

PRESENTATION	2
WOMEN OF COMPASSION AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE SUFFERING OF THE WHOLE OF CREATION	4
<i>P. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, OCist.</i>	
THE PANDEMIC, A KAIROS TO FOSTER SYNODALITY AS A WAY TO IMPLEMENT LAUDATO SI'	15
<i>Sr. Nathalie Becquart, Xavière</i>	
COVID19. RE-IMAGINING THE FUTURE: THE SPIRITUALITY AND THE CHARISM CAN HELP RELIGIOUS LIFE TO BE MORE GENERATIVE IN THIS TIME.	21
<i>Sr. Teresa Gil, STJ</i>	21
THE PSALMS: THE WAY TO THE FULLNESS OF OUR HUMANITY	28
<i>Sr. Marie Laetitia Youchtchenko, OP</i>	
THE DOCUMENT ON HUMAN FRATERNITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE	38
<i>H.E. Miguel Ángel Card. Ayuso Guixot, MCCJ</i>	
BURNOUT AND RESILIENCE BUILDING IN RELIGIOUS LIFE	44
<i>Sr. Maryanne Loughry, RSM</i>	
LIFE IN UISG	51
STAFF UISG	56



PRESENTATION

The Bulletin - issue No. 173 closes 2020, a particularly difficult and dramatic year for the whole world, hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The images and the words Pope Francis pronounced for the *Urbi et Orbi* Blessing, on 27 March 2020, in the square of St. Peter's Basilica still resonate in our hearts. Before the empty rain-wet square, the Pope, commenting on Mark's Gospel story of Jesus calming the storm (Mk 4:35–41), said:

"We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying 'We are perishing' (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this."

However, the initial fear did not paralyze us. Consecrated life which, far from being at a loss, soon became animated by a spirit of universal solidarity, compassion, brotherhood, and sisterhood, of closeness with the least, whom the pandemic has made even more vulnerable. This has inspired the effort to bring together personal and community initiatives to deal with the emergency and to find concrete ways to stay close to suffering humanity.

P. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, OCist

Women of compassion and their involvement in the suffering of the whole of Creation

Meditating on our relationship with the world, with creation, and with humanity, in light of the theme of compassion, I believe that it is like putting oneself at the centre of the question, with the recognition that this centre is a heart. That may seem sentimental. However, in reality, the more that the world advances in its chaotic path, the more we perceive that the true problem of humanity, of the Church, and of consecrated life, is not only or mainly that of having lost the direction of our path, but of having lost its centre, which is the heart that must guide our path.

Sr. Nathalie Becquart, Xavière

The pandemic, a kairos to foster synodality as a way to implement Laudato Si

This global pandemic and sanitary crisis act as a revelation of both our ills, dysfunctions and lights, good practices. It particularly highlights inequalities and injustices but also initiatives of solidarity and care for the weakest. This time is also a "Kairos", an opportunity to stop and check in to choose a better future and build a better world. Trying to read together the signs of the times in the midst of this uncharted context, we hear even more loudly the cry of the poor, the cry of the oppressed, the cry of those who ask for breath.

Sr. Teresa Gil, STJ

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

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.

Sr. Marie Laetitia Youchtchenko, OP

The Psalms: The Way to the Fullness of Our Humanity

The psalms are an incessant dialogue between God and humanity: the psalmist manifests his sorrows and his joys, his doubts and his confidence, his anguish, and his salvation... And God challenges his people; He invites them to listen to Him, to be guided, to be loved, because He wants their happiness. An incessant dialogue, a mutual search, that prolongs *Genesis*’ “Adam, where are you?”, in which the querying of all human life is played out: “Where do I come from? Where am I going? What’s the meaning of all of this?”

S.E. Miguel Ángel Card. Ayuso Guixot, MCCJ

The Document on Human Fraternity and its implications for religious life

Consecrated life has in front of it the road of fraternity to travel in a world divided by hatreds, by wars, by injustices, and by oppression. Therefore, it is necessary to live and testify to community in difference, the possibility of a multicultural dialogue, and to show the possibility of dialogue and peace between the peoples, races, and cultures. In the experience of fraternity, we experience the Triune God, community in diversity.

Sr. Maryanne Loughry, RSM

Burnout and resilience building in religious life

The changes that we experience in our communities, ministries and church can be disturbing and, in some instances, stressful, they can also create opportunity for some; our responses are not universal. For many the rapidity of change and uncertainty has been overwhelming and distressing. In religious life when confronted with sisters in distress it is not easy to always pinpoint the causes of distress and even more difficult how to best assist them. Our use of psychological terms and labels can create further distress.



WOMEN OF COMPASSION AND THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE SUFFERING OF THE WHOLE OF CREATION

P. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, OCist.

Dom Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori was elected Abbot General of the Cistercian Order on 2 September 2010. Born at Lugano (Ticino, Switzerland) Dom Mauro-Giuseppe received degrees in philosophy (1982) and in theology (1990) at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). As of 2005 he was a member of the Council of the Abbot General and Synod of the Order. He is known for the publication of numerous books and articles, which have been translated into various languages, as well as for his lectures and preaching for spiritual retreats.

(This lecture, in its unabridged version, was presented at the Study-day of the Superiors and Delegates of the Belgian Constellation, Heverlee-Leuven, on 29 February 2020)

Original in Italian

I would like to make to a contribution to your reflection on the ecological conversion to which Pope Francis calls us with the encyclical *Laudato si'*, and on how to welcome this call in your female religious life, focussing my meditation on the theme of compassion, on its nature revealed in Christ, on its female quality that must speak to men as well, and on how the contemplation of this mystery should bring us to become the leaven of today's world.

At the heart of compassion

Meditating on our relationship with the world, with creation, and with humanity, in light of the theme of compassion, I believe that it is like putting oneself at the centre of the question, with the recognition that this centre is a heart. That may seem sentimental. However, in reality, the more that the world advances in its chaotic path, the more we perceive that the true problem of humanity, of the Church, and of consecrated life, is not only or mainly that of having lost the direction of our path, but of having lost its centre, which is the heart that must guide our path.

God kept the Israelites in the desert for forty years to teach them not so much to look to the end of their journey as to centre that was accompanying them

towards that goal, giving meaning to each of their advances and stops.

Who is that God who is in the midst of the people travelling towards their land and towards their house? From the very beginning he showed himself to be a *God of compassion*, a God driven by compassion and a God who urges us to compassion:

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying for help on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. And I have come down to rescue them from the clutches of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that country, to a country rich and broad, to a country flowing with milk and honey (...). Yes, indeed, the Israelites’ cry for help has reached me, and I have also seen the cruel way in which the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now I am sending you to Pharaoh, for you to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Ex 3.7-10).

“I know all about their sufferings, and so I have come down to rescue them.”

Knowledge, in the biblical sense of the word, is not merely information, but a loving participation. God is touched by what he sees, by what he knows. It is a knowledge of love that unites the one who knows to that which is known, as when a man and a woman unite in conjugal love. God reveals here the extremely profound dimension of his compassion, which will reveal itself fully in the crucified Christ. Starting with the revelation to Moses from the burning bush, God allows us to know his compassion in action, which means “suffering with”, being close to the suffering of the other person, offering our presence to the sufferer, being close to that person. It is this that Jesus appropriates and describes in the parable of the Good Samaritan who took care of the man wounded by brigands: “But a Samaritan traveller who came on him was moved with compassion when he saw him. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him onto his own mount and took him to an inn and looked after him.” (Lk 10.33-34).

Compassion involves a “descent”. “I am well aware of their sufferings, and I have come down to rescue them” (Ex 3.7-8). It is thus that we must understand the infinite and inconceivable “descent” of the Son of God as far as the incarnation, passion, and death: “Who being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.” (Phil 2.6-8).

We must never interpret the humbleness of Christ apart from his compassion, which is a compassion that he shares with the Father.

When he cries out his heart-rending sense of having been abandoned by the Father – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27.46; Ps 21.2) – we might say that Jesus, so as not to betray the Father’s compassion for humanity,

is willing to forego the consolation of communion with Him. It is as though the eternal and indissoluble love that he shares with the Father came to concentrate itself only in his compassion for the world, as if compassion were the last indestructible thread remaining to unite him to the Father when all the other threads of the heart have broken under the weight of the sin of the world that the crucified Son carries for us.

For us, too, the compassion of Christ then represents the indestructible core of love that must or ought to unite us to God and to our brothers and sisters, no matter what happens.

Learning compassion

God, who is love, therefore revealed himself through compassion and as compassion. The image of God in us, for which and through which we were created, must then be met through a journey of imitating the compassion of Christ. This is the fundamental Christian exercise of self-discipline, because, as I was saying, it is in this way that we partake of God. The perfection of the Father, whom Christ gives us as the goal of the journey of our life, coincides with his mercy: “You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5.48) – “Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate” (Lk 6.36). It is also possible to render this idea thus: “Be merciful as is your Father”.

The compassion of Christ inserts itself in the heart of the human drama, which is the drama of a freedom called to love, to life, and to joy, but which, like Judas, can choose hatred, lies, death, and desperation. But if the compassion of Christ expresses itself in favour of the “delinquent” brothers and sisters that we are, in favour of the humanity that is lost and wandering, it also becomes a journey of return and conversion: it allows us to find again the lost way, the lost place, the house of the Father. At the end of Chapter 27, St Benedict uses, for the only time in his Rule, the verb “to suffer together” (*compati*), asking the abbot to imitating the good shepherd of the Gospel, Christ, who “had so much compassion [*tantum compassus est*] for the weakness [of the lost sheep] that he deigned to take it up on his sacred shoulders and thus carry it back to the sheepfold” (RB 27.9).

Therefore, it is a matter of living Christ’s compassion as a journey, as a way of life, which saves us and humanity from its disorientation. This holds true not only for the “delinquent brothers” towards whom we must show the compassion of Christ, but also for those whom Christ calls to become living instances of his compassion for the world. It is the great law of mercy and compassionate love to which God calls us, showing it to us, offering us experience of it. The Gospel, just as the Old Testament, is clear about the fact that it is in giving mercy that one receives it: “Blessed are the merciful: they shall have mercy shown to them!” (Mt 5.7). The compassion of Christ is the way to salvation both for those who receive it and for those who exercise it. We are saved by merciful love and in merciful love. It little matters where we find ourselves with regard to this flame because, in itself, there is only love and all happens in it.

Christ insistently invites us to allow ourselves to be loved by his compassion and become the instruments of it for our brothers and sisters in humanity. If the impassive God has come down and assumed our humanity so as to suffer with us, it is clear that this “journey”, this “descent”, is something that we, too, must live by following the example of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

From the head of man to the heart of woman

It is here that, in my opinion, the role of the woman becomes fundamental, and it is important that we all – men and women – be aware of it, even so as to better understand the Gospel of compassion (and thus of salvation) and to be able to announce it and transmit it to the world and the whole of creation.

During the Last Supper, Jesus wished to announce his compassion in a very simple and sweet manner, as if to show that even the tragic aspect of the Crucifixion must not make us forget that the compassion of God is that of a father who loves like a mother.

Jesus shows his love “to the very end” (Jn 13.1), up to the final compassion of the Cross, washing the feet of his disciples. Even here, there is a descent, in physical and spiritual terms. It is a gesture of compassion, a taking care of that which in the other is the lowest, the most filthy, of what is the most human and earthy in the human creature. It is not a humiliation that unidirectional and experienced only by the one washes the other’s feet. Even the person whose feet are washed must descend and become humble so as to allow their misery to be known, touched, and shared. In effect, Jesus wants this compassion to be reciprocal and that his disciples wash “each other’s feet” (Jn 13.14).

There is a mystery and a paradox in this reciprocity of compassion and in this descent of people with respect to one another. It is as if there were a continual descent that calls for a continual adjusting towards the lowly. So as to create a circulation of compassion between human beings that reflects in the abyss of our misery the abyss of the love that is exchanged between the Three Persons of the Trinity ...

But what I wish to underline in this scene, which for St John has a eucharistic character, which illustrates the total gift of the Body and Blood of Christ, is that Jesus learned this gesture of human compassion from the women who performed it for him, from the sinful woman who was pardoned and from Mary of Bethania (cf. Lk 7.37-38; Jn 12,3).

Jesus seeks to teach this feminine gesture to his male disciples, just as he himself learned it.

It was never easy for Jesus to teach his apostles his compassion for humanity. Every time that Jesus expressed it regarding the crowds, the poor, and the little ones, his male disciples had much difficulty understanding him and accepting it. They were forever calculating the “cost” of Christ’s compassion, just

as Judas calculated in three seconds the price of the perfume that Mary of Bethany poured onto the feet of the Lord (cf. Jn 12.4-5). Think, too, of the observation made by Philip when Jesus provoked him to note that the crowd had need of bread: “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough to give them a little piece each” (Jn 6.7).

Every time that his disciples begin to calculate, the result is that they immediately say that they are incapable of matching Jesus’s compassion. Then they try to stop it, to distract Jesus from the imprudent and dangerous sentiment. They think that even children bother the person and the teaching of the Master. These men always set their reasonable vision of reality in opposition to the arrival of a Christ who came to share in our suffering without measure, without limits, without boundaries, without calculations.

So, there is a conflict as it were, a war of wills between the compassionate heart of Jesus and the reasoning heads of the disciples. This conflict perhaps reaches its peak, and its breaking-point, at the moment in which Simon Peter wishes to hinder the Passion of Christ: “From then onwards Jesus began to make clear to his disciples that he was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day. Then, taking him aside, Peter started to rebuke him. “Heaven preserve you, Lord,” he said, “this must not happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do.” (Mt 16.21-23).

If we think that the whole of the Passion of Christ is compassion with lost humanity, we understand just how much the disciples’ resistance to the tender compassion of the Lord was a complete misunderstanding of their tie to him, of his mission, and of their own role. They got the whole of the Christian event wrong. Their “thoughts” that elaborated according to their criteria, their own measure, their closure upon themselves, their self-referentiality, and their fear, were truly a “Satanic” current opposed to that of the compassionate love that informed the whole mission of the Son of God who had become a human being.

Every time that his disciples oppose this “thought” to the compassion of Jesus, he calls upon them to convert, inviting a *metanoia*, which means a change of mind, thought, and judgement. A change that is a paschal passage from the thoughts of the head to those of the heart, to the thoughts of compassion. It is a matter of converting from calculating thoughts to compassionate thoughts, so that between our heart and the suffering of the other there is no longer any measured distance, but rather a proximity of communion. The calculating thought maintains a distance that can be an unbridgeable separation, without any possibility of nearness to the other. The compassionate thought is that of the Good Samaritan, who does not calculate like the other two who went before him, but allows himself to be led by compassion, which causes him to live an immediate communion with the suffering of the wounded man. The measure of compassion is therefore

determined by the necessity of the other, by his suffering, which cannot be measured without embracing it, without taking care of it and journeying together and assuming it oneself.

True conversion

We therefore understand that true conversion, that in which Jesus accompanied his disciples patiently but also firmly, is essentially that of passing from an abstract distance to a real compassion. Conversion must in the end cast down the divisions and the walls that we build between ourselves and our neighbour, between ourselves and our brother or sister in humanity.

Jesus in his own person cancels this distance. He makes himself the Passover lamb that is sacrificed to destroy the walls of division. How? With his compassion that leads him to identify himself with those whose suffering he shares. He suffers to such a degree with the brother who suffers – and also with the brother who is a lost sinner – that he becomes one with him. The compassion of Christ is a complete communion. It is not an emotion: it is a presence, his presence, the descent of the compassionate God upon those whose suffering he shares.

This was the crucial point in the conversion of St Paul, in the encounter with Christ who suffers with his persecuted disciples. All the ideas and perfect reasonings of Saul crumble when faced with the reality of a compassion that is the presence of God where Saul strikes in God's name: "He fell to the ground, and then he heard a voice saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' he asked, and the answer came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'" (Ac 9.4-5).

After all, the shock that left a mark on Saul for the rest of his life was the discovery that his God was a God totally identified with his compassion. For this reason, the conversion of Paul will lead to the total adhesion of his person to the sufferings of Christ, to a total com-compassion with the Passion of the Lord: "I have been crucified with Christ and yet I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me. The life that I am now living, subject to the limitation of human nature, I am living in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not setting aside God's grace as of no value; it is merely that if saving justice comes through the Law, Christ died needlessly." (Gal 2.20-21).

That which justifies us, that which saves us, is the adhesion to the redeeming compassion of Christ. Jesus suffered with us so that we might be saved by suffering together with him. After all, thanks to the Paschal mystery, we can live in reverse the experience of the incarnation of God. God, as St Bernard was fond of saying, was incapable of suffering, but he was able to suffer with us. We did not truly know how to feel another's suffering, but we were able to suffer. The compassion of Christ brings about the meeting and the union of these two conditions, the human and the divine, and therefore God, who in his compassion was able to suffer, allows us in our suffering to be able to feel compassion.

To be saved, God asks us not so much to enter into his suffering, but rather into his compassion. It is not so much the suffering that will save us as it is the love of compassion that God asks us to share with him and thus with everyone.

Compassion is Christ

Like all saints, Paul understood and lived a traumatic truth that shook above all his Pharisaic religiosity and moral system: the compassion of God is not only a behaviour that we are asked to imitated; *compassion is God himself with us*, compassion is Emmanuel, the presence of God at the foundation of our humanity. To be compassionate, we must not only do as God, but welcome Him, allow Him to enter into our life and above all allow our life to enter into Him, to unite with His. Compassion coincides with Christ who is present. It is not only a feeling, but a presence.

St Bernard, in a sermon for the Christmas Vigil, uses another brilliant expression to describe the arrival of Christ: “*Venire voluit qui potuit subvenire – He who was able to help us wished to come*” (*III Sermon for the Christmas Vigil*).

The compassion of God is precisely this “coming” rather than being able to help us. He did not assist our suffering from afar, but came to suffer with us. He came as far as our suffering, as far as our death, precisely for our suffering and our death as consequences of our sin and rebellion against God. All the wounds that man inflicts on the crucified Son of God immediately become sources of salvation. As St Peter writes: “He was bearing our sins in his own body on the cross, so that we might die to our sins and live for uprightness; through his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Pt 2.24).

After the death and resurrection of the Lord, the apostles live in the knowledge that the compassion that saves coincides with the presence of Christ, and that their compassion can be effective only if it shows and communicates the compassion of Christ’s presence, the active compassion of God-with-us, the presence of Christ in people’s suffering. “But Peter said, ‘I have neither silver nor gold, but I will give you what I have: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!’” (Ac 3.6).

The mystery of the Cross is the fulfilment of this mystery. When Jesus says, “I am thirsty!” vinegar is given to him to drink, and in that moment he says, “It is fulfilled!” and gives up his spirit (cf. Jn 19.28-30).

Vinegar is the symbol of the wine of the human joy of marriage that has gone sour, that has become bitter suffering. Jesus drinks this cup to the very last drop. *The cup of communion is, for him, the cup of compassion to the very end of the Passion*. There can be no other compassion for every human suffering, except that of the Crucified. Compassion as an emotion is something everyone can feel, experience, and respond to, but *compassion as experience*, compassion as a person exists only in Christ. Ontologically, love exists only in God, it is one Person only in God; in the same way, compassion can exist for us only in the person of the

crucified Christ, who suffers our suffering, who dies our death.

When one person feels compassion for another, it is essentially nothing other than the sharing of a suffering that is already common, that is our suffering, even if the other in that moment suffers more grievously and more innocently than me. Think of children's suffering, for instance. A healthy adult, when faced with a child's suffering, unless he is completely obtuse and unfeeling, cannot live his compassion without a sense of guilt, because he understands that the suffering of the innocent is his suffering, that for which, in one way or another, he is responsible. Only the compassion of Christ is absolutely innocent, absolutely free. He shares our suffering with a suffering that is not his own, that would not even be possible if the freedom of God had not chosen it, if the freedom of God had not been pure love.

Women's joy and compassion

Rejoicing at the arrival of the other is a woman's joy, the joy of motherhood: "A woman in childbirth suffers, because her time has come; but when she has given birth to the child she forgets the suffering in her joy that a human being has been born into the world. So it is with you: you are sad now, but I shall see you again, and your hearts will be full of joy, and that joy no one shall take from you." (Jn 16.21-22).

It is as if, at the moment of entering into his Passion, at the moment of displaying his compassion to the utmost, Jesus announced to his disciples that they needed to have a woman's heart, the heart of a mother, to receive fully the mystery of the Redemption. He does not announce this woman's joy, the joy of a wife and a mother, as a necessity, but as the reflection in them of his Resurrection, as a grace that they will experience, a grace, a joy that will be given to them with the Resurrected Christ. Is it just by chance that the first to see the Resurrected Christ and to rejoice were women?

The entire Gospel and the whole of the Bible are shot through with this joy of women who say with all their heart: "Blessed is he who comes!" That is to say: blessed be the presence of the other, the gift of the other who comes to share my life, my heart, my pain and my sadness to turn it into the fullness of joy!

It is with this predisposition to rejoice at the arrival of the other that woman is the first to understand the mystery of compassion. The women of the Gospel receive the compassion of Christ, entering into it and sharing it. They instinctively know that this is what humanity needs.

The woman, above all, knows *to move through compassion*. Birth is precisely a moment in which the mother and the child suffer together, they share in suffering, so as to reach the joy of life and the encounter, the joy of communion.

The first appearance of Mary in the Gospel of John, at the wedding in Cana, quite nicely illustrates this attitude (cf. Jn 2.1-11). The compassion of Mary is

above all in her feminine attention to the situation. Mary seems to be the only one to have noticed the lack of wine at this wedding. She does not react as the apostles often will, who, faced with others' difficulties, asked Jesus to send them away so as to look after themselves without disturbing them (cf. Mt 14.15). Mary sees the embarrassment and feels responsible for it; she takes charge and looks after things. This is typically feminine. By, at the same time, she knows that she does not have the means to resolve this problem. Mary knows that she can feel compassion, but that to truly console, her compassion must move through the compassion of the Son. So, the Virgin resorts to the fundamental means that the human being has to receive the compassion of Christ: she asks for it.

Prayer is the attitude in which the powerless compassion that we feel when faced with the suffering of humanity and creation allows God to express his all powerful compassion. At the wedding in Cana, one could say that the compassion of Mary begets and elicits that of Christ: "Woman, what do you want from me? My hour has not come yet." (Jn 2.4). In reality, Jesus simply remarks to his Mother that the compassion that she asks for and receives is not only sympathy for a situation that is temporary and fundamentally banal, but rather the universal compassion of God for all human suffering, which in the end will go as far as the Cross in the Paschal hour of redemption.

Let us observe that at Cana as on Calvary (cf. Jn 19.26), Jesus addresses his Mother with the title of "woman", as if to express his belief that the great role and mission of the woman are in opening the world to the Paschal hour of the compassion of Christ, who comes to repond in a superabundant manner to the insufficiency of joy and love displayed by humanity and the whole of creation.

Prayer which opens a fountain of compassion

One of the most profound and beautiful of reflections on compassion and prayer is that of Isaac the Syrian in the 30th of his *Ascetic discourses*: "You protect the fallen (...). You give him fresh courage. And the piety of your Master carries you. You assist the weak and those sick at heart with your word. If your hand gives in abundance, the right hand of Him who embraces the world will sustain you. In the pain of prayer and in the attention of your heart, unite yourself to those sick at heart and a fountain of compassion will open to what you ask.

Basing compassion on prayer means cultivating the awareness that the true need of every person is the need of God, of his proximity, of his love. In every difficulty, this lies at the root of suffering, even when a person suffers on account of illness or for some other reason. We must never lose sight of this. Otherwise, we shall not be capable of a compassion that shares true hope. There are many evils that will not pass. There are numerous trials, problems, illnesses, and damages to man and nature that are neither humanly nor naturally able to be repaired. But faith gives us the certainty that at the very heart of every suffering and every anguish, the perception of the loving presence of God is a consolation that is stronger than every temptation offered by despair.

When we pray, when we cultivate an awareness of the presence and love of God, we truly work for the consolation of the world. We live a compassion that arrives even at the root of human unease.

Without this, we today risk losing a *kairos*, in a manner altogether special in consecrated life, and perhaps especially in female consecrated life. We are diminishing, we are becoming ever weaker, we suffer from shortness of breath, especially with regard to the great sufferings and disorientations of the world. Many react and put themselves into motion, especially the young, and that is good. It is necessary to do so, it is urgent to do so! But there is a level of the problem where every human initiative reveals itself ineffective, where man can do nothing, that is to say where nothing that man does can be the source of the solution to the problem.

Jesus was very blunt on this subject, which always has the bitter aftertaste of original sin. He says: “Cut off from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15.5).

This expression is a sharp blade makes a clean cut between life and death, between fertility and sterility, between the sense and the nonsense of our life and our vocation. “Without me ... nothing”, which means “With me ... everything!”

Death for life

It is evident that we are living in the Church, in consecrated life, just as in the entire world, a moment of immense powerlessness. There is also impotence regarding the consequences of our errors, of inadequate behaviours of the past, and omissions in our education. The more powerful that human means have become, the more impotent man has become in terms of controlling them; at the human, spiritual, and moral level or in our unwarranted use of creation. As the problems mount, so, too, does the fragility of our forces. We can no longer not admit our weakness and impotence. In politics and the economy, attempts are still being made to reassure people with false promises of power, with illusory visions of security. People have failed to realize that the error lies precisely in the idea that security is to be found in a power that we can possess only if we wrench it away from others. Or else we apathetically resign ourselves to letting things go and despairing of humanity. Many individuals and communities are allowing themselves to slip resignedly into death.

There is a death for death and a death for life. What is the reason for the difference? Let us listen to Christ: “In all truth I tell you, unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.” (Jn 12.24).

Paradoxically, what makes the difference between a sterile death and a productive one is death itself, the very fact of accepting death as a condition of life. It is death that enables the wheat grain to bear much fruit, the fruit of life. Jesus came to give us new life by giving us a new death, a new way of living death. And beneath the word “death” we can understand all that torments and humiliates our life and the life of the world. All that apparently or really causes us to pass

through death, can in Christ become a source of new life, of a new life that the wheat grain that dies does not see, that seen from the outside seems a dream, an illusion that cannot possibly come true, but which in reality is altogether present in the wheat grain. In a single grain there are potentially all the plants and seeds that will follow their death unto the end of the world. For us, faith, love, and hope are the life without end that it has been given to us to experience through every death that we accept to live for the productivity of the Kingdom.

This law of life and fecundity, which is the law of the fecundity of the compassion of Christ unto death, is the secret of the fecundity of all that we are and that we do for the life of the world and creation. Which is not to say that the law of the wheat grain is an alternative to engagement, even active and militant, for the good of humanity. On the contrary, it must enter into everything that we do and everything that we cannot do, because the law of the wheat grain is the condition for every fecundity, for the fecundity of force as well as weakness, for the numerous as well as the few, for youth as well as old age, for life as well as death.

But having this awareness and living it, that is the specific duty to which we are called as Christians and, in the Church, as consecrated people among Christians. Only we are able, like the martyrs of the first centuries and of all those that followed, to keep alive in the dough of the world the Paschal yeast of this awareness and this hope that announce that even death, united to Christ, generates life.

If we are not witnesses to this, our compassion for the whole of creation will be sterile. It will be nothing more than a commiseration that joins itself to a universal despair that sees nothing other on the horizon than death. There are ways of engaging in social and ecological struggles that in reality do nothing other than foment universal despair by working on general illusions. We need to be aware of that, because otherwise we fail in our prophetic ministry of compassion and hope, of compassion for hope, to which Pope Francis incessantly calls and encourages us.

To live this in truth, we need everything that in our charism unites us to Christ like feelers to the vine: prayer, fraternal life in common, obedience, chastity, poverty, humility, service on behalf of the poor ...

Only by living everything in this perspective does it become possible to live our powerlessness and weaknesses with a profound and fecund peace.

Our prophecy lies in transforming all of the powerlessness that we experience into impotence chosen for Christ, into impotence united to him in the faith, awareness, and experience that, if without him we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15.5), our union with him allows us to “make the whole of creation new” (Ap 21.5).

Our prophecy, that which can truly and joyously feel compassion with the whole world and the whole universe, is that of this young and humble woman of Nazareth, who, strong only through her union with Jesus, sang the Magnificat of the already accomplished Good News of the Kingdom.



*THE PANDEMIC, A KAIROS TO FOSTER
SYNODALITY AS A WAY TO IMPLEMENT
LAUDATO SI'*

Sr. Nathalie Becquart, *Xavière*

Nathalie Becquart, Xavier Sister, is the Director of the National Service for Youth Evangelization and Vocations.

Conference of Bishops of France - 58 avenue de Breteuil - 75007 PARIS

nathalie.becquart@cef.fr - @SrNatB - FB: Nathalie Becquart

<http://www.jeunes-vocations.catholique.fr> - <http://quelleestmavocation.com>

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This global pandemic and sanitary crisis act as a revelation of both our ills, dysfunctions and lights, good practices. It particularly highlights inequalities and injustices but also initiatives of solidarity and care for the weakest. This time is also a “Kairos”, an opportunity to stop and check in to choose a better future and build a better world. Trying to read together the signs of the times in the midst of this uncharted context, we hear even more loudly the cry of the poor, the cry of the oppressed, the cry of those who ask for breath. We can’t deny any longer the depth of our social and ecological crisis. We can’t shut our ears to the impacts of the economic and political crisis on so many people. This epochal crisis underlines how we are at the end of a system that destroys the earth and generates “a culture of throwaway”. And it is noticeable to see that the lockdown reinforces this consciousness all over the world.

At the same time, we are more aware of our interdependency and connectedness. Thus this multidimensional crisis is emphasizing Pope Francis’ teaching “that *“Everything is interconnected”* (*Laudato si’*, §70, 138, 240) and illustrates that “we are all in the same boat” as Pope Francis reminded us during his meditation *Urbi et orbi*. We realize that the only way to go out from this pandemic is to act together in solidarity.

Thus we are called to be in the crew with others to seek together how to navigate on a stormy sea with a lot of different currents. This crisis is a call to think and act collaboratively to design the course to follow and to implement the right maneuvers to move the boat in the right direction. As religious, we feel we are particularly called to a path of conversion that requires us to go further to be prophetic and meet the current needs and cries of our broken world. And we discern it as a call to foster creativity and synergy, boldness and audacity through the promotion of intercongregational reflection and action.

With our already strong commitment to justice and peace, integrity of creation issues, we have already identified good roadmaps and GPS for navigating this uncharted time and prepare a better future full of hope. In fact *Laudato Si'* and the synod on the *Amazon's Final Document* with its key words – alliance, conversion, integral ecology, synodality, mission, and dialogue – along with *Querida Amazonia* structured in four chapters – 1/ A social dream 2/ a cultural dream 3/ an ecological dream 4/ an ecclesial dream - give us clear and interesting guidelines that are proving to be truly prophetic in the face of this crisis. It expresses a strong call to change.

Therefore, to fulfill her mission in taking account of our contemporary contexts and cultures to serve the common good of our “common home”, the Church has to embody the path of synodality. Because synodality is the required ecclesiology for today articulated with integral ecology that includes integral human development. So it is a truly good news and in a sense, not really a surprise after the synod on young people that insisted so much on synodality that the next synod of bishops in 2022 will be on synodality. Its topic “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission” gives us already the key words for our missionary life. And religious life, due to its experience of community life, communal discernment and ministry has probably a major role to play for the transformation of a clerical church to a synodal church.

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has emphasized this vision of synodality as a way to look at the Church that highlights the notion of “The People of God”. In one of the most important speeches of his pontificate – the address for the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops, 17 October 2015 - he clearly designed and embraced the path of synodality as the one “expected by God for the Church of the third millennium”¹. He stated that synodality – “Journeying together — laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome” is “constitutive of the Church”. His approach of synodality is rooted in a reevaluation of the theology of the People of God from the Second Vatican’s Council – especially *Lumen Gentium* chapter 2 – influenced by the Argentinian theology of the People that shaped his former ministry as a Jesuit and archbishop of Buenos Aires. He particularly underlines the *sensus fidei* and the equal dignity of all the baptized called to be missionary disciples.

Synodality is a way of being and acting, promoting the participation of all the baptized and people of good will. It means to “walk together” in a pilgrim church, a church on the move, the church of the people of God, where everyone has a voice and takes an active part whatever their age, sex or state of life.

In the vision of Pope Francis, synodality is also linked with the notion of pastoral conversion of the Church that he acquired from the CELAM conference of Santo Domingo². And he articulates these two key elements of the People of God/*Sensus Fidelium* and pastoral conversion to fathom that the only way for the Church to meet the call of God and fulfill her mission in this contemporary complex and plural world is through a path of reform that requires the involvement of all the faithful. At the heart of synodality, Pope Francis places listening, the mutual listening through which listening to the Holy Spirit is made: “A synodal Church is a Church of listening, with the awareness that listening “is more than hearing”[12]. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the Episcopal College, the Bishop of Rome, each one listening to others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of Truth” (Jn 14:17), to know what he says to the Churches (Rev 2:7).” Francis, address for the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops, 17 October 2015

This vision of synodality presents the Church in its historical dimension in a state of permanent birth, in an on-going process of reform. That is to say, it is a Church that takes people into account, starting below from the bottom-up of the people in a generative approach that sees the Church constantly being born and starting anew. This vision of a Church in emergence from and in the midst of the “people of the earth”³ can be connected with the concept of ecclesio-genesis or ecclesio-genetics. It lets us perceive that the identity of the Church is a dynamic identity, not a static one. It is a relational identity of communion-mission rooted in the Trinitarian mystery and the Eucharistic mystery. Intertwisted with this vision of synodality embodied by the image of the inverted pyramid⁴ is an understanding of the hierarchical ministry itself⁵.

To promote and implement this vision of a synodal Church, Pope Francis has been instrumental in transforming the concept and process of the synod of bishops. Promulgating a new constitution *Episcopalis Communio*⁶ two weeks before the synod on young people, he has profoundly renewed the Synod of Bishops, inserting it within the framework of *synodality* as a constitutive dimension of the Church, at all levels of her existence. In particular, the Synod is now understood as a process and no longer as an isolated event. It is considered as a process composed of three parts: the preparatory phase, in which the consultation of the People of God on the themes indicated by the Roman Pontiff takes place; the celebratory phase, characterized by the meeting of the assembly of

Bishops; and the implementation phase, in which the conclusions of the Synod, once approved by the Roman Pontiff, are accepted by the local churches.

In this vision of synodality embodied by the image of the inverted pyramid⁷ “this image offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.”⁸ From it we can deduce a style of leadership and manner of exercising power.

A synodal church is a relational church where all the People of God, where their vocation and position are in interdependence and mutuality. The minister doesn’t exist outside the community. He is not separate from the people to whom he ministers⁹. When we put a priority on the centrality of our baptismal call, the common priesthood of all the baptized, we can no longer separate the clergy and the laity as the clerical pattern does. The minister is the one who represents the community of which he or she is part. They are all together called to be a communion-in-mission animated by the Holy Spirit, a discerning missionary community. The main role of the minister is here to help bring about a communal discernment and to serve the communion of the community dedicated to the common good of the society. “Ministry doesn’t exist as a power or reality in its own right but only as linked to pastoral service”¹⁰

Thus, decisions have to be taken through synodal processes that require listening and involve all the protagonists and seek for consensus. If there is no synodality without primacy, the minister who is the leader is making the final decision from this whole spiritual process of listening and discernment that is embodied in the important notion of *conspiratio*¹¹. “We might consider an image first developed by Cardinal John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century: the *conspiratio fidelium et pastorum*, literally the “breathing together of the faithful and the pastors”. He is mingling with the community among whom he is journeying and is accountable to the people of this community. The vision and practice of a synodal church as opposed to a clerical church is articulated in a relational anthropology and theology of ministry.

With this in mind, we can shift our old hierarchical images of power imposing itself from above to sketch it as a process that empowers and enables. As the synod on young people named it we are called to endorse a vision of power in ministry as “a generative force (...) to liberate freedom”¹² This pneumatological conception of power based on the manner of Jesus who came to free the freedom¹³ (to liberate the person) is associated with the notion of servant leadership.

In conclusion, to follow up this perspective of an interconnection between the approach opened by *Laudato Si* and the ecclesiology of synodality, we have to envision how the ecological conversion, the cultural conversion, the pastoral conversion and the synodal conversion are interrelated. As long as human beings

promote abusive relationships towards the earth to exploit it, they will have a tendency to develop abusive relationships among them and vice versa. Relationship of respect and mutuality between men and women, between people of different colors, between clergy and laity, between human beings and the earth go hand in hand. The path to implement *Laudato Si*, Justice and Peace, equality and fraternity to shift the paradigm that destroys our planet and oppresses so many victims is the path of synodality. The method underlying synodality is the method of dialogue, listening and discernment in common. Thus to find the best practices for synodality and to end all form of abuses in the Church and in the society, there is probably a source of inspiration to take away from those who are exploring new ways of being and doing together based on the notion of cooperation, collective intelligence, communal deliberation, shared governance, and circular leadership. Religious life cannot miss this appointment!

- ¹ "The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium." Francis, address for the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops, 17 October 2015
- ² "the notion of pastoral conversion is proposed as an organic and structural axis of the whole genesis and ecclesial organization, affecting "everything and everyone" in relationship to lifestyles (personal and community praxis), exercises of authority and power (relationships of equality and authority), and ecclesial models (structures and dynamisms)" SD 30
- ³ "Francis has adopted the conciliar people of God ecclesiology (*Evangelii Gaudium* 111, 114). This Church, which 'is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture' (EG

115), must go out into 'new socio-cultural settings' (EG 30) and reach the 'peripheries', the remote areas (EG 20)" Rafael Luciani, "The centrality of the People in Pope Francis' Socio-cultural theology", *Concilium* 3 (2018) 58.

4 "§57. Taking up the ecclesiological perspective of Vatican II, Pope Francis sketches the image of a synodal Church as "an inverted pyramid" which comprises the People of God and the College of Bishops, one of whose members, the Successor of Peter, has a specific ministry of unity. Here the summit is below the base." International theological commission, *synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, march 2018

5 "this image offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself." *ibid*

6 Francis, Apostolic constitution *Episcopalis communio* on the synod of bishops, September 15, 2018

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html

7 "§57. Taking up the ecclesiological perspective of Vatican II, Pope Francis sketches the image of a synodal Church as "an inverted pyramid" which comprises the People of God and the College of Bishops, one of whose members, the Successor of Peter, has a specific ministry of unity. Here the summit is below the base." International theological commission, *synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, march 2018

8 *ibid*

9 "There is to be no distance or separation between the community and its Pastors - who are called to act in the name of the only Pastor - but a distinction between tasks in the reciprocity of communion." *Ibid* §69

10 Richard Gaillardetz, "The Ecclesiological Foundations of Ministry within an Ordered Communion," in *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry*, ed. Susan Wood (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 38

11 This correlation promotes that *singularis conspiratio* between the faithful and their Pastors[78], which is an icon of the eternal *conspiratio* that is lived within the Trinity. The Church thus "constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her" International theological commission, *synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, march 2018

12 According to the expressions coming from §71 of the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, "In order to undertake a true journey of maturation, the young need authoritative adults. In its etymological meaning, *auctoritas* indicates the capacity for enabling growth; it does not express the idea of a directive power, but of a real generative force."

13 "In the episode of the healing of the possessed epileptic (cf. *Mk* 9:14-29), which evokes so many of the forms of alienation experienced by young people today, it seems clear that Jesus stretches out his hand not to take away freedom but to activate it, to liberate it. Jesus fully exercises his authority: he wants nothing other than the growth of the young person, without a trace of possessiveness, manipulation or seduction" *ibid*



*COVID19. RE-IMAGINING THE FUTURE:
THE SPIRITUALITY AND THE CHARISM
CAN HELP RELIGIOUS LIFE TO BE MORE
GENERATIVE IN THIS TIME.*

Sr. Teresa Gil, STJ

Teresa Gil Muñoz is a Sister of the Company of Saint Teresa of Jesus. A doctor in Teresian and Spiritual Theology, she defended her doctoral thesis at Comillas Pontifical University on “The Dark Night of Teresa of Jesus. A Phenomenological, Theological, and Mystagogical Approach.”

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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.
- 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** [...];

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.

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

² *Ibid.*

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



*THE PSALMS: THE WAY TO THE
FULLNESS OF OUR HUMANITY*

Sr. Marie Laetitia Youchtchenko, OP

Sr. Marie Laetitia Youchtchenko OP, has been a member of the Roman Congregation of Saint Dominic since 1987. She lives in Italy. After serving adolescents for many years in teaching, she now devotes herself to preaching; she is also a translator-interpreter for the UISG and the Dominican Family.

Original in French

“In the face of the ever-increasing mastery over the living, from birth to death, what wisdom will prevail so that human beings can accomplish their humanity in critical and humble benevolence with regard to their powers? While researchers demand the establishment of a transhumanity, by increasing man’s potentialities in an unlimited way to the point of rousing the dream of immortality, what conversation will it be able to initiate?”¹

Some time ago an article entitled “Transhumanism, or the Temptation of the Perfect Man”² caught my attention. It showed how the modern quest for immortality risked “making an idol of a man with perfect health and living in a kind of eternal well-being.” Will the now-widespread use of nanosciences and other advanced technologies in the health field be able to stay at the service of the person, or will it inexorably lead to the human mind to “take the place of nature to do better than it can?” “Once God is eliminated, [will human beings] be able to save themselves?”

Since I’m not a bioethics specialist, I do not wish to enter here into a discussion on these complex issues. However, I noticed that, at the same time, in the religious world, there were increasing calls for more humanity in our lives. Our contemporaries’ thirst for authenticity pushes us to rediscover a quality of

presence, a coherence of testimony, an availability to listen and to meet. We are invited to be rather than to do, and to forget the objective of efficiency at all costs, to enter into the logic of the gratuitousness of God; following Christ we want to give ourselves to the little ones, to those whom society seeks to exclude because they are not “perfect.” On the other hand, our daily life in community reminds us that we are far from the ideal of “perfection” nurtured during our novitiate ... despite our efforts, our goodwill, and our persistence in prayer!

But then ... is it really perfection that we want to achieve? Is it in perfection that the human being finds his true happiness? Is perfection the answer to the *infinite desires*³ that hide deep within each person, whether they recognize it or not?

An overly hasty negative answer is not enough, because what alternative do we have to offer? To take up the question of Brother Bruno Cadoré OP,⁴ what conversation should we engage with our contemporaries in the search for wisdom “so that human beings can accomplish their humanity in critical and humble benevolence with regard to their powers?”

It is perhaps the words “search for wisdom” that gave me the idea to examine the psalms, these canticles that have constituted, for three thousand years, the heart of the prayer of the people of God, these canticles in which the whole range of feelings of the human person is expressed, these canticles that accompany the journey of every being in search for the truth. Examining the psalms, not to analyze them but to let ourselves be carried away by their wisdom; looking into the psalms, to enter into the depth of what is common to all humans, beyond their cultures and beliefs. Written in the first person (singular or plural), the psalms do not offer any theological reflection or abstract considerations; they are rather the expression of personal experience, encounter, amazement. The psalmist is each of us, but he is also the whole people; the psalmist is the Israelite who knows the Law and the Prophets, and he is also the Christian who reads the Gospel in the light of the First Testament; the psalmist is the Virgin Mary, the model of those who are inhabited by the Word and who live in the intimacy of God; the psalmist is Jesus Christ, who recapitulates all things, and therefore all prayers, on earth and in heaven.

A dialogue between God and humanity

<i>To you, I lift up my eyes, O you who are in the heavens</i>	Psa 123 (122):1
<i>Answer me speedily in the day when I call!</i>	Psa 102 (101):3
<i>“Hear, O my people, while I admonish you; O Israel, will you listen to me?”</i>	Psa 81 (80):9

The psalms are an incessant dialogue between God and humanity: the psalmist manifests his sorrows and his joys, his doubts and his confidence, his anguish, and his salvation... And God challenges his people; He invites them to listen to Him, to

be guided, to be loved, because He wants their happiness. An incessant dialogue, a mutual search, that prolongs *Genesis*' "Adam, where are you?", in which the querying of all human life is played out: "Where do I come from? Where am I going? What's the meaning of all of this?"

Every dialogue supposes a relation, an otherness. Unlike many of our contemporaries, the psalmist is not facing his querying alone: he has an interlocutor, an Other who, he feels, has the answer. An Other, to whom he can cry out because he is sure to be heard; an Other, to whom he can raise his eyes, for He is the Most High.

A Wonder

A cartoon, intended to be humorous, that is circulating on social networks shows two disillusioned people chatting in a cafe; one asks the other, "What is the greatest evil of our century: ignorance, or indifference?" And the other replies: "I don't know, and I don't care."

In his contemplation of God, the psalmist gives us an antidote to both ignorance and indifference: wonder.

Wondering means coming out of yourself to enter a surprising reality of beauty. It implies digging in yourself a welcoming space so that you can let yourself be invaded by something great; putting all your senses in tune with a message of love and truth; receiving a gift of which you do not feel worthy; forgetting yourself to spoil so that you can sink into contemplation. It means opening up to mystery; meditating in silence or, on the contrary, singing, bursting into cries of joy, for words are never enough to express this bedazzlement. Being amazed supposes that one stops and takes a step back from everyday activities in order to enter into another dimension:

*"Be still, and know that I am God!
I dominate among the nations, I dominate the earth"* Psa 46 (45):11

The psalmist has many reasons to be amazed: God's greatness, which exceeds all that one can imagine, His theophanies, the riches of His creation, the abundance of His love, the generosity of His benefits, the power of His mercy...

*I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.
Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God?
You are the God who works wonders.* Psa 77 (76):13-15

*Whatever the Lord pleases He does,
in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.* Psa 135 (134):6

*O Lord, You have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy:
"How great are your works, O Lord!"*

<i>Your thoughts are very deep!"</i>	Psa 92 (91):5-6
<i>You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it... You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.</i>	Psa 65 (64):10.13
<i>Your steadfast love is higher than the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.</i>	Psa 108 (107):4
<i>The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.</i>	Psa 103 (102):8
<i>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!</i>	Psa 32 (31):1

It is by marveling in this way before his Lord that the psalmist gradually becomes aware of the paradox of his human nature. For, if his first reaction is to recognize his smallness, his unworthiness, his finitude, he quickly perceives that he has value in the eyes of his Creator. Discovering that he is the object of love of the Most High, the psalmist understands that his greatness resides in this gaze of love that raises him up, trusts him, constitutes him co-creator, co-responsible. Before the vastness of the universe, before the Lord, he would be only a negligible quantity, mere dust, if God did not bend over him with infinite tenderness.

<i>Show me, Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. See, You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Man is but a breath; he is a mere image.</i>	Psa 39 (38):5-7
<i>The Lord looked down from heaven on Adam's children...</i>	Psa 14 (13):2
<i>Who is like the Lord our God? He rules from heaven. But He bends down to look at the skies and the earth. He lifts the weak man from the dust.</i>	Psa 113 (112):5-7
<i>Lord, what is man that you take notice of him; the son of man, that you think of him? Man is but a breath, his days are like a passing shadow.</i>	Psa 144 (143):3-4
<i>When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you set in place, What is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him?</i>	

*You have made him little less than a god,
crowned him with glory and honor;
You have given him rule over the works of your hands,
put all things at his feet.*

Psa 8:4–7

*I praise you because I am wonderfully made;
wonderful are your works!
My whole soul knows that.
My bones were not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret,
fashioned in the depths of the earth.*

Psa 139 (138):14–15

The psalmist thus discovers that he is not just an element among others within creation: he is known personally by the One whom nothing can contain... This love is not only a source of amazement and contemplation, but it will also become the support that will allow human beings to go through the various trials of life.

A Cry of Suffering

There are indeed many psalms that cry out to God: in them, we find anguish, sadness, loneliness—whether in the face of illness, sin, betrayal, danger from enemies, persecution, fear of death, exile... The psalmist does not hide his tears or his vulnerability: he expresses his incomprehension, his “why?” He invokes the Lord, asks for His help, and implores His forgiveness, even when he seems to be beating on a wall of silence, or in the emptiness of absence.

*I am stooped and deeply bowed;
every day I advance in darkness.
My loins burn with fever;
there is no wholesomeness in my flesh.*

Psa 38 (37):7–8

*I was caught by the cords of death;
the snares of Sheol had seized me;
I felt agony and dread.
Then I called on the name of the Lord,
“O Lord, save my life!”*

Psa 115 (114):3–4

My tears have been my bread day and night...

Psa 42 (41):4

*Even my trusted friend, who ate my bread,
has raised his heel against me.*

Psa 41 (40):10

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Psa 22 (21):2

*Awake! Why do you sleep, O Lord?
Rise up! Do not reject us forever!*

Psa 44(43):24

When reading these psalms of lament, it becomes clear that the psalmist is not seeking to deny the evil that surrounds him. He does not hesitate to express his weakness, his poverty, his inability to move forward; he is humble enough to expose his wounds in all their nakedness—he knows that it is useless to pretend before God and that his prayer will be heard only if it is truth. These wounds will then become the door through which the love of God can enter him and bring him salvation.

Indeed, even in the depths of his distress, the psalmist never for an instant doubts the fidelity of his Lord: the cries of suffering in these psalms all end with a note of confidence, because everything can be put into the hands of the One who bends down towards the earth with solicitude.

*But you do see; you take note of misery and sorrow;
you take the matter in hand
To you the helpless can entrust their cause.*

Psa 9B:14

Let us take just one example: Psalm 13 (12), which begins with verses expressing complete dismay: *How long, Lord, will you forget me, how long, hide your face from me*, ends as follows: *I trust in your love. Grant my heart joy in your salvation! I will sing to the Lord, for he has dealt bountifully with me!*

The psalmist's prayer is, therefore, not flight into an imaginary world without trials that would allow him to escape from the unbearable reality: it is confident abandonment, rooted in the certainty of the faithful love of God—a God who does not refuse His grace to those who humbly ask for it.

A Loyalty

*Praise the Lord, all you nations!
Extol him, all you peoples!
His mercy for us is strong;
the faithfulness of the Lord is forever!*

Psa 117 (116)

All the psalms, whether historical or royal, of praise or lament, sing of God's fidelity: fidelity to His covenant, to His people, to the promise of happiness made to each of us.

*Good indeed is the Lord, His mercy endures forever,
his faithfulness lasts through every generation.*

Psa 100 (99):5

I will sing of your mercy forever,

*Lord proclaim your faithfulness through all ages.
For I said, "My mercy is established forever;
my faithfulness will stand as long as the heavens.*

Psa 89 (88):2-3

God is faithful because He is eternal; God is faithful because His love is eternal. God IS: His fidelity reflects His immutability, His eternal present, His eternal presence—as Saint Paul will later say: God cannot deny himself!

*Your throne stands firm from of old;
you are from everlasting ...
Your decrees are firmly established;
holiness befits your house,
Lord, for all the length of days.*

Psa 93 (92):2.5

As for the psalmist, he lives in time, he has a past and a future. His reasoning is simple: if we look at the past, we see that God has always worked in our favor. Since God IS, He is unchanged, and does not depend on the vicissitudes of history: we can, therefore, rely on the certainty that He is still at work today and always will be. He simply cannot abandon His people. This memory of the past, fundamental for the psalmist's faith and confidence, is expressed in the evocation of God's deeds throughout the centuries, as well as in the frequent use of the verbs to remember and to recall.

*I will recall the deeds of the Lord; yes,
recall your wonders of old.;
I will ponder all your works;
on your exploits I will meditate.*

Psa 77 (76):12-13

*Remember your compassion and your love,
O Lord, for they are ages old.*

Psa 25 (24):6

*Remember me, Lord, as you favor your people;
come to me with your saving help.*

Psa 106 (105):4

God's loyalty is also revealed in His mercy, constantly renewed, constantly proposed anew. As we have seen, the psalmist is aware of his weakness and his poverty; but he is not afraid to fall, because he knows with all his being that he will be raised up again.

*I declared my sin to you;
my guilt I did not hide.
I said, "I confess my transgression to the Lord,"
and you took away the guilt of my sin.*

Psa 32 (31):5

*Deep calls to deep in the roar of your torrents,
and all your waves and breakers sweep over me.*

Psa 42 (41):8

The abyss of our misery calls the abyss of mercy because God's love is unconditional, completely free because He always precedes us and wants us standing on our feet. How far we are from the logic of our contemporary world, where error is the synonym of failure, where all weakness is despised, and where the value of a person lies in his efficiency!

Thanksgiving

The psalmist then naturally comes to wonder how to respond to this love. Seized by so much magnanimity, abundance, gratuitousness, he understands that nothing he can offer will measure up to the benefits received.

*How can I repay the Lord for all the great good done for me?
I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.*

Psa 116 (115):12.17

*“Those who offer praise as a sacrifice honor me;
I will let him whose way is steadfast look upon the salvation of God.”*

Psa 50 (49):23

During his dialogue with God, it appears to the psalmist that thanksgiving is the only sacrifice that pleases Him—it means simply welcoming love, with the humility of those who await everything of their Creator. However, it is essential to note that this humility is not the expression of weakness or submission that would destroy all freedom. Here, the psalmist is faced with a choice of life: either accepting love, which implies following the paths God will indicate to him, or deciding by himself which paths to follow, without depending on anyone. Choosing God's path means choosing confidence, abandonment, and therefore dependence... There certainly are dependencies that are very harmful to a person's integrity, but choosing to depend on someone for love's sake—in the sense of binding one's fate to that of the other and walking together on the paths of life—is the most beautiful act of freedom that a human being can accomplish; it is an act that requires both great inner strength and a very clear conscience of one's own dignity. Any choice, of course, implies renunciations, but freely assumed renunciations are all proofs of love that open up unimagined horizons. By deciding to give thanks, the psalmist renounces to building himself alone. His gaze is no longer turned to the quest for his own perfection but to God who leads him on his paths.

*Teach me, Lord, your way that I may walk in your truth,
single-hearted, and revering your name.
I will praise you with all my heart,
glorify your name forever, Lord my God.*

Psa 86 (85):11–12

A Fullness

This act of freedom, in which all the greatness of human nature is revealed and where the orientation of a lifetime is played out, is not unique in time: by relying on the fidelity of his God, the psalmist will also to enter into the logic of fidelity, that is to say, that he will constantly renew his thanksgiving and choose again, day after day, for love's sake, to follow Him on His paths.

*I, like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God,
I trust in God's mercy forever and ever!
I will thank you forever for what you have done.
I will put my hope in your name—for it is good!*

Psa 52 (51):10–11

Using a picture, it is as if the psalmist were abandoning the closed circle of his own search for perfection to launch out to discover an ocean, always offered, always deeper... the only condition for immersing himself in the Mystery being to choose again and again, at every moment, to love and to let himself be loved.

*Trust in the Lord and do good that you may dwell in the land and live secure.
Find your delight in the Lord who will give you your heart's desire.
Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will act.*

Psa 37 (36):3–5

This confidence is, therefore, neither resignation nor refuge but, on the contrary, a decision to assume responsibility as a person called to live the fullness of his humanity, a fullness that is participation in the life of God. For, this God wants him to “live in His house,” that is to say, to share His intimacy, His joy, His secrets, His peace.

*I say to the Lord: “You are my God.
I have no happiness apart from you.”
You show me the path of life,
abounding joy in your presence!
Delights at your right hand forever.*

Psa 16 (15):2.11

*The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.
Indeed, goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life;
I will dwell in the house of the Lord for endless days.*

Psa 23 (22):1.6

The psalmist is each of us; the psalmist is the whole Church; the psalmist is Jesus Christ, who not only makes all the prayer of humanity rise to the Father but who is also the Father's response to this prayer. A response that is not abstract or distant but which is an embodiment, that is to say, presence, in the concreteness of our daily life. It is through him that the fullness of the divinity⁵ comes to inhabit our earth, and it is because we are children in the Son that we hear the Father say us: “You, my child, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”⁶

What message for our world?

We will never finish examining the psalms ... but, even if many riches remain to be explored, this brief journey already makes it possible to begin a conversation with those of our contemporaries that the ideal of the perfect man is attempting.

Where, in our world, can we find criteria of perfection that are common to all cultures, to all tropics, to all eras, to all personalities? Will they be based on aesthetics, IQ, manual skill, life expectancy, material well-being? Will the criteria presented to me by my intelligence be the same as those of my neighbor? Will I have to submit to the criteria imposed by “society”? But isn’t society made up of men and women who, for now, are still imperfect?

How can one escape the narcissism fueled by social networks; how can one avoid losing hope, even falling into despair, when one does not correspond to the image of perfection they convey? How can one avoid being trapped by the rarely benevolent gaze of the “others”?

It seems that, if man eliminates God, a conception of perfection limited to the materiality of our planet will necessarily hit up against unanswered questions, internal contradictions, and lead to restrictions of freedom—both external and internal—threatening the dignity of the human person...

With the psalmist, let us dare to rediscover the origin and roots of this dignity, this greatness of the human being, called into existence by a gaze of love and invited to exercise his freedom of choice at every moment of his life.

Instead of the security of self-referentiality, prefer the adventure of meeting.

Instead of seeking power, decide to assume your vulnerability.

Instead of saving yourself alone, choose to depend on the Totally-Other.

Welcome non-perfection, in order to inhabit fullness.

Instead of considering the human being as an object of study, wanting to respect in him the mystery that makes him unique.

Give up an immortality that would tie us to this earth, and so take the risk of eternity.

¹ Bruno Cadoré, *Avec Lui, écouter l'envers du monde*, Cerf, 2018, p. 194.

² *Famille Chrétienne* no. 2133, 13–19 December 2018, pp. 10–13.

Born in the 1980s in the United States, transhumanism is an international cultural movement advocating the improvement of the physical and moral characteristics of human beings through technology.

³ The expression is from St. Teresa of Lisieux.

⁴ Master of the Dominican Order from 2010 to 2019.

⁵ Cf. Col 2:9.

⁶ Lc 15:31.



*THE DOCUMENT ON HUMAN
FRATERNITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE*

H.E. Miguel Ángel Card. Ayuso Guixot, MCCJ

Cardinal Ayuso is the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

This talk was delivered at the Meeting of the UISG/USG Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, on the topic “Religious Women and Men, Ambassadors of world peace and living together”, Rome 16 March 2020.

Original in Italian

Dear friends,

First of all I wish to thank for their invitation Sr. Patricia Murray and Fr. Emil Turu, who in the name of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue of the International Union of Superiors General and the Union of Superiors General organized the event in which we are today participating in a different manner.

I confess that it is a great pleasure for me to share with you some of my thoughts. In fact, I feel at home, because, belonging to a missionary institute (that of the Comboni Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus), I am well acquainted, both through my personal life and through my consecrated life, with the meaning and importance of the construction of fraternity and the promotion of dialogue with people of different religions.

The topic that I have been asked to discuss, the *Document on Human Fraternity and its implications for religious life*, is unquestionably a subject of immense relevance to the present day. Indeed, I believe that the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which was signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Al-Tayyeb at Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019, is a milestone on the road of interreligious dialogue.

I would like to make a rapid survey some of the contents of this Document and then go on to deal with its meaning for consecrated life.

1) Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together

a. Its roots in Vatican II

As the Holy Father has said, for us Catholics “[t]he document has not gone a single millimeter beyond the Council of Vatican II. Not at all. The document was made in the spirit of Vatican II” (*Press conference of Pope Francis during his trip of re-entry to Rome, 5 February 2019*). From the Catholic perspective, it is indeed impossible to understand the document unless one situates it in the now long established tradition of interfaith relations of the Catholic Church, which found its official expression in the Council of Vatican II.

b. It is addressed to everyone

The document is a concrete invitation to universal fraternity that concerns every woman and man. Therefore, it is not a confessional document nor an Islamic-Christian text, even though the spirituality of the two signatories is discernible. Rather, it is a document open to all, to be used and shared by everyone, believers and non-believers.

c. God is the Creator of everything and everyone

God is the Creator of everything and everyone. Consequently, we are all members of one family, and we have a duty to recognize this. This is the fundamental criterion that faith offers us so as to manage human coexistence, to understand the differences that exist between us, and to defuse conflicts.

d. Some key points

- No one is ever allowed to invoke God’s name as a justification for war, terrorism, or any other form of violence.
- Life must always be protected, just as recognition must be extended to children’s right to grow up in a family setting, their right to food and education, and their right to protection in a digital environment that is ever more treacherous for them.
- The Declaration defines as “essential necessity” the recognition of women’s rights to education, to work, and to the exercise of their political rights.
- The document condemns the compulsory conversion to a particular religion or culture, or to a style of civilization that the others do not accept.
- The right to religious freedom and full citizenship.
- The text of the Declaration of Abu Dhabi underlines the need to pass from simple tolerance to living together as sisters and brothers.
- The importance of the training and education of the younger generations.
- Respect, protection, and care for Creation.

The intent of the Document is that of adopting:

- the culture of dialogue as a means;
- working together in common as conduct;
- reciprocal knowledge as method and criterion.

These are just some of the points presented in the Declaration, and there is much work to be done on them in conjunction with our sisters and brothers in other religions. Faced with a humanity wounded by numerous divisions and fanatical ideologies, the Pope and the Grand Imam have shown that promotion of the culture of dialogue and knowledge of the other is not a utopia, but rather the necessary prerequisite for living in peace and leaving to future generations a world better than that in which we live.

Increasingly secularized, our world more than ever has need of interreligious dialogue that testifies to the “transcendental”, that defends religious freedom, that declares every form of violence to be intrinsically foreign to the authentic *raison d’être* of religion, which is that of encouraging the common construction of a world of peace and fraternity. In fact, the truth of the sacred character and of the dignity of the human person, together with the respect for religious freedom that leads to authentic dialogue, are the foundations for the construction of a world at peace.

2. The Document on human fraternity and consecrated life

When my thoughts turn to the consecrated life, I think automatically of Saint Francis of Assisi. It pleases me to recall here, as was also highlighted by the motto for the Apostolic Visit to Abu Dhabi “Make me an instrument of your peace”, that the meeting at Abu Dhabi took place 800 years after that between the Saint of Assisi and the sultan Malik al- Kâmil. Saint Francis had perceived that dialogue is the space in which the mission can engage with those who do not know the Gospel and have not heard Jesus Christ speak.

The lesson of Saint Francis is that, far from giving in to syncretism or relativism, or renouncing one’s own history and tradition, the Christian identity is all the same “flexible”. It is capable of engaging with the changed social and political circumstances of the world, and also overcoming preconceptions and forms of intolerance. It is an identity that lives thanks to the desire to encounter the other, that feels the desire for dialogue.

I think that “flexibility” and the “desire to encounter the other” are due behaviors that distinguish the specific contribution that the experience of consecrated life can offer in the field of human fraternity and interreligious dialogue.

Just to give an example, I cite the seminal experience of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) and the productive collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The contribution that the monastic experience can make to interreligious dialogue is fundamental. The Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, as an organization, began in 1978, in response to a call by Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli,

the second president of the the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In his letter to the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Confederation, he asked that monks and nuns be more closely invlved in interreligious dialogue because, as he affirmed, “monasticism is a bridge between religions”. The productive collaboration between MID and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has produced a wide variety of results over the years, especially in the field of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. Most recently, in collaboration with the Buddhist monastery of Fo Guang Shan and the Association of Major Superiors of Religious Women in Taiwan, there took place at Taiwan in October 2018 the first international dialogue for Buddhist and Christian Nuns, dedicated to the theme “*Contemplative Action and Active Contemplation: Buddhist and Christian Nuns in Dialogue*”.

I think, too, of the irreplaceable work in the field of interreligious dialogue that has been performed by the Institutions that have a missionary spirituality. I, too, as I have already said, belong to the Comboni Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and for that reason I well know much effort has been spent in seeing to it that our life be filled with brotherly love for everyone and with heartfelt friendship and sincerity for people of other faiths. The collaboration with women and men of different religious traditions must increasingly be based on common concern for human life, extending from compassion for physical and spiritual suffering to the commitment to justice, peace, and the preservation of Creation. All of this has been well expressed in the *Document on human fraternity*.

It is undeniable that tody dialogue is taking place everywhere. There are many spaces and opportunities for encountering one another. Aside from the untiring effort to speak to one another, we must learn, too, to share the joys and the sorrows of life. Every religious institute has its own charisma to offer on the journey of dialogue. I am convinced that each institute, if it takes inspiration from the spirituality of dialogue, will be able to make its own distinctive contribution to the journey towards fraternity and the peaceful coexistence of religions and cultures.

In this sense, the creation of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue is important. Its members include representatives of both the Union of the Superiors General and the Superiors General. It aims to develop among the religious congregations residing at Rome an awareness of and an acquaintance with the importance of the ministry on interreligious dialogue.

Consecrated life has in front of it the road of fraternity to travel in a world divided by hatreds, by wars, by injustices, and by oppression. Therefore, it is necessary to live and testify to community in difference, the possibility of a multicultural dialogue, and to show the possibility of dialogue and peace between the peoples, races, and cultures. In the experience of fraternity, we experience the Triune God, community in diversity.

We are all jointly responsible for the mission of the Church in the world, and we are all called to be protagonists of interreligious dialogue. Obviously, consecrated people who dedicate themselves to the service of interreligious dialogue need an

adequate educational preparation, just as is the case with study and research, since this sector requires a profound knowledge of Christianity and other religions that is accompanied by a solid faith and spiritual and human maturity.

Indeed, a profound and serious education in one's own faith (in this case, Christianity) is indispensable, as is a solid understanding of other religions, which provides us with confidence and renders us spiritually mature and humane. Today we cannot ignore the other. Instead, well rooted in our identity, we must open ourselves with sincere intentions to this 'culture of dialogue' desired by Pope Francis.

Given the context, the sensibility, and the competences of my audience, I would like to renew here the invitation of Pope Francis: "For those who believe in the Gospel, dialogue is advantageous not only from an anthropological but also from a theological standpoint. (...) We need to develop a theology of acceptance and of dialogue leading to a renewed understanding and proclamation of the teaching of Scripture. This can only happen if we make every effort to take the first step and not exclude the seeds of truth also possessed by others. In this way, the discussion of our various religious convictions can concern not only the truths we believe, but also specific themes that can become defining points of our teaching as a whole." (*Speech of the Holy Father Francis, "The Mediterranean as a Frontier of Peace", Bari 23 February 2020*).

Pope Francis had already expressed the hope, during his address to the Theological Faculty of Southern Italy (Naples 21 June 2019), that there would be undertaken studies, reflections, and research aiming at elaborating a theology of discernment, mercy, and welcome that enters into dialogue with society, cultures, and religions for the construction of peaceful life together. Here is an important new task that stands before us!

The consecrated, the missionary who is interested in the advent of the Kingdom of God, becomes a protagonist and a promoter of dialogue, working hand in hand with the faithful of other religions in a spirit of fraternity, sharing with them the common commitment to construct a better world, as believers in one God. This dialogue, as outlined by the documents of the Church, will be a dialogue of life, of action, of theological exchange, and of religious experience.

Last of all, I would like to underline an aspect, that of prayer, that is common to the women and men of different religions, but which it seems to me might take on especial meaning for the consecrated life and become for this reason a specific task for sustaining interreligious dialogue and the road of fraternity. We ought to learn to look at others with the eyes of God. The primacy of prayer is the visible manifestation of the fact that it is the interior and foundational dimension of every religious experience and it is the environment from which there comes forth strong even today the summons to the historic responsibility that religions have towards our world.

In an international context that is destined to swift and sometimes dramatic

changes, the invitation that reaches us from Abu Dhabi is to increase the dialogue between religions and of the religions with all people, starting with prayer. It is an unequivocal emphasizing of the need for a higher qualitative level that is needed for dialogue itself as well as a call for a more radical assumption of the duty to search for paths leading to peace. There will inevitably be consequences for private and public life.

3. Conclusion

The teaching of Pope Francis is rooted in the conciliar conviction that religions possess in themselves great resources for constructing, with all people of good will, a humanity that is at peace and, moreover, that there is always a need for a spiritual movement for peace that is capable of bringing the different religious worlds together without mingling them. Therefore, it is in this context that the *Document on human fraternity* finds expression as does the recent institution, in August 2019 likewise at Abu Dhabi, of a Superior Committee for the implementation of the *Document on Human Fraternity*, of which I am President and which has the task of developing a plan for ensuring the realization of the objectives contained in the *Document*.

In today's precarious world, dialogue between religions is not a sign of weakness. Its rationale is to be found in the dialogue of God with humanity. Prayer, dialogue, respect, and solidarity are the only winning arms against terrorism, fundamentalism, and every form of war and violence. What is more, they are arms that are part of the spiritual arsenal of all religions. In the respect for diversity, dialogue must take every care that every human being sees guaranteed and respected their rights to life, physical incolumity, and the fundamental freedoms, viz. freedom of conscience, of thought, of expression, and of religion.

In the language and in the very title of the document signed at Abu Dhabi we read of a common ground tied to an ancient truth that may sound new on account of the world in which we find ourselves: human fraternity.

The fact that Pope Francis and Imam Al-Tayyeb are asking that their message be studied and transmitted to the new generations announces a new season. I would say that common voyage has begun, fruit of a new light and of a new creativity at the very heart of each of the two religions, and not only. And if it pleases God that women and men of religion and good will prove capable of walking together in fraternity, it will be even more pleasing that this fraternity also become the journey of religious faiths.

I pray that the effort of Abu Dhabi be able to truly unite people irrespective of boundaries and individual identities and (above all) by leaving behind us the instrumental uses of the faiths. For peace and a life together.



BURNOUT AND RESILIENCE BUILDING IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

Sr. Maryanne Loughry, RSM

Sister Maryanne Loughry, rsm, is a member of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia and Papua New Guinea. A trained psychologist, Maryanne teaches in the School of Social Work at Boston College. She has worked for many years with Jesuit Refugee Service and her doctoral work researched the effects of detention on unaccompanied refugee children. In 2009 she was awarded the Order of Australia for service to refugee and displaced people.

Original in English

It is not always easy to identify the causes of another person's distress and it is often even more difficult to know when and how to assist a distressed person.

This article will explore the concepts of psychological distress in religious life, focusing on burnout and stress; explore contemporary interventions for addressing these expressions of distress and finally enunciate how good policies and practice can play a key role in preventing psychological distress amongst religious sisters.

Contemporary models of psychological distress

In our contemporary world we all know religious sisters working in vulnerable settings. We have heard about cases of religious women being abused and traumatised and we often meet sisters who appear to have no energy, no more fuel in their tank. These women can present as tired, worn out, negative and unenthusiastic. One psychological term that has become more commonly used to describe such conditions is burnout. Sisters who have given their all find that they are no longer able to engage as they have. Burnout is a 'work-related' condition of emotional exhaustion in which interest in work, personal achievement, and efficiency decline sharply and the sufferer is no longer capable of making decisions. ¹

It makes good sense that this condition is familiar to us. As described above many sisters are still working in demanding settings as if they have the same energy as they had as a young religious. Instead they are older, the conditions are more complex and they are seen as representing a model that of ministry that is

diminishing and possibly no longer relevant.

If not burnt out some are sisters are just stressed, they still have energy but unrealistic demands are put on them by themselves and others. We know that stress disturbs or can disturb the normal physiological or psychological functioning of a person. When confronted with a sister who appears to be distressed is she burnt out, stressed or is something else happening in her life that is affecting her? Language and frameworks used to explain people's behaviour matters. They shape our expectations and response.

Now days most contemporary language is full of psychological language with many terms being used without regard for what these terms really means. One very common term that has now been introduced into every day parlance is the word trauma. I am an Australian and in recent months my country has been ravaged by bush fires and other extreme weather events. There is now much discussion in the media about the trauma we have all experienced with special reference to those who have fought the bush fires. Technically psychology defines trauma as 'a physical injury or wound, or a powerful psychological shock that has damaging effects'.² So now the discussion begins as to who is traumatised and what needs to be put in place to address this trauma. A further technical expression that is used is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)³. After the trauma of the bushfires will significant numbers of the Australian population have a diagnosed psychiatric disorder P.T.S.D.? Well, without going into too much detail about this psychiatric disorder it will depend on what the so called 'damaging effects' look like and for how long they persist. Only professional mental health experts can make this determination. Meantime the psychological language of trauma dominates our Australian media causing fear and uncertainty.

In religious life we have also adopted psychological and mental health language to explain our behaviour and the behaviour of others. Frequently though our use of these terms is not technically correct. This can have serious consequence because how we describe our behaviour and the behavior of others can set up expectations as to how sisters mental health and distress should be best addressed and secondly it can lead to a stigmatising because universally mental health and mental illness are frequently perceived to be damaging for one's reputation and future.

Contemporary religious life as we know it has many challenges. Aware that it is not appropriate to speak in sweeping generalisations it is apparent that the number of women in religious life is declining, that fewer young women are seeking to join religious life and that the average age of women in religious life is increasing. Alongside these facts in recent decades religious institutions have had fewer sisters in active ministry and many religious institutions have had to relinquish their traditional institutions of ministry for example religious hospitals and schools. Often these institutions had symbolised the contribution of the religious institution. This has resulted in more laity in ministry leadership and in some instances a freeing up of sisters to work with the more marginalised.

Further, religious women have also seen their governance structures move from more hierarchical models to ones that are more relational. All of these changes happening when there are fewer and older sisters.

The changes that we experience in our communities, ministries and church can be disturbing and, in some instances, stressful, they can also create opportunity for some; our responses are not universal. For many the rapidity of change and uncertainty has been overwhelming and distressing. In religious life when confronted with sisters in distress it is not easy to always pinpoint the causes of distress and even more difficult how to best assist them. Our use of psychological terms and labels can create further distress.

When a sister shows signs of distress she could be traumatised, burnt out, stressed, anxious or depressed. Each of these conditions is technically defined by mental health experts and because some of the signs and symptoms are similar it can sometimes be best to leave it to the experts to make the determination as to what is the exact condition the sister is manifesting. Some conditions exist in tandem.

Possible interventions

Distressed people can be assisted by counselling, therapy, medication and or psychosocial activities or even just by time out. Which of these interventions is the most relevant can frequently be determined by availability, prior practice and possibly prejudice or lack of good understanding. This can be very evident in settings where there are sisters from different cultures with different cultural expressions of distress. Further, in religious life we can also confuse or complicate the situation by sending sisters to spiritual direction, sabbatical or retreat when really, they need a mental health clinician.

Let me give an example: Sister Mary, who is in her early 60s has recently been making what appears to be poor decisions. She has now approached the leadership team with a request for a change in ministry. Does the leadership team A. send her for counselling, B. recommend a therapist, C. invite Mary to apply for a sabbatical program, D. give her retreat time, E. Let her change ministry, F. All of the above

Congregational leaders have told me that listening to the needs of a distressed sister and making decisions like the example above is a significant part of their work. Some report that the first meeting can be complex as the sister describes her situation and shares her distress. The follow up meetings can be even more difficult because the congregation leader is not always skilled in therapeutic listening, feels that she wants to assist the sister and yet is uncertain about what to do. Occasionally the distress of a sister can trigger distress in a leader.

In addition, when it comes to how best to assist the sister there are also now many interventions that are new to us including mindfulness and positive psychology and insufficient evidence has been collected to assess their efficacy as a useful intervention. Religious and religious leaders are not always best skilled to assist

distressed sisters without obtaining professional assistance and getting advice on whom best to refer sisters to for assessment and assistance.

To add to the complications, as religious sisters age we are also confronted with sisters who are physically well but showing signs of dementia. Dementia can be difficult to diagnose and we can confuse it with emotional exhaustion and burnout. Secondly how to assist a sister with dementia and keep them, while appropriate, in community can be very taxing.

As outlined above religious in recent decades have responded to change and become more familiar with contemporary governance practice in our ministries as well as in our institutions. Such change has also been happening in many other contemporary institutions and to some degree also in the Catholic church. This familiarity has exposed us to the stress and strain of contemporary life as well as the ‘secular’ options available for assistance. At the same time psychology has also been evolving with new explanations and interventions designed to assist those impacted by stress and burnout.

More contemporary and preventative interventions

One very significant and relevant intervention has been the focus on self-help. This intervention, the subject of many so-called airport books, has focused on individuals taking agency and putting in place techniques and practices that are known to assist in combatting stress and burnout. These practices include, adjusting sleep patterns, exercise, diet, recreation, meditation and time out from stressful settings. I venture to suggest that while some religious sisters have embraced some of these others have seen them as a distraction from ministry and not something that religious should be indulging in. Some self-help practices can be seen as running counter to community life. There is evidence that many of these practices can address factors that contribute to stress such as high blood pressure and obesity.

Another set of interventions that can assist distressed populations are trauma informed interventions. Trauma informed care considers past trauma and the resulting coping mechanisms when attempting to understand behaviours and treat a person. Trauma informed care can take many forms, is trauma sensitive and actively resists re-traumatisation. It is sensitive to the wide range of emotions that are normal following traumatic events and responds to these emotions in a positive and compassionate manner. Frequently trauma informed care happens in communities of groups where activities are designed to play to the strengths of the population using a strength- based approach rather than a deficit model.

In the area of humanitarian work a further tool has been identified as helpful and that is ‘Psychological First Aid’ training. Unlike the focus on self-help this intervention puts its emphasis on working with groups. Not unlike “First Aid” training where groups are trained to respond to heart attacks, cuts and burns,

psychological first aid training is a one- or two-day training where people are trained in the basics of mental health. Both “First Aid” and “Psychological First Aid” training is designed not to replace health professional or mental health professionals but rather it is a training to ensure that work places are safe places with a shared language for understanding physical and mental distress. From these safe places referrals can be made, when appropriate, to relevant professionals. Religious institutions also need to be safe places for health and mental health and “Psychological First Aid” training could be beneficial and break down some of the stigma around mental health and assist with the development of a shared lexicon of stress and distress enabling religious to be freer to talk about their health and their experiences. The more we can be free to share our experiences as well as watching out for colleagues’ early signs of distress then the more supportive and robust our communities can become. Both “psychological first-aid’ training and self-care emphasise prevention rather than cure.

Institutional Resilience building

While in the sections above the issue of burnout and stress has been examined as well as interventions that can assist those who are distressed a lot more can be done at the level of leadership and governance to prevent sisters from ever becoming overwhelmed and distressed. One concept that is now prominent is resilience building in institutions as well as individuals. Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress,” or “bouncing back” from difficult experiences⁴. Resilient institutions have good policies and practices that facilitate the process of adapting well.

In religious life good policies and practices can assist sisters to navigate the changes and challenges they are experiencing. One strong example of a good policy would be a policy for ministry appointments and contracts. In many parts of the world sisters are working in ministries where there is no clear job description with related work conditions and resources for ministry. The absence of such policies can relate in frustration, long hours, and unrealistic expectations. Such conditions can eventually lead to exploitation and abuse, all conditions that will likely result in burnout. A clear policy and contract with stated performance reviews can result in the sister knowing the boundaries set for her ministry and give the sister, her religious leaders and her employer clarity around role and performance; all conditions for a positive relationship between a sister and her ministry partner. Such practices are recommended even if the sister is engaged in an internal ministry for the congregation.

Other policies that can be developed include policies on formation, both initial and on-going, renewal & sabbaticals, recreation and allowances. Policies such as these can remove ambiguity and provide a vehicle for communication and review. Many resilient institutions shape their policies on the best practice of others and use those most impacted in the shaping and articulation of the details

in the policy. This facilitates ‘ownership’ of the policies. As we move to more relational forms of governance it no longer seems appropriate to present policies without first sourcing input from those who will be experiencing the policy in their daily life.

In the light of recent scandals and revelations of abuse within the Catholic church it has also now become paramount for religious institutions to also have codes of conduct and policies on child safeguarding. Such policies remove any ambiguity regarding appropriate behaviour and practice in ministry and provide platforms for discussions about boundary setting, performance review and evaluations of ministry. They can also be used to prevent the abuse of sisters and those in our care by making much more explicit the standards demanded of sisters and our ministry partners including church partners. Open communication about sensitive topics is one way by which early signs of abuse are identified and addressed.

Leadership

It goes without saying that leaders of religious congregations face enormous challenges today. They too are part of an aging cohort and increasingly lead congregations that are diminishing in numbers and resources while still having women who continue to work with the marginalised expressing the charism of their foundation. Vocations are few and younger or newer members express different priorities, possess new skills and frequently have a concern for the future the universe and the Catholic church.

The present-day responsibilities for the leaders of religious life are also immense. There is much engagement with civil and canon law and the governance of ministries. Economic planning and securing sufficient resources for the future care of sisters and institutional ministries are taxing and requiring complex understanding and technical skills. Coupled with this, as religious institutions have become more relational in decision-making good communication has become paramount. More than ever amidst these responsibilities, religious leaders need to practice good self-care so that they can meet the challenges that present throughout their leadership with good judgement and good health. Religious leaders are called to model best practice in their own behaviour as well as in their expectations of their community.

A powerful strategy that is highly recommended for religious leaders as well as for religious in ministry is supervision. Supervision is a regular, planned, intentional and bounded space in which a practitioner skilled in supervision meets with another practitioner to look together at the supervisee’s work. These sessions can assist the supervisee to explore issues arising in their work that they had not been aware of earlier. Supervision brings a new set of eyes to issues and also introduces accountability and review of practice and patterns of behaviour.

Supervision, support and engagement with mental health professionals can

be expensive. Religious institutions would be wise to collate and keep updated a list of mental health professional and their particular expertise and scope of work for emergencies as well as on-going engagement. It is now also possible to access such services over the internet which can assist in settings where mental health professionals are few and also in settings where they may not be familiar with the culture and practices of religious life. Budgeting for such resources should be common practice.

Finally, in summary, the stress and strain of religious life can be costly. It is necessary to not only put good systems in place to address the effects of this stress and strain on individual sisters through selfcare and appropriate professional assistance but also to develop good policies and practices to ensure that our religious institutions are resilient and in good shape for the uncertain times ahead.

- 1 Colman, A.M. (2014) A Dictionary of Psychology (online). Oxford UK, Oxford University Press.
- 2 Colman, A.M. (2014) A Dictionary of Psychology (online). Oxford, University of Oxford Press.
- 3 PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault. (American Psychiatric Association)
- 4 American Psychiatric Association

From the Desk of the Executive Secretary

So much has changed, utterly changed, since I last wrote “From the Desk of the Executive Secretary” in issue no. 171. My concluding words were of gratitude to thank both Sr. Elisabetta Flick and Sr. Cecilia Bayona for their years of service at UISG. Little did we realize that within a short period of time Sr. Elisabetta would be taken from us, during the first wave of the Covid-19 virus here in Italy. Her death was a personal loss for her congregation and for each one of us here at UISG. However her death has also come to symbolize the loss which has been taking place in so many religious communities, female and male, firstly throughout Italy and Spain and then gradually impacting communities elsewhere in Europe and then in North and South America, followed by Africa, Asia and Oceania. Almost no religious congregation has been left untouched by the virus either directly with members infected or indirectly as family members, collaborators, neighbors, friends and the people among whom they minister, were impacted and suffered in the same way. May the souls of those we have loved and lost rest in the loving arms of their Lord and Saviour.

There have been many other losses and deaths to endure as our way of life has had to change and adapt to a time of pandemic. We have all felt the absence of touch, the forced distances both physical and psychological and the loss of our ordinary way of life, expressed in our being together for the celebration of the Eucharist, daily meals, teaching classes, ministering in parishes, hospitals or prisons, holding group meetings and conferences, Assemblies and Chapters. Each one knows the way in which her leadership has changed, with restricted travels and personal meetings and increased online communication. Technology has enabled a sense of solidarity to grow within and across congregations and from there, out to the wider world. We are all suffering together but also reaching out to encourage and sustain one another. We are learning to discern the essentials from the non-essentials.

Our work at UISG has changed significantly. Because of the needs worldwide several Foundations and many religious congregations approached UISG about the establishment of a special Solidarity Fund to support needy congregations. Subsequently we were approached by St. Egidio (an Italian organization) so that we could collaborate in receiving USAID funds for needy congregations, shelters and houses of welcome in Italy. Because of the constellation structure within UISG, we have been able to get the funds quickly to those in need without much bureaucracy and that has been greatly appreciated by the funders. Another new focus during this time has been the ability of UISG to offer practical help, focused training and spiritual nourishment to congregational leaders and their members

through Zoom. The range and number of topics have been extensive and we have marveled at the ability of the UISG staff to include large numbers working in four languages in online meetings. In addition Patrizia Morgante, Sr. Florence de la Villeon and Sr. Thérèse Raad have offered training and practical help to many congregations, enabled them to operate effectively using Zoom across their congregations and for their mission and ministries. The ability of female congregations to adapt to new realities mirrors that of their founders who met the new needs of their times with imagination, creativity and flexibility.

During these months the various UISG projects have continued to expand despite the limitations imposed by Covid-19. The Formation Programme for 44 participants moved online after one month. Sr. Cynthia Reyes and the participants managed the transition so well and we are grateful to the presenters for their flexibility in presenting at different hours of the day. The Catholic Care for Children International (CCCI) initiative was officially launched and Sr. Niluka Perera has offered some important webinars to explain the scope of CCCI's vision and the implications of adopting the Continuum of Care. The two unions USG and UISG have established a new Commission, supported by the UISG Office for Care and Protection. In collaboration with the Vatican Commission for the Care and Protection of Minors and the Centre for Care and Protection (Gregorian University), the Joint Commission has begun to offer important webinars for Superiors General, members of General Council and congregational contact persons. The UISG project "Sowing Hope for the Planet" has gone from strength to strength under the leadership of Sr. Sheila Kinsey and the network of participating congregations has been greatly increased.

Sr. Gabriella Bottani and the International Coordination Team has been supporting the many Talitha Kum networks during these vulnerable times which put more and more people at risk. Behind the scenes other staff members support provide administrative support for all these various initiatives; without them we could not proceed. Despite the difficulties, UISG launched a new initiative called "Sisters Advocating Globally" which aims to equip sisters in different parts of the world with the background and skills necessary for Advocacy and Communication on behalf of those on the margins of society. We are happy to welcome Ms. Uta Sievers and Ms. Giulia Cirillo as project coordinator and advocacy and communication officer respectively.

During the year as religious women and men we shared on the impact of Covid-19 on religious life in various parts of the world. The presentations by CLAR, LCWR and UCESM helped create a new sense of solidarity and fraternity. It prepared us for the opportunity to share Pope Francis' new encyclical Fratelli Tutti with congregational leaders so that the encyclical could be shared as widely as possible. The Dicastery for Institutes for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life presented the new document "The Gift of Fidelity and the Joy of Perseverance" by Zoom to religious worldwide. They will organize another meeting 18 February 2021 to explore particular aspects of the document with major superiors and procurators.

As we conclude this difficult year and to look to the new year with renewed hope may I offer a prayer from the Celtic tradition:

*If your path is menaced by shadow,
may the Lord circle you,
keep light within and darkness out.
If your path is targeted by conflict,
may the Lord circle you,
keep love near and hatred out.
If your path is threatened by worry,
may the Lord circle you,
keep peace within and fear without.
We long for you to come right here among us, where we are.
We will not fear the shadows that surround us,
because you are coming among us.
We await the sound of a cry in the night,
the joy that follows pain, the coming of hope.
Amen.*

News

UISG Renews its Communication: Website and Logo

As with each of us, every now and then we want to change our appearance: we cut our hair or change our look. After five years of intense activity, the communication platforms of the UISG are also in need of renewal, so that they may better respond to the needs of communion and relations emerging among our members. We will start with the logo and the website. The first has accompanied us for many years: we feel that, today, it no longer expresses what our Union has become. The website will follow, with many new features to make the circulation of information and your participation easier and more direct. It will take a few months of reflection, discernment, and study to arrive at a result. If you would like to help us with any ideas or criticism, this would be a great help for us; write to comunicazione@uisg.org

Leaders for a Consecrated Life in a world in gestation. Online Course on Leadership

The UISG and the USG promoted the first online course on Leadership in 4 languages, which will take place in October and November: this initiative has garnered a great deal of interest among women and men religious.

Some data: 1500 requests for registration, mostly from women; the majority of the participants are religious in a position of government (at different levels) or in formation; they come from the following countries: Europe, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Nigeria, and Canada.

Emili Turù, FMS and Pilar Benavente, MSOLA the two formators, said: *“This title is especially relevant in this time: we realized how Leadership has been questioned by the world’s new challenges; and as consecrated men and women, we must assume history and the world coming from this crisis. We have defined it, a time of gestation for a new time.”*

Given the interest, in 2021 the UISG will offer other courses on *Leadership*.

Course on Interculturality and Leadership

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:28-29)

In December, an 8-meeting course will be given on *Interculturality and Leadership*: the participants are General Superiors and General Councilors.

It will be an abridged version of the two-week program that the UISG promoted in January 2019.

The topics will include *Culture and intercultural sensitivity; Interculturality and Religious Life today; Spirituality and the intercultural journey of Jesus; Culture and gender; Interculturality and the digital age; Interculturality and leadership.*

Meeting with the Continental Conferences of Men and Women Religious

In 2020 the UISG met online with the board of directors of the various Conferences of Religious around the world, through a series of webinars entitled “Reimagining the Future”. We asked them some common questions:

- How is the religious life on your continent accompanying people in this time of pandemic?
- How does this crisis question religious life?
- How are we reimagining the future after this global event?

We also met the LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious, USA), the CLAR (Latin America and the Caribbean), the UCESM (Europe) e the COSMAM (Africa and Mozambique).

All these meetings were well attended: a moment of prayer and common reflection on religious life in the world; supporting each other; strengthening the communion that comes from a common brotherhood and sisterhood.

The recordings are available on our YouTube channel: <https://bit.ly/3kgI5me>

For All the COVID-19 Victims: Online Prayer

“Being silence to listen to the whispers and groans of those suffering from Covid-19”: with this in mind, we organized an online prayer at the end of July in 5 languages. A precious moment, during which we connected with the concrete faces of people, especially the most vulnerable, suffering from the inability to get adequate medical care or unable to get out to survive.

We traveled from Venezuela to India, from Brazil to Italy, praying and blessing the life capable of rising even from the ashes.

A beautiful moment of nearness!

Protection of Minors: A Joint Effort

The UISG, in collaboration with the *Vatican Commission for the Protection of Minors*, *Telefono Azzurro*, and the *Gregorian's Center for the Protection of Minors*, has promoted a series of 4 webinars on the topic *Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults during the COVID*.

Many religious are interested in this theme and aware that preparation at various levels is needed for this mission, as well as great attention and care for the person and relationships.

We have assembled all the materials and videos of the meetings, in different languages, in a single document.

You can find everything at this link: <https://bit.ly/2FX7L8z>

The UISG Establishes Catholic Care for Children International (CCCI)

The International Union of Superiors General (UISG) is launching a new project: *Catholic Care for Children International* (CCCI). This sister-led effort will help religious institutes, especially those with a charism of care for children, to provide children with the highest quality care possible. It aims to see every child growing up in a safe, loving family or family-like environment.

The project was launched on 2 October 2020 with an online presentation to UISG members, the press, and partner organizations.

CCCI vision: To create a world where every child grows up in a safe, loving family or supportive community.

CCCI mission: To help religious institutes with a charism of care to read the signs of the times and provide the best care possible for children and vulnerable persons, in particular: *to reduce recourse to institutional care and to encourage family- and community-based care for children.*

You can read more about this project, in English, at this link: <https://bit.ly/3huw9M0>

The Season of Creation 2020: Jubilee for the Earth

The UISG campaign on *Laudato Si'*, *Sowing Hope for the Planet*, joined *Season of Creation* from September 1st to October 4th, 2020.

The different constellations of the UISG were able to share their commitment to integral ecology and the implementation of *Laudato Si'*.

The campaign, in the person of Sr. Sheila Kinsey, the coordinator, contributes to the path that the *Dicastery for Integral Human Development* is pursuing the implementation of Pope Francis' green encyclical at all levels and in all aspects of our life.

You can find more information and download the material at <https://www.sowinghopefortheplanet.org>

STAFF UISG

<i>SECRETARIAT</i>	Sr. Patricia Murray, ibvm <i>Executive Secretary</i>	<i>segretaria.esecutiva@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.236
	Rosalia Armillotta <i>Assistant to the Executive Secretary</i>	<i>ufficio.segreteria@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.238
<i>FINANCES</i>	Aileen Montojo <i>Financial Administrator</i>	<i>economato@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.212
	Sr. Sunitha Luscius, zsc <i>Assistant Financial Administrator</i>	
	Patrizia Balzerani <i>Membership Secretary</i>	<i>assistente.economato@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.249
<i>COMMUNICATION</i>	Patrizia Morgante <i>Communication Officer</i>	<i>comunicazione@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.234
	Sr. Thérèse Raad, sdc <i>Communication Office (Volunteer)</i>	<i>comunicazione@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.233
	Antonietta Rauti <i>Coordinator UISG Bulletin</i>	<i>bollettino@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.230
<i>SERVICES</i>	Bianca Pandolfi <i>UISG Information Office</i>	<i>info@uisg.org</i>
	Svetlana Antonova <i>Technical Assistant General Services</i>	<i>assis.tec@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.250
<i>PROJECTS</i>	Sr. Florence de la Villeon, rscj <i>International Coordinator Migrants Project</i>	<i>rete.migranti@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.231
	Sr. Gabriella Bottani, smc <i>Coordinator Talitha Kum</i>	<i>coordinator@talithakum.info</i> 0668.400.235
	Marilde Iannotta <i>Talitha Kum Secretariat</i>	<i>secretariat@talithakum.info</i> 0668.400.232
	Sr. Mayra Cuellar, mb <i>Talitha Kum Database</i>	
	Sr. Mary Niluka Perera, sgs <i>Catholic Care for Children International</i>	<i>ccc@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.225
	Claudia Giampietro <i>Office for Care and Protection</i>	<i>safeguarding@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.225
	Sr. M. Cynthia Reyes, sra <i>UISG Formators Programme</i>	<i>formators.programme@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.227
Canon Law Council	<i>canoniste@uisg.org</i> 0668.400.223	