the conventional Western understanding, aware that these are not black-and-white categories especially since we are dealing with complex, multi-faceted realities. In ancient and holistic transformative religions the saying that "East is East and

West is West, and never the twain shall meet" cannot apply; the terms East and West can be used simply for emphases.

Christianity, coming from a Semitic background, was Asian, like all major world religions. However it was transmuted over the centuries into a Western entity whose form is now felt as alien to the Eastern mind. Christianity lost its Asian moorings and is now perceived as foreign to Asian thought and sensibility since its doctrines are conveyed through Greek-medieval European philosophical concepts and terms, and its symbolic world and organizational system regulated by juridical logic formulated centuries ago and uncritically reiterated today.

I feel it is now our task to rediscover the lost Asian "half" of Christianity by remembering and retrieving the richness of its Middle Eastern past, and by appropriating the new gifts offered by its adherents rooted in the cultures of South, East and Southeast Asia whose contribution to the universal church still needs to be recognized, accepted and embraced. As the bishops of Asia have repeatedly declared through the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, inculturation in Asia is an imperative and the churches must engage in a triple dialogue: dialogue with cultures, dialogue with religions and dialogue with the poor. The apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* itself declared: "The Synod Fathers were well aware of the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking. They pointed out that such an inculturation involves rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus" (EA 20).

It is no longer enough to portray Jesus and Mary with Asian faces or to adorn churches and liturgies with Asian-style decorations, worship implements and music, as is the wont today in communities across Asia after encouragement to "inculturate". What is needed is to respond to the action of the Word of God in Asian hearts and minds and let flow authentic expressions of their religious experience through art and ritual, theology and spirituality, missiological and pastoral practice so that Asian Catholics can really feel deeply at home in their religion, finding their hearts resonating with these expressions. Christianity, having "passed over" to Western religious forms, can now move to another level of its journey, bearing gifts from the West, and as in a never-ending spiral, move out again to "new" Asian cultures. By allowing the Spirit free rein in the churches of Asia, there can be a new flowering of Christianity as never before.

This task is not to be seen only as a hoped-for and beautiful ideal; it is urgent that the church take stock of its fidelity to the incarnational nature of Christ's mission among the peoples today. Preaching Jesus Christ in thought patterns and language understandable to peoples of different cultures is an

imperative today as it was in the time of the apostle Paul. Contemporary social and religious sciences have provided us with better tools at our disposal for more aptly spreading the Good News if only we had the passion, daring and freedom of Paul.

Aside from the discomfort felt by many Asian Catholics in their religion, the inadequacies of Western Christianity have also been shown by a decades-old symptom in Europe and the US. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, many of them Catholics, have moved to Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism, in search of spirituality that would lead them to wholeness and depth. This movement—for many a literal, geographical one to India, Tibet, Japan, Thailand—echoes the earlier “flight to the East”, to the deserts of Syria and Egypt of the third to the fifth centuries of men and women in search of radical personal transformation in silence and solitude. This exodus was not simply from the towns and cities in Asia or northern Africa to the fringes of villages or to the outlying wilderness; many from Europe went in search of this new learning from monks who had honed their spiritual skills, and eventually returned to Europe to lay the foundation of western monasticism, that gem of Christianity which today continues to offer many of us a deep well of spirituality. Interestingly, this very monasticism and the more recent forms of religious life have of late also been reinvigorated by the waters of Eastern religions.

Despite the oft-repeated rhetoric of entering into dialogue, there is a hesitation on the part of institutional churches to venture across religious boundaries mainly for two reasons: the sense of sufficiency and superiority of one’s religion, and the fear of the “other”. In spite of this many individuals have crossed this divide with the intuitive sense of the beauty and truth to be found in the “other”; what individual seekers have gained from their daring can now be helpful to the wider community.

All great world religions with a message of spiritual transformation (or “salvation”, to use the Christian term) are rooted in primal religion or cosmic religiosity; their symbols have power precisely because they emerge from personal encounters with the Sacred in “nature”. Human beings, as part and parcel of “nature”, deeply resonate with symbols condensed from elements in “nature”. But unlike Asian religions, Christianity has so stylized, categorized and numerically limited its symbols that these are now often abstract and artificial, encountered only in space and time that have been sacralized through ritual action regulated by a highly centralized church authority. It has distanced itself from the raw quality of life in general so that one meets most of these symbols only through a process of explanatory thought provided by religious training in the home or church. When symbols lose their immediacy

and spontaneity, when they need to be "thought through", they generally lose their power to evoke contemplative feelings. Such has not been the case with the Sino-Indian religions which flourish and renew their vitality through song, dance, and other art forms fed by religious feelings continuously preserved by their closeness to "nature".

There is no linear development from cosmic religions to metacosmic religions such as Hinduism (which is more a way of life than a religion) or Buddhism for their histories are punctuated by irruptions of the Sacred or theophanies to spiritual geniuses such as the foremost rishis of India or the monks of China, Tibet, Burma, Japan. But worldviews that have evolved from these encounters with the Sacred have not severed their ties with the cosmos, and their language and symbols for divinity express the oneness and interdependence of the whole—the human, the cosmic and the divine. Hinduism speaks of God as the womb of the universe, and all things are in that womb, a mother. God is

*"That from whence beings are born, that by which, when born, they live, that into which they enter at their death." (Taittirīyaka-Upanishad, 3.1.1).*

*"the father of this universe, the mother, the support and the grandsire. (Bhagavad Gita 9.17).*

*The Tao te Ching (6) says:*

*The Tao is called the Great Mother:*

*empty yet inexhaustible,*

*it gives birth to infinite worlds.*

The neo-Confucianist Chang Tsai wrote:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.<sup>2</sup>

All beings are in God, God is in all beings and permeates them with life. God is immanent, to be found in the universe, and at the same time is found inwards, in the center or depth of one's being. All dualities are mere illusions of the superficial mind, which like the sensory and emotional levels are always besieged by passing phenomena, but these mentally-constructed dualities can be overcome through deep awareness.

Asian philosophies limit the capacity of these levels. Rationality—which in the West has dominated religion—is held as a tool that objectifies,

analyzes and divides, but there is a level beyond thought, the transcendent, where subject-object polarities do not exist, and instead, there is a oneness with all beings, including the divinity.

This holistic and inclusive worldview that emphasizes unity has been named by contemporary Asian Christian theologians as "theanthropocosmic" or "cosmotheandric" theology. Here the laws of Western logic of non-contradiction do not hold sway since reality is whole and complex, and the contradictions that could be posited by the Western mind are overcome by a "both-and" position that comprehends all seeming oppositions.

God, the womb of all being, is therefore apprehended not primarily as Word but as Silence. Hinduism's "*neti...neti*" ("not this, not this") indicates the inability of the human mind to grasp God.

This, which rests eternally within the self, should be known; and beyond this not anything has to be known. As the form of fire, while it exists in the under-wood, is not seen, nor is its seed destroyed. Man, after repeating the drill of meditation, will perceive the bright god, like the spark hidden in the wood. (Svetasvatara Upanishad 1.12)

He cannot be seen, for, in part only, when breathing, he is breath by name; when speaking, speech by name; when seeing, eye by name; when hearing, ear by name; when thinking, mind by name. All these are but the names of his acts. And he who worships (regards) him as the one or the other, does not know him, for he is apart from this (when qualified) by the one or the other (predicate). Let men worship him as Self, for in the Self all these are one. This Self is the footstep of everything, for through it one knows everything. And as one can find again by footsteps what was lost, thus he who knows this finds glory and praise. (Brihadâranyaka Upanishad, 1.4,7)

In Chinese religion,  
The Tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao  
The name that can be named  
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.  
Naming is the origin  
of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.  
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations  
arise from the same source.  
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.  
 The gateway to all understanding.  
 (*Tao-teh Ching 1*).

Buddhism conveys a parallel idea in the notion of "emptiness", hence Ultimate Reality is Silence, the ground of Being which holds all phenomena as transient and illusory:

A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;  
 A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
 A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream. (*Diamond Sutra 32*)

These notions were shaped not through analytic or philosophical discourse but through experience of the depths of reality and of human consciousness. The inner life of God is not the object of discourse or dogmatic formulations or definitions since all these are obstacles to experience of God or Ultimate Reality.

Some Western theologians and spiritual writers these days, taking their cue from earlier mystical literature and the findings of contemporary physical sciences, speak of pantheism, God-in-all, where God is not a Being outside of the created world and humanity, and therefore, properly speaking not an object of thought or worship. This is so much more faithful to the Christian belief in God the Creator of all, in "whom we live and move and have our being".

The above characteristics of Asian religions are also present within Christianity, beginning with the first book of the Bible where God is portrayed as breaking the silence through the words of creation all the way to the book of Revelation. Throughout the centuries mystics have produced literature whose language is akin to that of Asian religions, but theology that has emerged from mystical experience in Christianity has often been relegated to piety or even sidelined as suspect and unreliable, hence, not a source of mainstream teaching about God unlike in Asian religions. The conventional image of God is still reminiscent of the Greek scheme of the universe where God is the Prime Mover who set creation into action, an Other who is not only transcendent but also separate and distant, "in heaven", whose remoteness is only bridged by the humanity of Jesus and the mediation of Mary and the saints. This God has been the object of philosophical speculation and formulation of a belief system grounded in metaphysical categories and ratiocination, hence, the emphasis on orthodoxy in Christian churches. However, these concepts are unintelligible to ordinary Christians, whose longing is for a God who is near, someone of whom they can say "we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked at and touched with our hands". For the most part

these doctrinal formulations can become a stumbling block, not just to simple Christians, but even to those who have experienced God as Silence. It is these two types of Christians who can most resonate with the God of Asian religions, a God who is infinitely available to them in all their desires and longings.

A major difference seems to be that in Asian religions, the basic framework for their religious systems is mystical; silence is prior to thought and word, hence a strong apophatism, a reticence towards Mystery predominates. God is Being is Reality is Silence. Mysticism is ontology. Logic and scientific method are important but come second, utilized not in defining divinity, but in mapping the stages of the journey and applying time-tested strategies or techniques of the journey the human being takes towards the divine. Method flows organically from the subject matter and the dynamism of the movement towards Mystery is maintained.

The reverse seems to be the case in western Christianity. Prescinding from its ultimate origin, the framework and system is basically rational, with dogmatic formulations taking priority and applied even to the mystery of God. Mysticism is a peripheral phenomenon, and silence is seen as a means to still the mind to prepare it for contemplation, coming into contact with God. There is a hiatus between faith-life and its explication since the latter was not an organic development from within but an appropriation from without. This is perhaps due to the "historical accident" of Christianity's development within the context of Hellenism.

This split between *mysterium* and *ratio* was not always there in Christian thought, even after the embrace of Platonic and Stoic thought by the Fathers of the Church and monastic theologians. Intellectualism came with the use of Aristotelian metaphysics and method, with emphasis on rational clarity and precise terminology demanded by medieval scholasticism which later exercised hegemony and virtual monopoly:

Being became an entity among other entities, hence subject to the manipulations of propositional thinking, or "logic". The logos became identified with the rational part, and the adequation of thought and thing was assumed. In this way, primary ontology became inscribed within "metaphysics", and Being, in its pristine sense, became masked, screened off, and forgotten...Alliance with Christian dogma gave rise to binary opposites with polarized ways of thinking, privileging the noetic principle as over against the natural order.<sup>3</sup>

Christianity is now imprisoned in this Greek conceptual universe, unable to free itself from its vise. No amount of deconstruction by Western

theologians, heirs to that conceptual universe, can free Western theology since they are all bound by its discourse. Having no other means at their disposal, they cannot "bring down the master's house by using the master's tools" unlike religionists and thinkers from the non-Western world who offer alternatives precisely because they come from a different world.

Can the Roman Catholic church recognize the limits of Greek metaphysics for conveying notions of God? Can it realize that not even the whole of the Semitic-Greco-Roman religious system can encapsulate God? Can it move the boundaries built over the centuries so as to allow Christians a glimmer of the God of all the universe and humanity and religions through other sources of revelation? Can it trust in the fidelity of Asian Christians who are genuinely committed to searching for alternative ways to communicate their faith in Jesus, his Abba and the Spirit? Can it allow these Christians to find a home in their chosen religion? Can it accept the fact that Asian theologians have a tremendous gift to offer to the universal church that will keep it from becoming moribund by renewing itself through dialogue—humble, active listening and a kenotic attitude toward the other? Can it let go its obsession with a rationality that impedes persons from fully encountering Mystery?

It is true that religions are whole universes of symbols and meanings, and to admit into its system elements that are new or seemingly foreign presents the risk of a tear in its seamless robe or set in motion its collapse, like a house of cards. But, it is also true that religions and cultures are dynamic, and creative change adds to their continuing vitality. This is so evident today in the Asian religions that have been transplanted in the West, especially Buddhism and Hinduism, which have absorbed the best influences that the West has to offer; these religions have been revitalized in Europe and the US through Western-born adherents bringing their particular mindsets and language to their new religions and enabling these religions to develop to a level not found in their original dwelling places in Asia. These religions have translated themselves while maintaining their "essence", they have been "trans-formed" and surpassed their previous limited and limiting cultural forms, now making themselves available and easily accessible to non-Asians. If we could apply the term "Pentecost" to these religions, it is this which has transpired and now they have become truly universal, speaking the tongues of many nations.

It is sufficient to survey the historical journey of Christianity across cultures to see that it has been transforming itself through the centuries. Hans Kung graphically demonstrates this fact in his charting this journey through six macro-paradigms in the development of Christianity: early Christian apocalyptic paradigm, early church Hellenistic paradigm, medieval Roman Catholic paradigm, Reformation Protestant paradigm, Enlightenment modern

paradigm, and contemporary ecumenical paradigm<sup>4</sup> (However, he acknowledges that authoritarian Roman Catholicism today has not moved away from the earlier medieval paradigm).

In fidelity to this tradition of culturally translating itself and to the Spirit that has guided these different transformations, Asian theologians and spiritual leaders attempt to speak a language comprehensible to their compatriots, in symbols that find resonance in their hearts rather than making them go through intellectual somersaults that in the end prove futile. To make them adapt Western rational discourse as a sign of religious belonging is tantamount to a subtle, "spiritual" latter-day circumcision imposed on modern Gentiles!

The task for contemporary Asians Christians is not to untie the knots in which they find their religion for that would be useless, nor even to try to construct a theological system based on their own inherited philosophical and cultural patterns as Aquinas did since it is too early for that. What is available now are fragments gathered from the depths of experiences of theologians and pastoral workers of reading the bible through Asian eyes through dialogue with their peoples, "organic fragments, namely, through the questions and challenges that face us immediately in our experiences, but which nevertheless lead us to the larger horizon of the whole".<sup>5</sup> These fragments are the first steps, hesitant perhaps because Asian theology is in its early stages of exploration, of creating paths that did not exist before, a situation similar to the tentative but discerning attempts of the earliest dogmatists and doctors of the church. But they are authoritative in the sense that experience is an undeniable authority when confirmed by the faith community that shares the cultural and religious mindset. In this instance, authority will be synonymous with the integrity of the search and its outcome. Authority will not proceed from the clarity of logical deductions and proofs, and repetitions of previous "ancient authorities" such as gave stability to medieval theologies couched in the language of scholasticism that eventually received incontrovertible acceptance by those in ecclesiastical positions. Here, truth is not a matter of logic or clarity of method. We are faced by the interrogation "What is truth?" For many Asians the answer will perhaps come from the non-answer of philosophies that emerge from experience, that do not do not define but simply evoke and point to Reality, as in yin-yang philosophy and non-dualistic thought patterns, and that do not subscribe to principles of Western logic.

Unlike most Western theologians whose skills have been honed in the discipline and rigor of only one tradition—that of the West—Asian theologians are equipped with both tools of Western theological methods and of their own educational training in Sino-Indian philosophies that developed before those

of the West. "Asian" theologies will, therefore, not suffer from lack of rigor but will flourish from the freedom of creative thought that is also subjected to self-criticism.

I will conclude by making suggestions for an Asian biblical hermeneutics, hermeneutics broadly conceived as theory and art of interpretation of texts. Not being a biblical scholar, I am strongly aware of my lack of expertise in this matter, but being an outsider has its merits in perhaps having the objectivity and perspective of distance, the daring of someone who has no professional reputation to lose, and having only the desire to widen the parameters for understanding the Word of God in Asia and the non-Western world.

At this point in time, to craft an "Asian biblical hermeneutics" is a daunting, if not an impossible challenge. It has to gather in the ancient, traditional and contemporary methods of the past 2000 years of biblical interpretation, both "Eastern" and "Western", selecting what is relevant, and moving forward to the present situation in Asia, therefore making extensive use of both diachronic and synchronic approaches, presuming that sound and meaningful hermeneutics today has to be both contextual and interdisciplinary if it will be of use to theology and pastoral practice.

What will be specifically "Asian" is precisely what comes from peoples' experiences of socio-political-economic struggles for liberation from colonialism and other forms of oppression, and "salvation" or spiritual transformation in the context of a diversity of dynamic cultures and religions. Indigeneous popular forms, such as myths and stories expressed through folk narrative, music or dance are receptacles of accumulated wisdom highlighting experiences of God. Classic "mystical" literatures meditated on over centuries and millennia have offered pathways to the evolution of human consciousness. A most fruitful novel approach is "cross-scriptural exegesis" of the symbiotic type:

For here a seminal teaching in the Scriptures of one religion, sown and buried in the texts, when exposed to the warm light that comes from the teachings of another religion's Sacred Writ, sprouts forth and grows into a fruitful source of new insights. In this "symbiotic" approach, no room is left for diluting or distorting the basic teachings of either religion; and no effort made to indulge in easy equations or odious comparisons.<sup>6</sup>

Such a reading opens us exponentially to new horizons of understanding:

There are multiple universes of wisdom, each capturing something of the radiance of being and refracting it into the lives of its followers, none refuting or excluding the others, each as it were the native language of its

followers, but combining in a hymn of glory to the creator.<sup>7</sup>

Hermeneutics that attempts to convey depth and wholeness necessarily demands the tools and perspectives of many disciplines which heretofore have not been utilized in aid of interpretation of scriptures, especially the various sciences of religion (history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy of religion), as well as disciplines that apply to more secular fields like economics and the natural sciences. Hopefully, such a gathering of tools would help illuminate the action of the Spirit through the Word in scriptures. It would also advance our understanding and following of Jesus who repeatedly crossed the boundaries of his religion and learned from the outcast and the stranger of his time, including the "heretical" Samaritans.

John Paul II himself invited the church to be "open to the new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia" and to "take heart from the experience of Saint Paul who engaged in dialogue with the philosophical, cultural and religious values of his listeners" (*EA 20*).

Note: The author would be interested to have your comments. You could send them to her e-mail address: [advasquez@yahoo.com](mailto:advasquez@yahoo.com)

- <sup>1</sup> "Asia is the bone of contention because it is the cradle of all modern heresies, as the head of the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples stated with reference to the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*", Pim Valkenberg, "Jacques Dupuis as a Theologian with a Reversed Mission" in Frans Wijssen and Peter Nissen, eds., *Mission is a Must: Intercultural Theology and the Mission of the Church* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p.148.
- <sup>2</sup> Chang Tsai, "Western Inscription", *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* by W.T. Chan (Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 497.
- <sup>3</sup> Stanley Hopper, "The Word as Symbol in Sacred Experience", E. D. Blodgett and H. G. Coward, eds., *Silence, the Word and the Sacred* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989) pp. 85-86.
- <sup>4</sup> Hans Küng, tr. by John Bowden, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Culture* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1995).
- <sup>5</sup> Felix Wilfred, "Jesus-Interpretations in Asia : Fragmentary Reflections on Fragments", *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 43 (2006) 4, <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr006/wilfred.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> Felix Wilfred. Also see Pieris, Aloysius "Cross-Scripture Reading in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: A Search for the Right Method," in *Scripture, Community and Mission. Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles* edited by Paul Wickeri (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia – The Council of World Mission; London: second printing, 2003) p. 253
- <sup>7</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum 2003), p. 204



*THE FIRE OF CONSECRATED LIFE:  
A 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PERSPECTIVE ON THE  
VOWS*

Sr Camilla Burns, SNDdeN

*Camilla Burns, SNDdeN, is the Superior General (elected in August 2002) of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Her apostolic experience has been as a teacher at the elementary, secondary, college and university levels as well as community administration. In her most recent position she served as Director of the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, USA.*

*At the 2004 UISG Assembly, Sr. Camilla was elected a member of the Executive Committee for a three-year period. She brings a breadth of vision to this position due to her ministerial experience and membership in an International Congregation.*

*Original in English*

*A talk given to the Conference of Religious in England and Wales*

## **INTRODUCTION**

**T**he title of this talk comes from a quotation of Teilhard de Chardin in which he says, “The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire.” We are well into the attempt to harness space, the wind, the tides and gravitation so the time is coming for us to harness for God the energies of love. Religious Life is eminently suited to participate in the harvest and has done it for centuries but the awakening in science opens another perspective for us. Religious Life is a song that goes on singing: a song which has changed key many times during history. The scientific discoveries of the last century give us an opportunity to consider singing this song in yet another key.

A further motivation for this topic is that the UISG Plenary Assembly in Rome in May 2007 issued an Assembly Declaration which contained the following statement: “Our growing awareness of our connectedness with the whole of life in all its forms challenges us to deepen a new vision and understanding of the consecrated life today.” This presentation is an attempt to respond to that invitation and to consider the vows from the perspective of the New Cosmic Story.

## IMPORTANCE OF STORIES

Stories are fundamental to life. The major experiences of our life are couched in stories because the bare recounting of facts rarely contains the depth of the experience. The Bible is filled with stories in order to communicate our Ancestors’ experience of God. A mere tally of events does not always give the depth of feeling. I maintain, the more “outrageous” the story in the Bible appears to be, the greater the depth of experience. The question is not to ask the Bible “what happened” or “why did it happen” but rather, “what was the experience.” This brings to mind a student I once had who responded to the above statement by sharing an experience. She related that she met her boyfriend in the sports centre at a university. The bare facts of the story were that they were both hot and sweaty after a workout. Every time they tell the story, they elaborate with additions so imaginative that they had most recently included the presence of McNamara’s Band! We all know that the Band wasn’t there but she is not telling a lie, she is attempting to communicate the importance of the relationship which “hot and sweaty after a workout” does not reveal. The young woman is using mythic language which is evocative. A definition of myth is “things that never happened but always are.”

There is a wonderful Jewish legend relating the importance of story.

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezeritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer.” And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: “I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.”

It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient.

God made man (sic) because he loves stories. (*The Gates of the Forest*)<sup>1</sup>

## STORIES OF ORIGIN

Every culture and civilization has a story of the origin of the world which contributes to its fundamental understanding of relationships to God, to the world and to one another. The cosmological narrative is the primary narrative of a people because it gives to that people their sense of the universe. Our foundational story of origin is in the first three chapters of Genesis. We know that the first account of creation in Genesis 1 reflects the context of the Babylonian exile but it is remarkably different from the Babylonian understanding of creation. The Babylonians believed that there was a pantheon of gods with different responsibilities and the human person was a lowly creature made in order to give the gods a rest from their work. In contrast, the Judaeo-Christian God pronounces in the Bible that all of creation is good – “And God saw that it was good!” God created humankind in God’s image and blessed them and told them to be fruitful. Stories of origin shape and reflect our world of understanding.

The first three chapter of Genesis are the source of traditional Christian cosmology and picture a static universe. The involvement of God in creation still stands but advances in science and technology in the past century have exploded with information about the universe. The most important change in our understanding is from a static predictable universe that follows known laws to an evolving universe. Even astronomers of the early decades of the twentieth century thought that the universe was basically eternal and static. Things might change a great deal within the universe as Charles Darwin also taught, but otherwise, in the cosmos as a whole, nothing really essential changed. The cosmos did not have a history.

We no longer speak of a repetitive, unchanging universe that came into existence at one point and continues to repeat definite cycles. We now understand that there was a beginning and a continuing process of change. In other words, the cosmos has a history therefore the universe has a story. Rather than cosmos, we can now speak of cosmogenesis because the cosmos is continually evolving and changing in an ongoing act of creation and creativity. Cosmogenesis is best presented in narrative; scientific in its data

and mythic in its form. In this Story, the Universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects.

## NEW COSMIC STORY

The story begins 13.7 billion years ago with the Big Bang. The term “Big Bang” was given to the initial event by the British astronomer Fred Hoyle as a derisive name and the name adhered. A flaring forth of Fecund Emptiness or All-Nourishing Abyss are other descriptions for the mysterious origin. Much has been said about what happened after the moment of origin but what preceded it is still shrouded in mystery. Following are some significant points related to the evolving universe:

- All creation has come about through a single cosmic event, often called the Big Bang. Creation is not a static, fixed event, but a cosmogenesis, an ongoing act of creation and creativity. Because all life is part of this single cosmic event. All life is connected at its most basic level.

- Evolution is a process that moves toward ever-increasing complexity, and the movement toward consciousness provides a plausible explanation for the development of the universe and its components. Some say that the meaning of GOD is Generator of Diversity.

- On a fundamental level energy and matter are interchangeable:  $E=mc^2$  Einstein discovered this law that changed the face of science. (Energy equals the mass of an object times the speed of light squared).

- The language of some scientists engaged in the new cosmology often sounds like the language of the mystics, who acknowledge that our lives are rooted in mystery – and on the level of mystery we are all one. <sup>2</sup>

There are three difficulties we face in entering into the new paradigm of an evolving universe and its ramifications. The first is that we may experience a dis-ease because of all the scientific information and abandon the hope of understanding. There are a growing number of publications by non-scientists that are very helpful to the non-scientist. The book from which I have just quoted, *Radical Amazement* is written by a married woman with degrees in education and religious studies. *Science as Sacred Metaphor: An Evolving Revelation* by Elizabeth Michael Boyle, O.P is highly recommended. The author is a playwright, poet, and teacher who finds inspiration for poetry and prayer in the natural sciences and says, “I can assure the reader with a limited knowledge of science that we do not have to be professional musicians to be moved by the beauty of music or to appropriate its wordless eloquence for prayer. Reflecting poetically and receptively on scientific data as a sacred text, we can go beyond analysis to enter into communion with the creative

mystery at its heart.”<sup>3</sup>

The second challenge is to change our world view. We are so immersed in the concept of a static universe that we are unaware of its influence in our thinking and theology. We are like the little fish in a story told by Anthony DeMello who swam up to its mother and asked her to show it water. The process of changing a paradigm is slow and requires patience and effort. There are two stories in history which should give us comfort.

Albert Einstein grew up in the world of Newtonian physics in which the cosmos was thought to be fixed, much like a machine. When his mathematical computations led him to the Theory of Relativity, he saw the implication that rather than being fixed, the universe was expanding in all directions. If it was expanding then it must have started from a single point. Shocked by a realization that radically altered what had been held as truth for centuries, he fudged his equations! He calls this the greatest blunder of his life but it is a lesson on the great difficulty experienced by an acknowledged genius in changing a paradigm.

The second story is from the New Testament. We know that a major issue in the early Church was the question of circumcision for the Gentiles. Peter made a marvellous speech at the Council of Jerusalem in which he says, “Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God “(Acts 15:19) and later sent Judas and Silas to tell the Gentiles the same thing for “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden” (Acts 15:28). They were to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols but circumcision was not required. You will certainly not be surprised to discover that this resulted in two factions: the circumcision faction and the uncircumcision faction.

Peter lived with his convictions until the circumcision faction arrived in Antioch. That time he stopped eating with the Gentiles in order to avoid the conflict. His new world view collapsed at the thought of disagreement. In his own inimitable way, Paul confronted Peter. “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles...he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction...But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”(Ga 2, 11-14). Peter, like Einstein found it extremely difficult to live in a new paradigm. These are stories to encourage us in our own efforts to enter into a new worldview.

A third complexity that gives rise to a fear some have that cosmic concerns will lead to a form of pantheism or paganism. The *ha* *New York Times* "Religion Journal," reports that one of the fastest-growing religions in North America is "paganism, the umbrella term for all nature-based belief systems and spiritualities." <sup>4</sup> Pantheism is a conclusion made by some but there are other routes to take. Many theologians are working with the new understanding of reality and one of the attempts is Process Theology which is an effort to understand the God of process cosmology. Some of these theologians work from the process cosmology of the philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead. There is no talk of pantheism but *panentheism*, that is, (God-in all, all in God).

Panentheism understands that "God is eternal, but it is an eternity that is inclusive of, rather than separate form, temporality. God takes in all the events of the world's temporality, including its suffering, weaving them into the fabric of his own everlasting life and thereby preserving their value forever. In Whitehead's own words, God is the 'tender care that nothing be lost.'" <sup>5</sup>

"God is understood as the primordial source and stimulus for cosmic evolution. God is the creative eros, the inspiration and attractive 'lure' at the bottom of things, that arouses the world to the evolutionary movement toward life, consciousness, and civilization." <sup>6</sup> God is relocated from a vertical dwelling "up above" to one who comes into the world from "up ahead." Teilhard de Chardin claimed that evolution requires us to imagine God not as a driving force but as one who draws the world from up ahead toward the future. Karl Rahner, spoke of God as the "Absolute Future." Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann tells us that the biblical view of God means first of all, "Future," and his colleagues Wolfhart Pannenberg and Ted Peters refer to God as the "Power of the Future." <sup>7</sup>

## **COSMOGENESIS AND RELIGIOUS LIFE**

Cosmogogenesis also puts Religious Life at a new frontier for birthing a new consciousness. We are dying to a life of security in a static universe that once offered a sense of knowing our place. We are birthing into life in the context of the evolving cosmos with a consciousness of our interconnectedness to the whole of creation. Does it matter? Emphatically yes, even Thomas Aquinas said that a mistake in our understanding of creation will necessarily cause a mistake in our understanding of God. <sup>8</sup>

Interdependence is at the heart of our consideration of an evolving universe. Both science and religion claim the law of interdependence. Scientists claim interdependence because all that exists began at one point in the event

of the bursting forth of the Fecund Emptiness or All-Nourishing Abyss. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that “God wills the *interdependence of all creatures*. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.”<sup>9</sup> The next step in the evolution of this idea of interconnectedness is to expand it beyond the earth to the universe.

“Cosmologists and theologians, scientists and mystics affirm the reality of interdependence, of interconnectedness.”<sup>10</sup> The Leadership Council of Women Religious in the United States recently published an issue of *Occasional Papers* on Tending the Holy. Alexandra Kovats, csjp, a retreat facilitator and professor of spirituality at the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University, wrote about the Vows in a cosmic context. She comments that our Western culture is based on a value of separateness. We prize individualism and establish categories of sacred and secular, the human person and nature. Such a thought pattern militates against a deep sense of connectedness. “Many of us have equated distinction with separation.”<sup>11</sup>

Given the importance of interdependence which both scientists and theologians recognize as the reality of existence, what could we say about the vows from this perspective? These reflections do not negate religious life as it has been lived for centuries or denigrate in any way our previous understandings. We lived out of the context of the time. We are now living in a new understanding of our context and this offering is an attempt to add further insight to our wonderful tradition offered from the perspective of the evolving cosmos.

### THREE COSMIC PRINCIPLES

Cosmogogenesis is a description of the inner working of the cosmos, not an outside force acting upon it. It is the natural propensity within all life-forms, whether inorganic or organic, to come into being, grow, change and mature. The movement is towards creativity and possibility. It is not a tidy, predictable movement but a process of “forever experimenting with and exploring its own growth and development. And yet it is not totally random.”<sup>12</sup> Thinking of the universe as a machine gives rise to the expectation of an output of a specific product. In an evolving universe, living systems are primarily concerned with renewing themselves. The capacity for self-renewal or autopoiesis (Greek *autos*, self and *poiesis*, formation), is the **first cosmic principle** which refers to the characteristic of living systems continuously to renew themselves. They do so in such a way that they maintain the integrity

of their own structure. Some synonyms for autopoiesis are subjectivity, self-manifestation, sentience, self-organization, dynamic centres of experience, presence, identity, inner principle of being, voice and interiority.<sup>13</sup> Autopoiesis is the power to self-organize which is the ability of each being to become itself. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry describe it as “the power each thing has to participate directly in the cosmos creating endeavor.”<sup>14</sup> This is a governing theme of the universe and the basal intentionality of all existence and so is also the power of the human person.

Creatures in the universe do not come from some place outside it; they were all present in potentiality at the first flaring forth. “We can only think of the universe as a place where qualities that will one day bloom are for the present hidden as dimensions of emptiness.”<sup>15</sup> For example, something evolved into the acorn which in turn became a tree. The earth was once molten rock and now its heavens are filled with birds of striking beauty. These are all example of autopoiesis or interiority, a thing becoming itself through self-organization.

The **second cosmic principle** is differentiation. Synonyms for differentiation are diversity, complexity, variation, disparity, multiform nature, heterogeneity and articulation.<sup>16</sup> I mentioned it above as one of the salient points of the universe when I stated that evolution is a process that moves toward ever-increasing complexity and the movement toward consciousness provides a plausible explanation for the development of the universe and its components. Stunning variety is a law of the universe. The primordial Fecund Emptiness or All-Nourishing Abyss of 13.7 billion years ago differentiated itself into all that has come into being since then. We are in awe at the dazzling display that we see. The British novelist Sara Maitland expresses the overwhelming realization of diversity:

“It is terrifying. God plays preposterous games. God allows complexity, encourages complexity. God obliges us to play the game of becoming.... We have to struggle to replace the functionalist, bureaucratic God with an artist God – that is to say a God who loves both beauty and risk.... God’s willingness to run risks for the sake of a risky delight should boggle our minds.”<sup>17</sup>

“Continuous innovation rather than consistent preservation is what we witness throughout the story of evolution.”<sup>18</sup> From atoms, through the marvelous structures of the animal world, to the galaxies with their planetary systems, we find a universe of unending diversity. The lack of repetition is conspicuous. Swimme and Berry call the risk for newness “an outrageous bias for the novel.”<sup>19</sup>

Because all nature has a common origin, the **third cosmic principle**

concludes that all created reality is relational. Communion is the name of this principle in which relationship is perceived as the essence of being and becoming. Synonyms for communion are interrelatedness, interdependence, kinship, mutuality, internal relatedness, reciprocity, complementarity, interconnectivity, and affiliation.<sup>20</sup>

“‘Communion’ is the goal of all movement, personal and planetary alike. Communion is the power within the evolutionary story that forever draws things into mutual interdependence. Relationship is the essence of existence; nothing makes sense in isolation. Everything that exists, animate and inanimate alike, is begotten out of a relational matrix. Communion is the cosmic destiny of all beings in a universe structured within the embrace of the curvature of space-time.”<sup>21</sup>

Swimme and Berry offer an arresting example of communion:

An unborn grizzly bear sleeps in her mother’s womb. Even there in the dark with her eyes closed, this bear is already related to the outside world. She will not have to develop a taste for black berries or for Chinook salmon. When her tongue first mashes the juice of the black berry its delight will be immediate. No prolonged period of learning will be needed for the difficult task of snaring a spawning salmon. In the very shape of her claws is the musculature, anatomy, and leap of the Chinook. The face of the bear, size of her arm, the structure of her eyes, the thickness of her fur – these are dimensions of her temperate forest community. The bear herself is meaningless outside this enveloping web of relations.<sup>22</sup>

These three principles of auto-poiesis or interiority, differentiation and communion are the life-blood on which evolution unfolds and thrives; these words are beyond one-line univocal definition. These three features are not deductions from within some larger framework. They come from a post hoc evaluation of cosmic evolution. The events of the evolving cosmos are shaped by the central ordering tendencies – autopoiesis, differentiation and communion. These are the cosmological orderings of the creative display of energy everywhere and at any time throughout the history of the universe. Swimme and Berry use the metaphor of music to express the nature of this ordering:

From one perspective, a symphony is a series of notes and silences, a sequence of disturbances in the air, a string of tones occurring in a certain interval of time. So too, from one perspective the universe is a series of occurrences, a sequence of disturbances in the field of energy throughout reality, a string of material and energetic configurations taking place in an interval of time.

From a deeper understanding, the notes are ordered as they are to give

fresh expression to the underlying themes of the symphony. The notes occur in the way they do so that something that is otherwise silent and ineffable can be sung into existence. Music consists of both the particular notes and the governing themes. For without the notes the themes would have no power to move anyone; but without the themes the notes would only irritate and distract.

The universe arises into being as spontaneities governed by the primordial orderings of diversity, self-manifestation, and mutuality. These orderings are real in that they are efficacious in shaping the occurrences of events and thereby establishing the overriding meaning of the universe. Indeed the very existence of the universe rests on the power of this ordering. Were there no differentiation, the universe would collapse into a homogeneous smudge; were there no subjectivity (autopoiesis), the universe would collapse into inert, dead extension; were there no communion, the universe would collapse into isolated singularities of being.<sup>23</sup>

These three fundamental principles or energies offer a new perspective on the vows.

## THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS

These are initial soundings into interpreting the vows in the context of a universe that is ordered by interiority, interdependence and complexity. Each cosmic principle provides a specific way of understanding each of the three evangelical counsels.

The principle of differentiation invites us to explore the vow of poverty. The dazzling variety of the increasing complexity of the universe calls into question our relationship with the gifts of creation. Kovats calls it the vow of “cosmic reverence.”<sup>24</sup> I think that reverence leads to gratitude so I would suggest that it is well-stated by John Foley, SJ:

The vow of poverty is an attitude and action founded on love. It is not in the first instance an external garment but an internal disposition. Like love, vowed poverty does indeed try to dispossess itself, to hold nothing back from the beloved. But even here a paradox occurs. The very first duty of poverty is not to give everything away. It is to receive....*The first dynamic of the vow of poverty is not to dispossess but to possess gratefully.*<sup>25</sup>

I am not talking about the momentary thrill of gratitude that rushes through us at the sight of a snow-capped mountain or rustling forest, important as that may be. I am calling for us to immerse ourselves into the new paradigm in such a way that we begin to see at deeper and deeper levels the amazing energy of differentiation in the universe and in our own lives of process. The

call is to “live in congruence with the truth” of the New Story.<sup>26</sup> This requires a great discipline of study and prayer so that our worldview begins to change. It calls for the soul of a poet.

*Glory be to God for dappled things-  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him. <sup>27</sup>*

The second great response of poverty is “a grateful response of love, a letting go into the hands of love.”<sup>28</sup> The dispossession can only follow true possession. It is not a matter of being deprived but of releasing. What a remarkable journey it would be for us to let go into the process of the cosmos with a consciousness that enriches and gives deeper meaning to the music of our lives.

The principle of communion invites us to consider the vow of chastity. To be is to be related, for relationship is the essence of existence. At the very first instant of the flaring forth of the All-Nourishing Abyss, every primitive particle is connected to every other one in the universe. The interconnectedness and interrelationship of all creation remains today. Nothing is itself without everything else.<sup>29</sup> Our primary sacred community is the universe and with it comes accountability. “We are now responsible for the whole earth community.”<sup>30</sup>

The natural world is replete with examples of the value of relatedness demonstrated in the elaborate mating rituals that have been developed. So much of the plumage and coloration and dance and song of the world come from our desire to enter relationships of true intimacy. The intense dedication of the search for relatedness in nature tells us something about the meaning of communion.

The vow of celibacy in this context calls us to a more intense relationship with all of nature rather than an attitude of separation or non-involvement. Kovats names it as the vow of “hospitality and solidarity.”<sup>31</sup> I would also

emphasize the whole person in relationships. “Sexual integration ranks as a most difficult human task. Growth is needed, development of the whole personality, widening of one’s scope to include the other as the goal instead of just pleasure.”<sup>32</sup> “Widening of one’s scope” is what the evolving universe requires of our commitment to celibacy. It involves an openness to the universe so that we live mindful of the vast web of which we are a part. Like the new emphasis in the vow of poverty, this too calls for a commitment to prayer and study.

The cosmic principle of auto-poiesis or interiority opens new terrain for the vow of obedience. We have often understood obedience as attentive listening. Kovats calls it the vow of “creativity” because it summons us to “right relationship with our personal and communal creative energies in light of mission.”<sup>33</sup> “Autopoiesis points to the interior dimension of things. Even the simplest atom cannot be understood by considering only its physical structure or the outer world of external relationships with other things. Things emerge with an inner capacity for self-manifestation.”<sup>34</sup> Interiority, voice or inner principle of being is the source of the inner listening of obedience. Obedience calls us to a deep listening of our own power of self-articulation in dialogue with our mission. We have committed ourselves through this vow to direct it toward a specific end in “a covenant of cooperation.”<sup>35</sup> We participate simultaneously in the gifts of interiority, diversity and communion.

None of these forays into understanding the vows pretends to be complete descriptions. They are an invitation to enter the world of religious life through the lens of an interrelated, evolving universe. Because all of us here have lived our lives in a Newtonian universe, we may experience resistance to the efforts required to cross the threshold into a new worldview. We may feel no personal need for it but new candidates for religious life in the future will participate in this thinking and we owe it to our future members. I do not want to underestimate the task that lies before us. Our goal is to know the Story and our life as Religious is to live the Story.

Brian Swimme speaks to the moment that faces us:

In 1543 Copernicus announced to a startled Europe that the Earth was not stationery, but was sailing rapidly through space as it spun around the Sun. This was difficult news to take in all at once, but over time the Europeans reinvented their entire civilization in the light of this strange new fact about the Universe. The fundamental institutions of the medieval world including the monarchies, the church, the feudal economic system, and the medieval sense of self, melted away as a radically different civilization was constructed. We live in a similar moment of breakdown and creativity.<sup>36</sup>

Our challenge is enormous and perhaps in the end, rather than specifying a new way to look at the vows, I am making a plea for a commitment to read, study and pray ourselves into these new understandings. Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, faculty member in the Theology Department at Fordham University, New York recommends that “cosmology be a framework within which all theological topics be rethought.”<sup>37</sup> I suggest that we use it as a framework within which all of religious life is rethought.

Theologians, cosmologists, ecologists, poets, mystics and feminists are taking it seriously and producing a wide variety of literature for us to explore. In addition to the references in this presentation, I recommend books by John Haught, a theologian at Georgetown University in Washington, DC who has dedicated many of his publications to theology in the light of Darwinism.<sup>38</sup> The *Hand of God* with a marvelous introduction by Sharon Begley combines inspiration for the mind and spirit by juxtaposing majestic photographs of the cosmos next to illuminating words of scientists, poets, and theologians.<sup>39</sup>

Let us never stop beginning and never begin stopping to harness for God the energies of love. For it is on that day, for the second time in history that we shall have discovered fire.

- 
- 1 John Shea, *Stories of God: an unauthorized biography* ( Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1978) introduction.
  - 2 Adapted from Judy Cannato, *Radical Amazement* ( Sorin Books, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2006) 33-34.
  - 3 Elizabeth Michael Boyle, *Science as Sacred Metaphor: An Evolving Revelation* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2006) xvi.
  - 4 Erin Goldscheider, “Witches, Druids, and Other Pagans Make Merry Again,” *New York Times* (28 May 2005) B7.
  - 5 David Toolan, *At Home in the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 149.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, 168.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150. See this for references to the work of these theologians.’
  - 8 Thomas Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Texts* (Durham, England: Labyrinth Press, 1982), 76.
  - 9 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mission Hills, Ca: Benziger, 1994), 88.
  - 10 Alexandra Kovats, csjp, “Re-Visioning the

- Vows Holistically” in *LCWR Occasional Papers*, Summer 2003, 23.
- 11 Ibid., 24.
- 12 Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Evolutionary Faith: Rediscovering God in Our Great Story* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2002)50.
- 13 Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 72.
- 14 Ibid., 75.
- 15 Ibid., 76.
- 16 Ibid., 71-2.
- 17 Sara Maitland, *A Big Enough God: A Feminist’s Search for a Joyful Theology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995) 43.
- 18 O’Murchu, 65.
- 19 Ibid., 65.
- 20 Swimme and Berry, 72.
- 21 O’Murchu, 66.
- 22 Swimme and Berry, 77-78.
- 23 Swimme and Berry, 72-3.
- 24 Kovats, 26.
- 25 John B. Foley, S.J., “Stepping into the River: Reflection on the Vows,” *Studies In The Spirituality of Jesuits.*( 26/4: Septembetr 1994), 11.
- 26 Miriam McGillis, O.P., is co-foundress of Genesis Farm, a learning center for earth Studies in Blairstown, New Jersey, USA. I am deeply indebted to Miriam for giving me a copy of her talks on Religious Life.
- 27 Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, selected and edited by W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1967), 30.
- 28 Ibid., 14.
- 29 Swimme and Berry, 77.
- 30 McGillis, O.P. unpublished talks on Religious Life.
- 31 Kovats, 27.
- 32 Foley, 17.
- 33 Kovats, 28.
- 34 Swimme and Berry, 75.
- 35 McGillis, unpublished talks on Religious Life.
- 36 Swimme., Center for the Story of the Universe , <http://www.brianswimme.org>.
- 37 Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, “Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology.” This address is available on the internet: <http://www.catholic-church.org/~canossians-sg>. as a service of the Canossians in Singapore.
- 38 A good introduction is John F. Haught, *Responses to 101 Questions on God and Evolution* (New York: N.Y., Paulist Press, 2001). Other books of Haught published by Paulist Press are *The Promise of Nature, What is God?, What is Religion?* and *Science and Religion*.
- 39 Michael Reagan, editor, *The Hand of God* (London: Templeton Foundation Press, 1999). Introduction by Sharon Begley.



# THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD - ONE WORLD TO ANOTHER

Javier Melloni, S.J.

*Javier Melloni, S.J., Member of the Study Centre of Christianity and Justice, Professor at the Faculty of Theology of Catalonia.*

*He has a Doctorate in Theology and is an anthropologist. He has published books on the History of Religions and is a member of the consultant group of the Parliament of World Religions. He has specialized in Inter-religious Dialogue.*

*Original in Spanish*

**I**n a world not only of inequality but one that is armed and tense, where distrust and suspicion of others grow, to refer to the experience of God involves deepening our understanding that we do not belong to ourselves, but that all identity - be it personal, community, national, or religious- is received. We do not have the source of being within us but rather we are receptacles of a life given to us. To forget that we are recipients leads to arrogant possessiveness and, in turn, to violence.

Different religious traditions express and celebrate this sense of belonging in various ways, and call for detachment from one's own being so that human life may become gift. As members of consecrated life at the core of the Christian tradition we wish to bear witness to a way of being and of living: being in and for the world as a sign that we do not receive life from ourselves but from the One who helps us detach ourselves from our own self ownership. We do this by means of the vows: detachment from things by means of poverty, non-possessiveness of persons by means of chastity, and detachment from our own will by the voluntary exercise of our freedom carried out in obedience.

This self-detachment that comes from the awareness that we receive our being from THE ONE whose very essence is Giving, returns innocence to our relationships with things, the world, and persons. It is a blessed simplicity, a second innocence that can make possible a different world. The experience of God, renewed and continually deepened, restores this primordial innocence

because it deactivates egocentric impulses, be they personal or communitarian, political or religious.

Today we can no longer limit ourselves to a specific experience of God applicable only to our group or our tradition. It is true that when we live deeply the essence of our own tradition we will reach the core of others because all religions are imbued by One unique Mystery: the awareness, gratitude, and celebration that life is gift and giving. But, at the same time, in order for the world to change, we have to not only open up our experience of God but also our concept of God.

If our sights are set on the whole world, we will need to cultivate an experience of God that is broader and more inclusive. The spiritual experience that can transform the world is one that, belonging to each tradition, is interdenominational and trans-denominational. Because of this I will introduce an experience that is universally human: breathing. All human beings, all living things as well, breathe. The mystery of life is contained in breathing: receiving and handing over, taking in and offering back. This rhythm is a reflection and a participation in what happens at the core of the Trinitarian relationships: The Son receives himself from the Father at the same time he gives himself back to the Father. The Son is the breath of the Father exhaled into the world, and we become Sons and Daughters to the measure that we receive him and unite ourselves to this movement of self-giving. Thus, breathing, being profoundly Christian, is also universal because it touches the essence of our condition as created beings. Only when we feel ourselves to be creatures do we reestablish a just order with the human community and with the world. All believers of all traditions share the common experience of breathing. After all, what does it mean to be a believer if not to believe one has received one's own existence, one's being, from an Other, and transform this existence into a gift of self that does not consider this self as an object of possession but rather as a gift given? And in breathing we also encounter the so called nonbeliever, because they also make an act of faith every time they breathe, opening to that which is beyond them.

We can breakdown breathing into four moments.

## 1. Inhaling

- 1.1 Inhaling implies taking in and recognizing our need of the Other, of others and of things. It involves a confession of our own indigence and of our own mortality. Each inhalation implies an act of humility and an act of faith. Of humility, because we recognize ourselves to be lacking and in need; of faith, because we entrust ourselves to what we are about to receive. Breathing, we take in and taking in, we open ourselves. To

open is to declare a primordial yes to the gift of life that comes to us through each person and event, it presupposes making ourselves available to receive Life, and with it, the Lord of life. It's about reaching an attitude of active passivity: it is action because no one can do it for us, but it is passive because it happens in us. The experience of Faith is also like that: we profess it freely, as an inalienable responsibility, but what we receive from it is much greater than what we realize. In a culture dedicated to "doing" where one's worth is measured in terms of gains and successes, the very act of recognizing that we receive more than we give is already an experience of God because it opens us to gratitude and respect in the presence of Mystery.

Receiving is in contrast to separating and rejecting. When we choose and select, we exclude and discriminate. Inhaling implies cultivating an innocent gaze, attentive, transparent. "All is revelation, all is about accepting things in their nascent state" said Maria Zambrano<sup>1</sup>

It is to inhale the whole of a reality, to allow it to enter the pores of our being, to expose ourselves to it, to allow it to strip and disarm us.

Receiving is also in contrast to demanding. The person, whose life is rooted in the awareness that she does not receive herself from herself, cannot be demanding. She perceives existence as a continual gift, and that makes her grateful. At the same time, to the measure that one lives rooted in the awareness that all is gift, one becomes incapable of destruction. There is nothing further from the experience of God than to demand and to grab. This experience and awareness is critical to our being able to stop preying on each other and to freeing the planet from the pillaging and plunder to which we submit it with our zeal and anxiety.

If we do not want to demolish each other on the basis of rights and obligations, the civilized code that conceals how we ignore the gift of life, we must act out of the awareness of life as Gift.

- 1.2 Applied to an inter-religious context, to inhale means to recognize that there is inspiration in other traditions. This implies opening oneself to that which nurtures: to their sacred texts, to their symbols and celebrations, to their values ... and this, in turn, implies taking interest in them, venerating them as sources of inspiration and transformation for their followers. How can we respect other religious traditions if we do not know what inspires them? To breathe (*inspirar*) with them means knowing their Scriptures, reading them with respect and studying them with the awareness of being on sacred ground. Who among us has read the Koran, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita or a Buddhist sutra? This

is not a trite question. What would we say to someone who told us that they know us and respect us but have not read even a page of the Gospel? How would they recognize Jesus if they do not know founding texts that speak of Him and that nurture us as Christians? This approach is yet to be made. Yet today it is possible to carry it out because in all libraries around the world you can access the great texts of the major religious traditions. A sign of globalization is the awareness of the diverse traditions of wisdom and holiness that we cannot neglect, and for which we must give thanks and welcome, belong not just to the denominations from which they originate but are part of our shared human patrimony. We will need mystagogues to introduce us to the texts, but there is no doubt that our community liturgies have a lot of ground to cover in regard to this.

- 1.3 Thirdly, to inspire (inhale) involves conspiring (to co-inspire). Is this perchance not what all believers on Earth are called to do? And when I speak of believers, I do not think only of those who explicitly identify themselves with or are adherents to one of the major religious traditions, but of every human being who transcends him or herself in an act of contemplation and of devotion (outpouring) to others in recognition of the gift of life they receive. Today we cannot breathe without co-inspiring, because we need each other. As consecrated persons, we are called to go into the desert, that is, to the limit of our religious territory and to heed the energy and wisdom of other methods and approaches. As Christians we confess that the mystery of God is revealed in the holiness of our brother or sister, but from other traditions we can be enriched by the emphasis on their encounters with the sacred in ways we might otherwise overlook: mother earth, the present moment, ethical action, beauty,... Our faith proclaims the incarnation of God which makes possible our opening to all that is human, to the point of being able to say “nothing human is foreign to us”. Being that we feel that nothing is foreign to us we can discover the authenticity of the experience of God. As Simone Weil said, “To know that a person has truly experienced God I do not focus on how he or she speaks of God but rather of others”.

## 2. Interiorizing

Once you inhale air you have to know how to hold it for awhile in your lungs, while it runs through your whole body oxygenating every cell.

- 2.1 The experience of God the world needs today requires times of assimilation and interiorization. Possibly, this is needed more now than ever given

the extroversion we are all forced to live today. I am not going to demonize this extroversion because it is also a source of extraordinary creativity. We are, we move and we exist thanks to it and to the scientific and technological advances it has made possible. Thanks to it, we are all here today since we have all come by metro, bus, car, train or plane. But this same progress has become devouring and devastating. It is not about stopping what we are doing, but rather about behaving in another way. “My Father works and I also work”, says Jesus (Jn 5,17). How does the Father work? How does Jesus work? Without agitation or intensity, attentive to what people and things are, listening to their internal heartbeat and yearnings. Because the God outside, the totally Other, is also the God inside, there is a sameness of same things. To experience that, one must be truly centered. We, on the contrary, live crazy lives, literally dislocated from our axis. Interiorizing is what allows us to create a space between ourselves and things, between ourselves and others. It is akin to what the Gospels say of Mary, “that she kept these things in her heart” (Lk 2, 29.51). To keep in your heart: that is the task of interiorization, its active passivity.

- 2.2 On this point we are called to be as radical as we are bold and creative. It is one of the most fundamental dimensions we can contribute as believers, and even more so as consecrated to God, the Absolute. Another quality, not just about work but about being, emerges in persons who pray, in persons who cultivate interiority. Here is where the term *con-sagrare* acquires a particular resonance: “to makes oneself one with the sacred”. “Sacred” is that which “confers reality on things”.<sup>2</sup> The sacred, then, is not something separate from the world, but its very nucleus, the marrow at the core of the real. In all religious traditions there exists the call to radicality of adoration and of contemplation which cannot be substituted by any other activity. This requires that we make it a priority in our day, choices of activities, and decisions.

At the beginning of the Gospel of Mark (1,21-39) we are presented with twenty-four hours of Jesus’ life where the difference between his activity and that of Peter’s is made clear precisely by the place of prayer in Jesus’ choices in contrast to Peter’s. Jesus has had a very active day: in the morning he preaches in the synagogue and he heals someone who was possessed; mid-day he is invited to Peter’s house where he heals Peter’s mother-in-law and where we can imagine his playing with the children of the family, as well as discussing the situation in Israel in face of Roman domination and other religious questions that concerned his recently chosen disciples; later he spends the rest of the afternoon healing a long line of the sick that have sought him out. And then, the

gospel says, “early in the morning, when it was still dark, he withdrew to a very solitary place to pray” (Mk 1,35). Jesus’ activity and mission is inconceivable without this time of prayer and interiority. Jesus knows that he can do nothing of himself without first having seen it done by the Father (Jn 5,19). And where does he come to see this if not during these times of contemplation, times when he enters into his own depth, and enters into the abyss of God? That is where he receives light, confirmation, anointing and clarity. Thus we can understand the reply he gives to Peter when he interrupts Jesus’ prayer, pleading, agitatedly insisting that Jesus return to the house right away because everyone is looking for him to heal them. Jesus responds peacefully that he is not going to do that, instead he is going to go on his way to other towns to announce the Kingdom. The freedom that Jesus has, by which he neither creates dependencies nor becomes dependent, flows from his prayer, from his capacity for internalizing events and situations that he lives, re-reading them from another depth. Peter, on the other hand, because he does not give himself this space, is trapped in the immediacy of the situation, without any perspective.

- 2.3 Every religious tradition cultivates this interiority in its own way. A very simple way is what our Moslem brothers practice: They stop five times a day to remember that, above all activity, no matter how urgent or important they may be, there is God, the Absolute. Just as we said above, that we are called to know the sacred texts that inspire other traditions, we are also called to get to know their different techniques and paths to interiority. To come to know is not to peck at. However, to get to know we will have to try it out. Although all try to open up the human capacity for silence and adoration, the supports they use vary. The West has mostly developed the word. But there are many more registers to explore: physical posture, breathing, dance, movement (*tai chi, chi Qung,...*), vehicles of integration as well as internalization. This is not about a style but rather a *kairos*, although it is true that it can become boring. The difference between styles and *kairos* is that the former only entertains, while the *kairos* offers the opportunity to grow.

The experience of God introduces into the world of immediacy the depth of silence. I am convinced that this is one of the most important contributions that religious traditions can offer our contemporaries, and all the more so for us, as men and women consecrated to the Absolute, striving to deepen our awareness, to be more serene, more accustomed to the free, unwarranted gift of encounter and to the quality of that moment.

### 3 Exhaling

The air that we inhale, internalize, has to be exhaled. It cannot remain in the lungs. Just as it gives us life it kills us if we do not let it go. We attach and detach. Exhaling involves the exercise of self-emptying, letting go of the self.

- 3.1 It is the moment of self surrender. In a good breath, exhaling takes twice the time of inhaling. All that we have and we are is to be offered. It is a freely given pouring out of self, a self surrender. Here again we see the prophetic nature of this movement. Trained by our culture to consume and devour, we do not know how to let go and share. Interiority and solidarity go hand in hand. They are the systol and the dyastol of the same movement. The experience of God leads to self outpouring because God, God's self, is the self surrendered. The world exists as God's self outpouring into form. The fullness of God is shown in the fullness of allowing to be. This movement of allowing to be, of helping other beings and things to be, and to be themselves, is an experience of God, because it participates in God's creative and inspiring power.
- 3.2 The self outpouring, the exhalation that is the experience of God, is not found apart from other types of self-surrender, but along with them. The self-gift that flows from a profound and expansive experience of God does not stand in judgment of other ways persons give themselves, but rather rejoices with them. I refer to the generosity expressed in alternative platforms that emerge outside political and religious institutions, like the Porto Alegre Forum and other initiatives in which we are not present. This self outpouring enables us not only to give ourselves more fully but to discover where there are elements of life that are not a constitutive part of our own core of being. Therefore, the experience of God involves an ideological disarming. The shortcomings of an ideology or an experience of God which has become an ideology lie in its incapacity to move outside its own definitions in its attempt to block recognition and acceptance of that which goes beyond them. Self surrender, self-outpouring, involves de-absolutizing one's own self gift.
- 3.3 The forms of self outpouring can differ in emphasis. To simplify, there are two:  
  
the prophetic and the sapiential. I say sapiential and not mystical because I understand the prophetic is also mystical albeit characteristically more brusque in style. It expresses itself with the announcement which denounces. That another world is possible is stated forcefully, with urgency, even with indignation, in the name of so much pain that has

been silenced and ignored. The world has need of this prophetic disposition. But there also exists a sapiential tone that flows out of a silent gaze that in the face of pain does not lead to rebellion but rather reverence. It is a serene, deep, infinitely patient gaze that knows how to read the other side of things. Clamor and silence are both part of being in the world in which we pour out ourselves, exhaling slowly and serenely, confidently, without anxiety nor rush, even though the world in which we live may need urgent change. The following profession of Buddhist principles expressed by the Peacemaker Order is a valuable testament to this second type of emphasis which is part of the so called “current of committed spirituality”:

*“I vow to consciously follow the principle of “not knowing”, aware of the ignorance of Absolute Reality that my limited vision has, renouncing all fixed ideas about myself, others and the universe.*

*I vow to bear witness to the joy and the suffering of the world.*

*I vow to heal myself and others.*

*Aware of the interdependence of the One and the Other I commit myself to the following spiritual practices:*

*To recognize that I am not apart from the whole.*

*To be satisfied with what I have.*

*To deal with all of creation with respect and dignity.*

*To listen and speak from the heart.*

*To cultivate a mind that sees with clarity.*

*To accept unconditionally what each moment offers me.*

*To express what I perceive to be true without blame or blaming.*

*To use all elements of my life.*

*To transform suffering into wisdom.*

*To honor my life as an instrument of peace.*

In face of such texts, one can do nothing but rejoice in having such companions in the journey, although we may not agree in the names we use for the Ultimate Reality or Being that impels us.

#### **4. To remain in the emptiness**

- 4.1 We human beings fear emptiness because we experience ourselves as deficient and in need. Our anxieties and aggression come from our inability to confront our deficiency and nothingness (emptiness). Nevertheless, men and women of God seek this stripping. “Rejoice, Mary, full of grace”. Mary was full of grace because she was empty of

herself. The experience of God leads to this stripping that goes beyond commitment (Self-outpouring). In the outpouring of self we are still in control; in the stripping we are no longer. It lies within God's sphere, there where we are out of our depth. In the words of Meister Eckhart:

*When material fire kindles wood, a spark receives the nature of fire, and it becomes like pure fire (...). When fire works, and kindles wood and sets it on fire, the fire diminishes the wood and makes it unlike itself, taking away its coarseness, coldness, heaviness and dampness, and turns the wood into itself, into fire, more and more like to it. But neither the fire nor the wood is pacified or quieted or satisfied with any warmth or heat or likeness until the fire gives birth to itself in the wood, and gives to the wood its own nature and also its own being, so that they both become one and the same unseparated fire, neither less nor more. And therefore, before this may be achieved, there is always smoke, contention, crackling, effort and violence between fire and wood. But when all the unlikeness has been taken away and rejected, then the fire is stilled and the wood is quiet.<sup>3</sup>*

For the nature of wood to become like that of fire it must consume its proper substance. This is the emptiness. Jesus' outpouring of himself culminates on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Self surrendering his spirit, he died, and at the same moment that he died, he resurrected, his spirit piercing through to the world. In the Gospel of John, Pentecost begins on the cross.

Jesus' self-emptying is the path to the resurrection. There is still so much in us, in our institutions and in our religious traditions to empty! We speak of maintaining our identities, and it is true, that needs to be done. But, the paradox is in the seed that only takes root if it dies. Our identities, congregational as well as ecclesiastic, national, political, denominational, are not fruitful as long as they are defensive (armored). Our identities do not belong to us, but rather, we are the reservoir into which they have been poured. They will only be fruitful when we offer them till the end, without doing so for any purpose of propaganda, but rather placing them at the service of others. The faith in Christ Jesus is not a boundary for Christianity, but rather the impetus to go beyond all boundaries, just as he pierced through the walls of Jerusalem. There, totally dumbfounded, speechless, is when one is most oneself, when one shows most clearly who he or she is: the Lord, emptied of every form of power.

- 4.2 It is thus that we reach the more radical dimension of detachment that we talked about at the beginning. While we are on the defensive, we are

also on the offensive, so there will not be any real encounter. To reveal God we need to be ready to lose ourselves, beyond the seal of our own religious group. This will lead us to what the mystics call the Cloud of Unknowing. In the quieting of the flame and the wood, words are also stilled. And in this silence of our speech, of our discussions, and of our ideas, all religious traditions, as well as agnostics, are called to encounter one another. All theology is, in the last analysis, apophatic. It is only thus that we stop talking about God and let God be the one to speak. This capacity for stillness reflects the authenticity of religious experience. Words belong to our sphere. All religious traditions are biased in speaking of God. That is why their end is to allow it to be God who speaks through them. And for this, they must be empty.

- 4.3 In this empty space the new can emerge with the silence of the old. Not because the old in itself distorts or impedes, but because we have been able to make things too much ours and it occupies a place that does not allow for the incorporation of what is yet to come. When the lungs have expelled all the air, they can once again breathe in pure air. The experience of God is characterized by this permanent novelty, by an irruption that displaces and surprises, like the apparitions of the resurrected Jesus. The Lord that has crossed over death reveals himself to his disciples beyond what was hoped for, to the point that it is difficult for them to recognize him. And when they do, he vanishes so they cannot hold onto him. Christ Resurrected and the Spirit that flies over the waters of the Earth and history since the origins of time continue to reveal themselves without our recognizing them, beyond the mental, symbolic, and religious parameters which we have set for them. But always, then as now, the signs that it is the Resurrected One that we have met are in the effects of the experience: in the bush that is aflame but does not burn (Ex 3,3-4; Ac2,3-4) and impels one to free a whole people, in the gentle breeze that brings serenity (1 K 19, 12-13) in the midst of persecution, in the peace that frees hearts from fear (Jn 20,19-20; Lc 24,36), in the more-than-abundant catch that does not tear the nets (Jn 21,11), in returning to the community with burning hearts (Lc 24,32), impelled to share the experience just received and to continue together the adventure of the shared mission.

If names and symbols had to be found to express the faith experience that broke all known molds of the tradition to which the founding accounts of our origin belong, today we find ourselves in a similar place that requires the same type of audacity, confidence and discernment. Having exhaled, a new air needs to come into the Church, in such a way that we can breathe together with other believers of the world and share

with them energizing symbols and metaphors.

## 5. Conclusions

Thus, we have moved through the four moments of the breathing cycle. As consecrated women and men, all we can do is qualitatively live each of these four moments to the fullest, that is, to face life with four attitudes: receiving, interiorizing, offering, and detachment to the point of total emptiness so that God can burst in anew. Live free and unfettered, predisposed to what may present itself: the challenge of a different world, in need of audacity as well as patience, of identities that are profound but not armored, of prophesy that cannot be corrupted as well as that of silence, capable of personally feeling the fate of 6 thousand million sisters and brothers, ready to inhale what every tradition breathes.

I want to conclude with a text prepared by different religious traditions for the IV Parliament of the Religions of the World (Barcelona 2004)

### AN OFFER FOR THE WORLD

*We citizens of the world,  
 People on the journey, people who seek,  
 Heirs of the ancient traditions,  
 Want to proclaim:  
 That human life, of itself, is a wonder;  
 That Nature is our mother and our home,  
 And it is to be loved and preserved;  
 That peace needs to be built with a conscious effort  
 Upon justice, forgiveness and generosity;  
 That diversity of cultures  
 is a great wealth and not an obstacle;  
 that the world is a great treasure  
 if we can relate to it with profound respect;  
 and that the religions want to be paths to that depth;  
 that, in the quest, religions find strength and meaning  
 in openness to unbounded Mystery;  
 that forming community helps us in this experience;*

*that religions can be an access road to  
interior peace, harmony with oneself, and with the world,  
that translates into an admiring, joyful, and grateful gaze;  
that we who belong to different religious traditions  
want to dialog among ourselves;  
that we want to share with everyone  
the struggle to make a better world ,  
to resolve the extreme problems of humanity:  
hunger and poverty,  
war and violence,  
the destruction of the environment,  
the lack of access to a meaningful quality of life,  
the lack of respect for freedom and for difference;  
and that we want to share with everyone  
the fruits of our search  
for the highest aspiration of the human being,  
starting with the most radical respect for each person,  
and with the purpose of together living  
a life that is worth living.*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Claros del Bosque*, Seix Barral, Barcelona 1977, 1951

<sup>2</sup> Coming from the Indoeuropean root "sak", which means to "confer reality".

<sup>3</sup> "The Book of Divine Consolation" in *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, by Edmund Colledge, Bernard McGinn; Paulist Press, 1981, pp 221, 222.

## ***Important Dates of UISG Meetings***

Council of Delegates:

7-13 December 2008 in Bangalore, India

Plenary Assembly:

7-11 May 2010 in Rome

Council of Delegates:

13-14 May 2010 in Rome