



Spirituality
in the service of leadership

SPIRITUALITY IN THE SERVICE OF LEADERSHIP

A “Marian Decalogue” to illuminate this service of animation

Gonzalo Fernández Sanz, cmf

We have here two images (that of the Annunciation and that of the Visitation) that can help throw light on the spirituality of those who, because of the mission received, experience “annunciations” and “visitations.” This is the *clef* of our stave that will help us to read all the notes of the melody correctly.

Here is a simple **decalogue formed with some meaningful words**. My intention is not to propose Mary as a “patroness” of leaders, but rather to discover what she experienced in relationship with God and with human beings, which will help us to understand and exercise our service in a better way.

1. “Greetings, o favoured one, the Lord is with you!” (Lk 1: 28)

It is impossible to live the leadership service spiritually and thus transform it into a source of personal growth, if it is not accepted as a grace. But, generally, I think, for most of us the service of animation is not something tempting in itself, but **an assignment that we accept obediently** through the election or designation process of our Institute.

These are, in addition, temporary services. **When it's over, we resume our ordinary life.** Our greatest aspiration in life is "to become brothers and sisters." It's enough.

And without removing the air of simplicity, it is necessary to discover that the mission received is, actually, **a new grace that changes our lives**; that is to say, a gift of God who manifests his love to us and communicates to us his Spirit, for the successful completion of this mission. Better yet, who enables us to give life so that our brothers and sisters can live their vocation faithfully. I believe that, like Mary, we also should feel "full of grace." The first sign of spiritual health is to overcome the temptation to spend our time complaining, exaggerating the difficulties of the charge or presenting it as a heavy cross. **If we were 'blessed', we must also be 'grateful'.** In this way, we will indirectly help our brothers and sisters to accept their own destiny with serenity and joy.

How can we be "animators" without continually being in touch with the source of joy, especially today, when we are permanently tempted to discouragement? Who can encourage the animators? Let us remember that this is not something that we seek but a mission that we receive. This is why we can put our trust in God who is with us as our shepherd, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." (Psalm 23/22).

When a person is elected or designated as a member of a Leadership Team, she experiences a kind of "annunciation" that starts a complex process made of surprises, fears, questions, doubts, acceptance, etc. But we must never forget that at the beginning there is **a grace** (favoured one, full of grace) and at the end a gift, "Let it be to me according to your word." These are the two poles that allow us to better understand this process.

2. "She was greatly troubled at these words" (Lk 1: 29)

In spirituality we must not be afraid of moments of discomfort. Ours is not a spirituality of "feeling good", of turning off stress, but a spirituality of **discovering God in the web of life such as it is, with its lights and shadows**. In the service of animation we can often experience a good deal of discomfort from within and from external sources.

But perhaps the most profound discomforts, those that unsettle us most, **come from the Word of God itself**.

For Mary there was distress at the words of the angel. For us it has to do with the inadequacy we often see in ourselves, the discrepancy between our assigned mission and our personal poverty. During visitations or chapters, we sometimes have to talk, for example, about the importance of prayer in religious life, while we see the deficiency of prayer in our own life. And it

may be the same in regard to the vows, community life or apostolic creativity. We fear not living up to the Word of God, the God we are called to serve, not being consistent and decidedly not being credible. The lack of credibility destroys above all the effectiveness of our service.

This fear can paralyze us, it is true, but it can also help us to mature spiritually, because **it allows us to become aware of who we really are** (and not to assume that our holiness is assured by the mere fact of belonging to a leadership team) and moreover **opens us to God's action "in" us and "through" us**. When both dimensions are part of our experience, we are better able to accompany our brothers and sisters who are troubled and confused in their religious life.

3. "Do not be afraid..." (Luke 1: 30)

Amid the discomfort, the Lord's message, manifested by his countless angels, is unequivocal: "Fear not". This message of the angel Gabriel foreshadows the "chorus" often repeated by Jesus to his apostles: "Do not be afraid" (cf. Mt 10, 31; 28, 10; Lk 12, 32; Jn 6, 20; 16, 33).

Fear is a feeling that paralyzes us, that blocks all the resources God has given us to accomplish our task. Although this is a constant in all spiritual experience, we must recognize that in

current religious life the overdose of worries that make us fear has multiplied.

Only faith enables us to discover there is no reality, dull as it may seem, that cannot be penetrated by the light of God. Actually, our fears and our concerns are always an issue of faith. It costs us to believe that God is where we see no signs of God's presence. That is why **in our spirituality it is so important to be nourished by the Word of God** through the daily exercise of "lectio divina"; a practice that we are cultivating more and more. In the midst of so many messages that lead us to fear, the Word of God, without condoning reality, always conveys the same message: "History, yours and the world's, is in God 's hands. Therefore there is no reason to fear."

I think one of the best services we can offer through the general leadership teams is **to invite our brothers and sisters not to fear**. Naturally, this cannot be done by means of naïve or immature people who are not aware of the difficulties. It can be accomplished exclusively by means of psychologically optimistic people, believers who grow in faith and hope in regular contact with the Word of God.

Currently, there are many indicators of fear in the context of the severe crises we are experiencing and we can easily succumb to defeatism. In this context, the service of animation also acquires the traits of **comfort** ("Comfort, comfort my

people, says your God." Is 40:1), **patience** ("Be patient then..." Jas 5:7), **vigilance and prayer** ("Watch and pray..." Mt 26:41).

4. "How will this be...?" (Lk 1: 34)

Questions are an important part of our spirituality. Mary is usually represented as the "woman who said YES", woman with a response, but we tend to forget that she is also a **woman with questions**. This aspect makes the link with millions of believers, perplexed as to how to live their faith in various complex situations of modern life; it also refers to our brothers and sisters who are more lucid, who do not renounce questioning themselves on the foundations of their faith and their vocation: Is it true that faith fulfils the human being? Who can assure me that a celibate life does not lead to great personal immaturity and sterility? The time of traditional religious life - has it already passed? Is it worth continuing to look for vocations while what we can offer is a monotonous and routine life?

In the exercise of our service we do not always know what to do. We are also perplexed when dealing with personal situations, financial problems, restructuring processes, etc.. But questions, when well formulated, are part of the answer. They give us clarity and insight; they help us to avoid repeating things out of habit or laziness. What are the questions we ask today?

5. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you" (Lk 1: 35)

The difference between spirituality and spiritualism is in the role we assign to the Holy Spirit: a supplementary role (in the second case) or a dynamic role (in the first case). I remember a sentence of the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx that struck me when I was a theology student: "Usually, the Holy Spirit does not make up for a culpable lack of competency." **The coming of the Holy Spirit is not a kind of ointment that heals all the problems we find in our leadership service.** But it gives an impetus to the mission.

As members of leadership teams, we need to always remember that "no one can say Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). This same Spirit will remind us throughout life what Jesus said (Jn 14:26) and will guide us to the whole truth (Jn 16, 12-13). In other words: without the Holy Spirit, religious life is no longer *memoria Jesu*; it simply turns into a *modus vivendi*, more or less acceptable according to the social fruits it bears.

What does it mean for us that the Holy Spirit will come upon us? We might respond by saying that **we will receive the gifts and fruits of the Spirit to carry out our mission** and not to impose our views or realise our personal projects. When we consider the gifts (wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, piety, fortitude and fear of the Lord), we realize that even though they are granted to all Christians, it looks like they are

more necessary for those who received the mission to discern, to make decisions, to accompany, to console, etc. They will help us greatly to cope with our service from a deeper perspective, as women of faith. The service of leadership based on **the gifts of the Spirit** will certainly produce **the fruits of the Spirit** in the people with whom we share life and mission: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, temperance and chastity."

6. "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (Lk 1: 38)

When we say "yes" to our election or designation, we do not really know what we are getting into. In reality, we do not say "yes" to a programme or a specific *job description*. We say "yes" to God and to His Word. We say *Hinneneni*; here I am, with all the "friends of God": Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, etc. This is an act of absolute confidence. We believe that **the One who has called us will complete His work in us**. Therefore, usually, it is better not to put too many conditions.

I invite you to mentally recall the moment you were asked if you accepted your appointment. What were your feelings at that time? In the case of a renewed nomination, one or more times, how did you feel? Were you aware that deep inside yourself, this "yes" was the expression of your vow of obedience? The fundamental question is not to know where I

will feel better, but to know **what God wants of me in this moment of my story.**

Once we said "yes" we cannot continue to question our response. **The "yes" also implies a spirituality of accepting the consequences, a spirit of normality and simplicity.** We do not have to lift a heavier cross than we can bear ... with God's grace.

Today, the “yes” is articulated in the perspective of a “shared mission”. It is about **jointly exercising the service of leadership.** We have a new spiritual opening before us here. I think we could even talk about the **spirituality of shared mission**, which implies:

- recognizing the voice of the Spirit in the opinions of others even if they do not coincide with our point of view;
- daring to express our personal opinion, after having prayed and reflected;
- introducing « other voices »to the Council, voices of lay people who work with us, “pastors”, experts in different fields etc. so the discernment does not become a purely internal exercise, referring exclusively to ourselves;
- sharing the team work and accepting willingly what is entrusted to us;
- making critical observations without fear of breaking the harmony.

7. “Mary arose and went with haste...” (Lk 1: 39)

I like this verse from St Luke’s Gospel because it applies *sine glossa* to members of leadership teams. They are permanent ambassadors. **Their itinerancy, their “going with haste” is part not only of their work, but above all of their spirituality.** We are invited to a permanent **spirituality of un-installation.**

This “setting off for a journey” also implies a **spirituality of openness to other countries, climates, languages, races, cultures, etc.** Furthermore, this permanent opening, which sometimes can produce physical or emotional fatigue, forces us to bring into play a series of virtues that are specific to itinerancy:

*Patience, humility, ability to be surprised, to listen,
Sensitivity towards the poor; Sense of humour*

When Mary sets off, she does so “*cum festinatione*”. Our bibles usually translate this expression as “in/with haste” as if to justify our accelerated lifestyle! It would be more appropriate to say “with promptness or rapidity” that is to say without unnecessary delays and putting all our heart in what we are doing. Moreover, Mary in her visit to Elisabeth carries the gift of “peace” (*shalom*), a gift of universal harmony with oneself, with the others and with God’s creation. And above all, she carries in

her womb the “Prince of peace”; “Christ our peace”. She is the one who carries God (*théophore*). Do we not find here a new inspiration for our spiritual journey? A member of a Leadership Team should be, during her visits, a *théophore*, and bring the gift of peace without adding to conflict situations that we sometimes encounter in some places.

8. “Blessed is she who believed...” (Lk 1: 45)

What we feel deep inside ourselves in our leadership service is the **experience of faith** in God who arrived long before us, who is working in us, who creates cultures and supports our life, who stimulates through his Spirit the evolution of the universe. Wouldn't we be happy if, at the end of our service, we could say of ourselves what Elizabeth said to Mary: “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”!

The question today is: **To what extent does our leadership mission help us to believe more deeply and devotedly?**

9. “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Lk 1: 46)

Mary's response to the compliment given by her cousin Elizabeth is a song of praise to God. Mary's *Magnificat* reveals precious insights regarding her way of living faith in God, and also our Marian spirituality.

- The experience of God as a **source of joy and fulfilment**, not alienation as denounced by the "masters of suspicion".
- The experience of God as **an experience of salvation or "constitutive experience"**, which allows us to pass from a life centred on ourselves to a life centred on God and on others.
- An image of God that **transforms the unjust world** that we have built and makes us turn towards the little ones.
- An image of God who **reveals his faithfulness** throughout the vicissitudes of history and inspires in us an absolute confidence in his love, amid ongoing changes in our life history.

When we look at our spiritual experience of recent years, do we recognize these traits in our experience of God? I think that, especially in times of trial, it would be a good exercise to write our *Magnificat* to appreciate all that God accomplishes in us, in his church and in the world; benefits of which we are, by our service, privileged witnesses. The more abundant God's blessings, the greater must be the expression of our gratitude and praise.

10. "She returned home" (Lk 1: 56)

It is important to know how to return home. An expression of our itinerant spirituality is to inform, without overwhelming, without taking the space of the community sisters who stay "at

home". Another expression is to recognize the service rendered by those who support us "in the background".

But there is a more radical "coming back home"; it means being able to end with dignity the mandate for which we were elected.

To avoid this crisis, which basically consists in confusing the *role* we represent with the *person* we are, we should develop, from the very beginning, an awareness that the service in a leadership team is temporary.

Conclusion

- *What are the questions we ask ourselves in the exercise of leadership?*
- *What Magnificat could we write on the basis of our leadership experience?*



Questions for sharing

1. What aspect of this text holds the most significance for your life?
2. What calls for transformation do you hear - personally, and as a team?

