

Covid19. Re-imagining the future:
The Spirituality and the Charism can help Religious Life to be more generative
in this time.

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Introduction

Since I received the invitation to share some suggestions for re-imagining the future from the keys of spirituality and charism, I have let everything that came to me as an inspiration resonate. I will share my thoughts on the basis of the concrete reality in which I live, from what comes to me and reverberates within me. I am in tune with what Teresa of Jesus, my constant companion in this reflection, said: “I shall say nothing about what I have not experienced myself or seen in others.”¹

Perhaps, from this perspective, situated as a Teresian Sister living today in a specific community, within a likewise determined geographical point, “helps to pay attention, better than the learned, to things that don’t seem to amount to much in themselves.”² Those small things, in my opinion, refer to a theology of experience, of everyday life, of reality, of the concrete. This moves away from the great abstract, theoretical, universal discourses... It is the language of experience!

In this sense, my reflections will appear as conversation, starting from the questions that have been proposed to me and trying to engage in dialogue with “voices” that I perceive behind these questions or suggestions. Like any conversation, it is not a finished reflection.

1. How can spirituality help us to live this time as a generative moment? - PREPARE / CARE FOR THE TERRAIN - Personal Moment

Spirituality is either generative or it is not. All spirituality, in this sense, is a source of life and care. When we speak of “generativity” or “creativity” or “innovation,” where do our desires point? It seems to me that it has to do with generating a new way of situating ourselves, assuming a new lifestyle that cares for the earth and for our brothers and sisters, and, finally, a life at the service to our world with the charismatic mission received.

Speaking now of spirituality, I do so underlining the strictly personal dimension, which is therefore not transferable, not delegable. I am referring to spiritual development itself, understanding as such, the deep connection in a double simultaneous movement: interior/depth and exterior/opening/width/height.

Three images come to me in reference to spirituality understood in this sense:

- “a gate in the field.” We would say that cultivating spirituality does not mean “entering” a place where one is not. Cultivating spirituality helps us to awaken and expand our awareness of who we are and what we are living. Being present.

¹ Teresa of Jesus, *The Way of Perfection*, Prologue 3.

² *Ibid.*

- the “butterfly effect.” This image comes to me in reaction to those “skeptical voices” that speak out frequently and too easily: “All things considered, what can we do? I can’t do anything.” This thought has the immediate effect of deactivating the spiritual tension of growth that should characterize our life. On the contrary, what counts is living confidently and with the believing certainty that cultivating one’s spirituality has an “unsuspected” effect that reaches beyond what I perceive.
- “an anchor”. This image expresses the solidity that spirituality can bring within an increasingly VUCA³ context. This refers to the foundation or structure that makes it possible to give a life consistency.

Now, what can help us, at this moment, to deploy our spirituality to its full potential? Undoubtedly, for me, the ability to endure the questions that come to us, without being in a hurry to “execute them” (i.e., by giving quick answers that somehow “kill” the novelty, the life that can be born).

This time in which we are living places us before an opportunity not to succumb to what, for me, is the greatest temptation: FLEEING from the primary questions, which are questions of meaning. They come to us, if we are attentive, and we do not have to do “ruses” to identify them. It implies a way of living, with openness that lets them come.

This is in opposition to what I identify with what “imported questions” would be, in other words, those that come to us “from others.” It implies entering into silence and listening, likewise without “ruses.” And let us not be afraid, run away, or be in a hurry to “give a reassuring interpretation” to what appears or does not appear. The important thing is BEING THERE. We can be inspired by R.M. Rilke’s poem “Loving the questions”

Be patient towards all
that is unresolved in your heart
and to try to love the questions themselves
as if they were locked rooms,
or books written in a foreign language.

Do not now strive to uncover answers:
that you are not prepared to live
because the key is to live everything.

Live the questions for now.

Perhaps you will gradually encounter them, without noticing them,
and one distant day in the future find the answers.

2. SUGGESTION: Recreate the life of personal and community prayer

Our way of praying personally and in community must be in harmony with what has just been said. With a way of living connected to life starting from the questions that are taking us deeper and deeper into an open space. They are not two different times. The development of one—spirituality—implies the transformation of the other—prayer. And that is why we need to walk on the path that leads from the experience of prayer as “practice” to the experience of prayer as the “vital dynamism of a story of love and friendship.” Prayer understood in this way is that space in which “to BE ATTENTIVE in order to see WHAT THE LORD IS ACCOMPLISHING in the soul [and—I add—in the world]” (4M 3,4).

To make us witnesses of this experience: God communicates with us and loves us

Perhaps God will be pleased to let me use it to explain **something to you about the favors He is happy to grant to souls** [...];

³ From the English: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity.

because It will **be a great consolation** when the Lord grants them to you if you know that they are possible; and for anyone to whom He doesn't, it will be a great consolation to praise His wonderful goodness; that just as it does not hurt us to consider the things that are in heaven and what the blessed enjoy, before we rejoice and try to achieve what they enjoy, it will not **make us see that**

it is possible in this exile for so great a God to commune with such foul-smelling worms; and, upon seeing this, **come to love a goodness so perfect and a mercy so immeasurable.**

We can only bear witness of this communication and of God's love in an effective and credible way if we have experience. I feel the urge to share a call for attention that, in this time, has assaulted me with force. I was feeling it, almost without realizing it. Now, this time of confinement has meant for me a kind of "crystallization" of that feeling. Beware of so many fixed, prefabricated, "canned resources"! I believe that as Religious life we must display, in our way of praying, more freshness, spontaneity, vitality, simplicity of prayer, expressed "with our own voice." We all like beautiful words, and they can inspire and nurture, but prayer cannot be "deferred" or "delegated" to others, or "follow a script written by others." At the least, it is important to ensure that there is a proper space for expression, sharing, silence. Our community prayer must be more like those plays produced by the actors' "improvisation" based on a word or title that the public offers them. Once the inspiring word is made ours, we live that time of prayer from that connection with our source of life that is God. And in this sense, it must spring from personal and community truth, just as it is, without frightening us, humble. As Teresa of Jesus would say: "we must walk in truth, in the presence of God and man, in every way possible to us. In particular we must not desire to be reputed better than we are and in all we do we must attribute to God what is His, and to ourselves what is ours, and try to seek after truth in everything" (6M 10,6).

RE-IMAGINING personal and community prayer requires that we ask ourselves some "courageous questions": before what ways of praying—both personally and in community—, structures or styles should we react because we discover that they no longer give us life? Now, I mean a question of discernment that goes to the root, not to the surface. There are community prayers, liturgical celebrations that "satisfy us" at the moment; they are aesthetically beautiful, with theologically perfect and open contents... but they are NOT connected with our concrete, real experience. They lead us to what we could identify as "a pretense of reality" that recedes from our truth.

In addition, it also requires SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS, in which we integrate discernment on these ways of praying. I am not referring to long and complicated discernment processes. I mean the simple and concrete question: "Does this prayer that we have just shared help us?"; "What does this way of celebrating say about us?" In other words, opening between us channels of dialogue about those brave questions to which I have referred.

And, finally, it requires ACTIVATING "LIVELY FAITH." For Teresa of Jesus, lively faith was faith lived, experienced, activated in the first person. She opposed it to "dead faith," that is, believing only what we see and only "the visible" before our senses. Furthermore, it also opposes those other forms of faith "in bulk" that would consist in adopting the "truths that we believe because of what we have heard and because of what the doctrine of the faith tells us." In relation to prayer, having "dead faith" would mean having stopped believing that "God communicates with us." Activating the faith requires, for us today, "returning to Jesus" as the "DOOR," as the evangelist John tells us. Making Jesus our permanent interlocutor, our companion, true friend, living book, the true book where truths are seen, the "mirror of the soul."

3. How can we dream a different tomorrow starting from our own spirituality and charism? - Interpersonal Moment

The word "dream" can be controversial. For some, it may sound like evasion, impossible illusions, lack of reality. And just hearing about "dreams" generates disaffection. For others, however, the dream evokes dynamism, ambition, drive, and creativity.

However, if we really activate our faith—through a spiritual background and a life of renewed prayer—we can have no doubts about this word:

“Afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.” (Joel 2:28).

On the other hand, here, I also want to repeat a Teresian warning:

“The devil sometimes puts ambitious desires into our hearts, so that, instead of setting our hand to the work which lies nearest to us, and thus serving Our Lord in ways within our power, we may rest content with having desired the impossible” (7M 4.14).

Keeping the tension in the middle of this polarity, between the “dream” and “the desire for the possible that we have at hand,” is essential. It is mistaken to identify the “dream” with what Teresa considers “impossible ambitious desires.” This would lead us to install ourselves in a “pretension of reality,” which is far from being “reality itself.” Our founders and foundresses can greatly inspire us in this. They were great dreamers who knew how to connect with the possible step.

Yet, then, what is the DREAM that truly transforms and brings newness “made of”? I would say that the dream must be intricately connected with what we hear from the different voices that come to us:

- From reality (the surrounding environment, community, social, political, ecclesial reality ...)
- From God (from His Word, from the CHARISM RECEIVED)
- From ourselves (offering ourselves as a “sounding board” for all that comes to us...)

I believe that the “dream” also passes through the mediation of CONVERSATION FOUNDED IN “TRUTH” and “FERTILIZED IN SILENCE” that precedes it. The truth of the resonance that I listen to with absolute simplicity and honesty, that needs silence in order to be heard and welcomed.

Finally, the “dream” is built IN THE FAMILY, in PROXIMITY (faces, stories, flesh, experience), physical or virtual, but in any case, proximity. We—religious and laity—are probably invited to create new forums for meeting and conversation to discover together that NEW LIFE which we are invited to deploy from the charism. Forums where we can participate in a “common space.” It has been beautiful to see how, in this time, many of the encounters that we have lived in the “virtual space” have been a reflection of that “common space.” This does not mean coming to meet in my house or in yours, but in that common space, in absolute horizontality. This is a path.

4. What can we learn from this time for our incarnate Religious Life? - Assimilating Moment

The time of “stopping,” together with the whole of society, can allow us important life-long learning: we need to stop, keep silent, wait, listen... and welcome our “precarious, but true reality.” Feeling vulnerability is not a limit to God’s action. What “ties the hands of God,” is our sin, which is, basically, being “outside of ourselves,” that is, “pretending to be who we are not”, “living in other people’s houses”, as Teresa of Jesus would say.

If the “entrance door to the castle is prayer and consideration”, I dare to propose that revitalizing our spirituality and prayer, starting from this quest for the truth of who we are, assuming our vulnerability and precariousness, can lead us into that NOVEL space in which the Spirit wants and can recreate life. But, attention! I do not think that the unprecedented is identified with RE-IMAGINING the surface of what we are and live, but rather the meaning, which will, logically, bring as a consequence the transformation of “modes, structures, forms...”

5. Recapitulation: Suggestions for nurturing a different spirituality. - Expressive Moment

I conclude this reflection by recapitulating all that I have shared, starting from the certainty that CREATIVITY is a SPIRITUAL process that involves:

- a. A personal moment - pay attention, listen, pray
This requires of me a FUNDAMENTAL ATTITUDE of life in which LIVELY FAITH is activated.

- b. An interpersonal moment - conversations “based on truth” and “fertilized in silence.”
This requires that we give new meaning to the COMMUNITY SUBJECT on the basis of the criterion of PROXIMITY: Who celebrates, who prays, who is the God in whom we believe, what link or relationship do we have with Him and among ourselves?
- c. A reflective-assimilating moment - keep quiet, pray, meditate
This requires that I listen internally to “that little bit which is in me”, that “possible step”, and visualize who I want to invite, to encourage, to accompany “so that they live the same thing.”
- d. An expressive moment - “We do what we do, because we believe what we believe”
This calls us to communicate, live, serve, celebrate, be witnesses together, IN FAMILY, with the “personal voice” that connects with our most authentic charismatic vocation.