

## THREE ESSENTIAL CALLS FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE

a) Interior conversion and Internal/communal Transformation, b) External Revitalization. c) The call for creativity in religious life.

### INTRODUCTION

*“The impulse of the Word of God – “Let us go over to the other side...” (Mk 4, 35-41) and “throwing off his cloak, he sprang up...” (Mk 10, 46-52) became our source of inspiration and light, challenging us to a “cross-over” and “letting go of what binds us”. We became aware of the critical situation of the Body and were able to uncover certain aspects that put it at risk. (20th General Chapter, Pg. 5)*

This is an amazing time in religious life and in the world. Our context is that of massive shifting, including dying and rising to new life. It is a remarkably paschal time. This is the case not only for religious life, since education, politics, economics, the environment, technology, social media, civil discourse, and a myriad of other areas are also navigating an era of massive uncertainty and transition.

In 2015, Pope Francis opened a Year for Consecrated Life, calling us to “Wake up the World!” He called us to *“be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom, incarnated here on earth,”* In order to wake up the world, however, we, in consecrated life, must also wake up. Pope Francis gives us some direction for this, **calling us again and again to live in a prophetic way that comes from a deep encounter and relationship with God.** The Pope at the same time entrusts us to look at our contexts to see what is being called for at this time. The call to consecrated life invites us to a conversion that will help us to continue to participate in **God’s mission.** Personal conversion is needed in order to respond to the Spirit. Communal transformation is required if congregations are to make the changes needed to respond to the cries of this time through the gift of the charism. External revitalization is also needed if we are to respond to the church and world today. (Three Essential Calls for Religious Life – Maria Cimperman, Rscj, 2020)

#### **During 29<sup>th</sup> Holy Family General Chapter,**

*We experienced our own contradictions and resistance to let go, to allow a real transformation to emerge in response to the call to live our mission of communion today. And we also recognized the energy of being and working together as Family for mission, in the diversity that enriches and unites us, thus becoming a sign of the hope that is so longed-for by our world.”*

*“As Chapter Assembly, having discovered the critical state of the Institute, we identified the most crucial dimensions of our life, where we need a real letting-go of what can no longer continue so as to adopt the transformative actions necessary for life and mission in the Institute.” (20<sup>th</sup> General Chapter Document, Pg. 5 -6)*

## **REFLECTION 1: THE CALL TO INTERIOR CONVERSION AND INTERNAL/COMMUNAL CONVERSION**

### **A. Interior conversion**

For some years there has been a realisation that much is shifting in religious life and that each of us will be asked to shift, adapt, change, and live into the future as we see it now. This is true of every Continent, though what that looks like differs according to context. What is needed? **A conversion that only God can give us, and to which we must be open.**

I suggest that we begin with these four areas:

1. Openness to be led deeper in prayer.
2. Learning and practicing discernment and moving toward communal discernment.
3. Disposition (and practices) of radical availability.
4. Listening to how our charisms are being called today so we may offer our lives where the needs and our gifts converge.

**The deep change that God is creating** (evolving) requires our depth, where we are opened and formed into this time. While we are beginning to see some directions forward, **we will need to sense from our depths**, rather than simply from external signs, **what God is asking of us**. This is not magic but **the slow, intentional process of making our lives congruent (consistent) with God's mission and vision.**

The process of discernment asked of us is deeper than decision making, for it will be transformative at its very core. Those who do this well will be asked to assist the wider Church. Pope Francis has asked that the church help young people with discernment. He has also asked every seminary and school of theology to teach discernment. This is crucial learning. Knowing how to practice individual discernment brings us to communal discernment with some necessary skills and dispositions. **Although religious life holds a stance of availability and a desire to respond to God's calls**, in moments of honesty we can acknowledge that parts of religious life right now are struggling with entropy, (chaos, disorder) apathy, or lethargy. At times we are in a rut. Some story tellers remind us that a rut is just a shallow grave. In such times, people and groups tend to hold on to what is known more than staying open to what is calling. The call is to listen to what the Spirit is moving in our charism of religious life and in our charisms. Our identity will flow from this movement. **The overarching call is to a radical availability, to our surrender to God's movements in our lives.**

### **QUESTIONS**

- What in this reflection speaks to your experience? What invitation or call do you hear for your own life?
- The text speaks of God, God's call, God's mission ... How do you understand and experience God and how do you live this experience? What has changed in you because of your experience of God?

## **B. Internal/communal Transformation**

Realizing that God acts and that God asks our participation in the living of our call to God through a religious community, we look now at some areas needing internal transformation. **Note that transformation is deeper than change.** I can change but not be transformed.

**Four areas that need internal transformation in religious life are:**

1. The quality of community life.
2. Movement toward living interculturally
3. Structural changes in religious life, *and*
4. Communal discernment.

These will flow from our communal engagement of our charism amid the cries we hear. (Maria Cimperman)

The following are the five dynamic elements that, when woven together, constitute the key processes for personal and communal transformation:

1. **Shifts in consciousness: creating a new narrative**
2. **Reclaiming our inner voice: the seat and soul of everything that lives**
3. **Reconciliation and conversion: the womb of our becoming**
4. **Experimentation and learning: acting our way into a new way of being**
5. **Transformative visioning: listening to our deepest longings.** (Embracing our vulnerability and its transformational potential, Ted Dunn)

In many congregations' quality of community life is challenged by circumstances. In some parts of the world, Institutes are trying to adapt to many changes, such as fewer sisters in local communities as elders move to retirement centres. In some places fewer people available for particular ministries means that the size of the local community or area decreases. In other parts of the world, there are more people in the formation process than persons who have completed initial formation. Congregations are trying to make external changes but the internal growth of community living is not keeping up. The stresses in society also exist in religious life and there is unevenness in acknowledging or responding to these challenges. We are, at times, simultaneously grieving the increasing losses of our eldest members. We also find ourselves explaining why there are no more religious in a given parish, school, organisation or town. There are already several ministries carried out in collaboration with partners in mission. The moment asks us what the creative Spirit and the cries around us are calling forth for the sake of God's mission going forward. (Maria Cimperman)

*In our Holy Family reflection on **Accompaniment through a new lens** we stressed the importance of **contemplative listening** as a way of living from within and communally that helps us to be fully responsible for formation for mission; as a new consciousness, a new way of seeing God in everything and everyone; a way of living connected to self and the whole universe; a deeper listening, becoming consciously aware and being present to the Presence. In a way to be mystics, living the spirit of God Alone. It is a loving way of looking at everything that can lead us into communal discernment. Rooted in our charism and history, contemplative thinking together revitalises our purpose and sets direction for a new era.*

(Accompaniment through new lenses, 2018 pg.1-2)

Determining what will be life-giving and life-generating for a community requires honest, revelatory conversations, lest we withdraw into our individual pods of life. Our world is in need of living models of the Risen Christ's message of love, forgiveness, nonviolence, reconciliation and dialogue. The call is to live not perfectly, but with authenticity and love.

In a world that struggles with the other who is not like us, religious life has the gift of many such "others" who are part of us. We still have work to do on this. The diversity of membership in our congregations and communities makes the call to creating intercultural community essential for religious life and the world. We are called to witness the Good News of all creation. This interculturality must be lived in vowed life, including in prayer, in community, and in ministry.

In order to respond to the call of God in this time, a transformation of structures is needed for the sake of mission. Many congregations are discerning this or are already in this process. In November 2017 the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Apostolic Life issued a document called *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II*. It is an honest, hopeful, and helpful document that urges congregations toward the transformation needed in this time, which is not only structural but interior as well. Both leadership and membership must be involved. (Maria Cimperman)

*The living of our mission in the light of the new world view – the new lens- calls for a deeper and new understanding of 'faith as a conscious participation in God's unconditional Love' – the entering into the mind of Christ that embraces the whole. We recognise that this demands much dialogue and communal discernment. (Accompan. through a new lens, pg.2)*

Congregations often use a process of communal discernment in General Chapters. The call now is to use it for significant decisions in the life of the community or congregation. Our evolving charism calls us forth in this. One challenge will be to give the necessary time to this effort. Another is that there is often a gap between desire and skill in this – people with expertise are needed. Internal transformation will serve not only religious life but also all those with whom we minister. There are groups outside religious life already doing some of these processes and we have much to learn from them.

### **FOR REFLECTION**

- How do you see that a new way of experiencing God and the evolution of consciousness can enlighten you or give you new insights regarding community living?
- What do you sense is the call to us on a Personal, Community and Unit level with regard to,
  - a) Interior conversion?
  - b) Internal/communal conversion?
  - c) In the light of your reflection what needs to change in the way that we understand formation and the formation programme?



## **ESSENTIAL CALLS: REFLECTION 2 - EXTERNAL REVITALIZATION**

Perhaps most obvious to many religious is the call to listen and to respond to what God is asking of us in our outreach. I mention four areas briefly:

1. Ministry realignment,
2. Proximity to the peripheries and margins according to our charisms,
3. Widening charisms, and
4. Collaboration across the charisms of religious life and consecrated life.

Ministry is in flux. We are walking with Jesus among our current commitments and compelling calls to our charism. Some congregation serve in areas that are part of an emerging call to religious life. Revitalisation here will include offering the needed education, training, and mentoring.

Our religious histories all include responding to unmet needs. It is where the charism given to us by our Founders moved us. In some areas religious continue to be at the growing edges of need or in the centres of great challenge. Some communities have ministries in places where they can influence those who have power, or they may have positions of influence themselves. The positions of influence are for the sake of the margins, this is a delicate and dangerous place to be, for it takes skill and centredness in God's mission not to succumb to the real temptations of power, privilege, and wealth.

A critical question for religious life today is whether we are still at the margins and peripheries. Are our places of ministry where we are wanted, or are they were we are still needed? External revitalisation calls for responding to the needs of today that are not met and to which our charism calls us. In some places we see the need but do not have the structural, financial, or personal resources to serve on our own. This is a great gift! It means we have to work with others, with all that this entails in terms of collaboration and mutuality. (Maria Cimperman)

The focus of the mission is given to us by the cry of humanity and of the battered Earth, and the plight of the poor. Their situation challenges us as Church and moves us to go out, to decentralise, to abandon security and rigidity. The existential ecclesial and social peripheries guide our research and energise our apostolic responses. (Conference of Religious Latin America, CLAR, Reflection 1)

### **Renewal of structures in religious life**

Like any vocation, the starting point is the following of Jesus. This begins when we listen to Jesus' invitation "come and follow me" and we prepare ourselves in a spirit of openness and inner freedom to live a process of open dialogue and discernment.

In the course of this process, we discover that the reality of Religious Life is plural, and diverse. On the one hand, we find a Consecrated Life that is committed to processes, to what is emerging, with a contemplative view of reality, to the existential and geographical journey, the missionary outreach in inter-congregational and intercultural realities. We meet people of different ages, cultures, approaches, origins, who, without losing their own identity, commit to a life project centred on the Kingdom and on a lifestyle where first place is given to the search for fraternal and sisterly experiences and the common good, at the heart of the People of God.

However, we note with concern and honesty that, in many congregations, the original freshness and originality has been displaced - disfigured - by several structural layers and forms that have been

taking precedence, in many cases overshadowing the true sense of discipleship and passion for the Kingdom. In several cases, a vision and praxis that tends towards the institutional, hierarchical and clerical predominates, with resistance to a change of mentality and structures, clinging to rigid practices, ways and customs which limit freedom of speech and decision making, is slow and fearful to take risks, seeks to homogenise (standardise) and instead of providing a channel for active participation and co-responsibility of the members, it seems to be content to be the guardian of obsolete and outdated traditions.

This reality cannot be reduced to a mere diagnosis. It is necessary to take decisions and take on a process of transformation, of real and actual conversion. It is time to allow ourselves to be moved by the newness of the Spirit that urges us to be a Church that walks in a spirit of dialogue and participation, welcoming diversity, and discerning the decisions that guarantee an authentic reform in order to free ourselves from the ways and customs still existing, that imprison what is genuine in our following of Jesus. (CLAR reflection 5, Rosaria Purilla, CM and Rafael Luciani)

*A deepened understanding of Eucharist invites us to interpret “This is my body” in a way that embraces the whole universe in its diversity and complexity. It broadens our view of the oneness of life. The whole community of life is the body of Christ. Where there is free self-giving there is Eucharist. When the community celebrates Eucharist, it expresses and lives this joyful communion with the whole universe and commits itself to the mission of Jesus to empower life of all in this suffering world.*

*Creation is of the order of love (Laudato SI 77) which calls us together into universal communion (76) The Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love (236) (Accomp. through a new lens, pg.3)*

*Involving ourselves in our world reality implies respect and care for the whole Earth community. We are contracted into the vision of Jesus to enhance all of life, especially those who are weak, vulnerable, and threatened. In this world governed by a culture of exploitation, division, and discrimination, we are called to live a culture of collaboration and cooperation where inter-cultural living can be a prophetic sign of communion. We are evolving beings living in an evolving universe, all part of an amazing cosmic-evolutionary process. Each of us has a profound effect on the whole and consequently an obligation to the whole. (Accomp. through a new lens, pg.4)*

### **CLAR – Reflection 5 continued...**

Synodality being a fundamental dimension of the whole Church, must touch the heart of Religious Life leading it to profound changes. We cannot be satisfied with a revision of certain practices, but must go deeper and discern how we can achieve, in the years to come, an authentic ‘synodalisation’ of our being and our way of proceeding. This will require the freedom to discern and carry out "spiritual, and institutional reforms" with the aim of building new institutional models that will inspire our actions and help us to better realise our shared mission considering the changing times we are living, both socially and ecclesial. For this reason, the time has come to change forms and styles, and to take up again the path of being proactive that comes from the incarnation of the Gospel in today's history.

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### **FOR REFLECTION**

- How does our experience of God inspire and encourage a desire to respond to the burning needs of today's world/ and live together our common purpose/mission of the whole?
- In the light of your reflection what changes do you see are necessary for a new way or style of community life?
- What might it mean to live the way Jesus lives more than worshipping Jesus? What structures do we need to change or let go in order to facilitate internal and communal transformation?



### **REFLECTION 3 - THE CALL FOR CREATIVITY IN RELIGIOUS LIFE**

What are God and this time asking of us? Everything. And our response is worth everything, for we want to follow God's desires for a world at peace, living justly and tenderly. We will see religious life as yeast, present where the Spirit asks us to serve, encouraging the life already there, and constantly being created in our prayer, community and ministry. We are called to a particular mystical-prophetic witness in this time. This is a call to each of us that has no age limit or end to its creativity. The vulnerability and incompleteness of religious life at this time is a gift, for it means we will need to continue to look to God and to the calls for direction.

#### **Call to be mystics and prophets**

Sometimes we separate mystics and prophets, thinking that mystics have a particular call that is separate from the calls of the prophets, and we do not necessarily think of prophets as mystics. Yet it is the linking of the two that gives authenticity to both mystics and prophets. Our lives, in depth, flow outward to the world in which we live, whether we are contemplative, monastic, or apostolic religious. Our world today needs mystics and prophets thus consecrated life is call to be mystical and prophetic.

Five signs that a religious consecrated life is mystical and prophetic are that individuals and congregations:

1. Know God,
2. Cultivate interior freedom,
3. Read the signs of their times with a critical and creative fidelity to the Gospel vision of the Reign of God, denouncing injustice and announcing the gospel vision,
4. Live in closeness to and solidarity with the powerless, oppressed, and marginalised and
5. Invite all to bring their gifts to participate in the vision of the reign of God.

#### **These five signs should be integrated in our lives.**

The invitation here is to ask God for continual conversion, transformation, and revitalisation, personally and communally, so that we and our religious Institutes may be open to the calls of this time. Jesus is our model and image of the unity of mystical - prophetic life. To live this today takes faith, hope, and love. We must remember that we do nothing alone. Because we have seen the Spirit changing us and changing situations, we cling to this "dangerous memory" from scripture, our experiences, and the experiences of our congregation. Sharing narratives is important. The sharing is part of the mystical-prophetic call and response. This will take us ever more deeply into the God of hope. In this humanity-earth in which "everything is interconnected" through the enduring action of the Divine Ruah, Francis' call to synodal conversion is nothing other than a call to spiritual awakening of Catholicism, and of all Catholics in the world.

Catholics of the world are to join, without hesitation, this irreversible movement of the spiritual awakening of humanity. This is what, for me, is meant by Francis' invitation when he insists on overcoming selfishness, when he insists on overcoming the ecclesial self-referentiality, dismantling the clerical model, implementing ecclesial equity, and moving towards pastoral, ecological, and relational conversion, etc, It is time to allow ourselves to be moved by the newness of the Spirit that urges us to be a Church that walks in a spirit of dialogue and participation, welcoming diversity, and discerning the decisions that guarantee an authentic reform in order to free ourselves from the ways and customs still existing, that imprison what is genuine in our following of Jesus. (Maria Cimperman)



### **CLAR: Reflection 3**

In the life and experience of the new generations, there is a constant revelation of the becoming and the advent of a new humanity that confuses and bewilders many. I have been discovering, with astonishment, in the new generations a sort of calm and tranquil conscience, a new direction of humanity, which will be recreating new relational-institutional forms from an inner revolution, produced by and in, the inner voice of humanity, a new direction of humanity. In its conscience, there where, for those of us who believe, there exists God. This new ethical/relational - spiritual - consciousness is in constant conflict with a monstrous socio-political and economic apparatus, which tries to isolate and weaken the growth of this new consciousness of the human with right-wing and left-wing offers, which systematically exclude or ideologically use the vast majority of humanity, those who live on the peripheries of history. (CLAR, Context Guillermo Campuzano, CM, )

The Church is not an organisation apart from the world, from the places in which it is rooted. The Church is "worldly" for better and for worse. There are tensions within it that help it to grow, but also to regress. The world, in this sense, often resists collaborative work, solidarity and synodality. In religious congregations, in particular, there is room for selfishness, individualism and the quest for power. It is a fact, which cannot be hidden, that conspires against their evangelical mission.

Synodality demands from formation at least the following tasks: formation for conversation and common decision-making; for solidarity with those who, for various reasons, are forced to slow down; for forming or participating in communities; for expressing ideas, for entering and leaving conflicts; for spiritual discernment with other people; for being critical and self-critical; for those in formation to learn to seek justice and communion.

All of the above forces us to abandon the idea of the superiority of religious men and women over other members of the People of God. Formation should expose the persons in formation to enter into relationships with other persons with whom they can grow psychologically, spiritually, intellectually and pastorally. Synodality implies learning and development. Like the Gospel, it cannot be taken for granted in Religious Life. (CLAR , reflection 3, Jorge Costadoat, S.J)

*Re-awakening of our “Pioneer spirit” – following the bicentenary of our foundation, we hear a call to communally discern what we are going to hand on to future generations. Each one of us, irrespective of age, is responsible for the life of the whole in her own unique way. Where are the seeds of a pioneering spirit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? (5)*

*“I dream of a missionary option, that is a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, schedules, language and structures can be changed for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.” (Evangelii Gaudium, 27) (Accomp. through a new lens)*

### **Questions for reflection**

- What is there in my/our life that must be transformed for the sake of the Gospel, for the world?
- What needs to become more flexible in our formation structures and environments, to facilitate mature commitment, creativity, initiative, and responsibility?
- How can we reorganize our formation process to motivate sisters to live in communities as mystics in today’s reality?
- How can we help ourselves and others, through our formation process, to let go of energy draining activities and to focus on life giving journey?