

# EMBRACING VULNERABILITY TO BE A SIGN OF GOD'S TENDERNESS



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# EMBRACING VULNERABILITY TO BE A SIGN OF GOD'S TENDERNESS

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# PRESENTATION

In choosing the articles for this issue of the Bulletin, as for the previous one, we have tried to prepare the way for the celebration of the 2022 UISG Plenary Assembly, which will have as its theme *“Embracing Vulnerability on the Synodal Journey.”*

Embracing our own vulnerability and that of others, be they our closest brothers and sisters, such as our communities and families, or the small, the defenseless, creation... makes us, firstly, more human, more aware of our need for one another.

Vulnerability is the main way that leads us to solidarity and puts us in touch with the inner strength that sustains us and helps us to sustain others in moments of crisis, such as the one we are experiencing. Each person becomes a sign of God’s tenderness whenever he or she listens to the needs of others and welcomes their fragility with love, as did the Lord with us, embracing our humanity.

*Vulnerability is in fact “a precious space of encounter, of care, where Grace and mutual goodness can flow. We feel the need to recognize it and to be able to speak about it, when we experience it present in the world, especially in the neediest, in the those who suffer most, and when we experience it within our congregations in so many ways, including when we experience it in our service of leadership. We know that when we feel vulnerable every manifestation of care can be vital. In situations of fragility, we feel that God makes Himself even more present in His mystery of the suffering humanity of the Son of God, who bends down before humanity’s wounds. We feel Him embracing us, and this makes us able to embrace others” (Sr. Jolanta Kafka, RMI, UISG President).*

**Sr. Laurie Brink, OP**

***“For All the Earth” (1 Cor 10:26): Mission and the Reign of God***

Perhaps the first step to Whole Earth thinking is to pay attention. The fires in the Amazon, the drought in Australia, the floods in the United States, the typhoons in the Philippines, the volcanic eruptions in New Zealand aren’t happening to those people and that land over there. We are “those people” and the interconnectivity of all creation means we share in the suffering. St. Paul’s words have never been more true: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom 8:22).

What does an ethic of the New Cosmology and evolutionary consciousness look like? Beyond paying attention, how do we engage in “Whole Earth thinking”?

**Dr. Angela Rinaldi*****Towards the culture of Safeguarding: a change of pace.******The culture of Safeguarding approached via Cunningham's definition of culture***

When speaking of a phenomenon that has attracted as much interest as that of the abuse of children and vulnerable individuals, it is necessary at least to cite some fundamental principles on the basis of which to improve that which in every particular culture can play a role in terms of prevention. First of all, there is the principle of the dignity of the human person. It must be said at the outset that this refers to the nature of every man, woman, and child and that it cannot be referred to the external aspects of the person. It concerns the intrinsic value that every human being has as a result of being created in God's image and as a consequence of being a person. To speak of this value is not only the teaching (*magisterium*) of the Church, which in fact dedicates a whole chapter to it in *Gaudium et spes* (nn. 12-23), but also philosophy and lay ethics.

**Sr. Chinyeaka C. Ezeani, MSHR*****Holistic Formation of Leaders of Religious Congregations for Mission in a fast Changing World***

An important personal question which every religious leader needs to often ask him or herself and honestly respond to is "Where is my heart?" As a leader, what is important and really matters for me?" Jesus clearly stated that where a person's treasure is, there will his/her heart be (cf. Matt 6:21). If one's heart is in the values Christ expressed through the consecrated life, the person's interest and attention will be in those values and living them. However, if the heart is centred on worldly affairs, one is ruled by that. It is unlikely the latter would lead to greater love of God and neighbour and authentic living of the religious values. Overly pursuing and embracing the matters of this world can lead to a loss of meaning in the religious life and the essence of leadership ministry. It is therefore crucial that leaders have their heart in the right place, for that is what will guide their decisions and actions.

**P. Carlos del Valle, SVD*****To be an Account of God's Tenderness***

Receiving the Father, source of life, beauty, and goodness, and welcoming the brother. Accepting the Kingdom means living from God and the brothers, with them, and for them. There are religious who let this transformative dynamism of the Kingdom enter into their lives as a blessing for all. Blessed are those religious who have entered the dream of God. The Church offers Her truth not as a system of dogmas but as a path of tenderness. Tenderness is sensitivity, capacity of attention, and care. A religious man or woman is someone who realizes the truth in love. Truth without love kills. Love without truth is sterile. Ask yourself if your community is an elite of pure and hardcore people, or a caravan that welcomes pain and questions with tenderness.

# “FOR ALL THE EARTH” (1 COR 10:26): MISSION AND THE REIGN OF GOD\*

Sr. Laurie Brink, OP

*Sr Laurie Brink is a Dominican Sister of Sinsinawa. She is Professor of New Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and an associate editor of The Bible Today.*



*Original in English*

*A review of the biblical and theological foundations of our call to mission demonstrates that the development of an integral ecology on behalf of our common home is a Christian imperative.*

## **Introduction**

A few years ago, the fad was to wear silicone wristbands stamped with a particular issue: pink ones for breast cancer awareness; red for AIDS awareness; yellow ones for LiveStrong. A popular one among teen-agers read: WWJD—What would Jesus do? The purpose of the accessory wasn't so much to advertise an awareness of the Gospel as it was to remind the wearer that when faced with a difficult situation she or he should ask that question—What would Jesus do?—before responding. As we vowed religious explore our responses to the Laudato Si' Action Platform, the question is a good one: What would Jesus do? Whether you hold a high Christology or a lower one, as vowed religious we are obliged to ask this question. But considering our growing understanding of cosmology and evolution, another question demands an answer: *Why* would Jesus do what he did? How do we understand Jesus' motivation for mission in an unfinished and emerging universe? Once we ponder those questions, we are left with yet another: What is ours to do today?

\* This paper is an excerpt from *The Heavens are Telling the Glory of God: An Emerging Chapter for Religious Life. Science, Theology, Mission* (Liturgical Press, 2022).

## Why Would Jesus Do What He Did?

At his baptism, Jesus has a profound spiritual experience in which he comes to recognize that he is God's beloved son (Mark 1:9-11). After John's arrest, something signals to Jesus that now he must act on his sonship, taking up the work of his father, "proclaiming the good news of God" (Mark 1:14-15). As the evangelist Mark presents it, Jesus does not proclaim the gospel of Jesus but the gospel of God. The apostle Paul had made this explicit in his letter to the Romans: "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1).

What is this gospel, the Good News, of God? Drawing from the Hebrew Scriptures—the Scriptures Jesus knew—the Good News is that God is faithful to God's promises. But what are those promises? The first occurs in Genesis 9:8-17:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

God makes a covenant with the created world. Nine times the phrases, "every living creature" (vv. 10, 12, 15, 16) and "all flesh" (v. 11, 15 [twice], 16, 17) are repeated. With the first introduction in verse 10, God makes clear what is included in "every living creature": "the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you." The covenant also extends to "the earth" (v. 13). "This is kind of amazing. God makes an everlasting covenant with every living creature of all kinds of flesh, whether furred, feathered, or finned, establishing a covenant 'between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'"<sup>1</sup> The very first unilateral commitment God makes is with all the creatures of Earth—not only the human ones—and with Earth itself, reaffirming what had been stated at the very dawn of God's creative acts: "God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). As Dianne Bergant, CSA, acknowledges, "This connectedness of all natural creation is found in other passages of the Old Testament, suggesting that the theme was not limited to one or two periods of Israelite history."<sup>2</sup>

Later, God will make a covenant with a specific family of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 12:1-3), with Moses and the people (Exod 19 and 24) and with King David and his heirs (2 Sam 7:8-17). The prophet Jeremiah will speak of a new covenant that God will write in our hearts:

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer 31:32-33)

The Hebrew term, *hesed* captures the breadth and depth of God's commitment to relationship and stalwart dependability. It appears 249 times in the Old Testament, often translated as "steadfast love" as in this passage from Isaiah.

This is like the days of Noah to me:  
 Just as I swore that the waters of Noah  
 would never again go over the earth,  
 so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you  
 and will not rebuke you.  
 For the mountains may depart  
 and the hills be removed,  
 but my *steadfast love* shall not depart from you,  
 and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,  
 says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isa 54:9-10; italics added)

When we come to the New Testament, God's compassionate love is incarnated in Jesus and God's faithfulness is everlasting. "What we learn about God from Jesus is not contrary to what had already been revealed about the loving-kindness and fidelity of God through the history and scriptures of Israel."<sup>3</sup> The apostle Paul states directly in 1 Corinthians 1:9: "God is faithful," *pistos ho theos*. This divine *hesed* and *pistis* when viewed through the lens of eschatology becomes the coming reign of God.

Whereas originally the prophets had held out a vision of a renewed and restored land and people in this world, over time these ancient prophecies were seen as intimations of a far more radical change, when God would not only restore Israel, but would defeat all the manifestations of chaos and evil that plagued not just Israel but the whole world. These expectations were especially important in times of persecution, when faithful Jews needed assurances that their fidelity and even martyrdom were seen and cherished by God, who would reward them, not in this life but in the next.<sup>4</sup>

The Gospel of Mark is clearly imbued with this sense of eschatology, and the Marcan Jesus is portrayed as the messianic Son of Man (Mark 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21, 41, 62; 15:30) who announces the in-breaking moment of the reign of God. The Greek is *kairos* and connotes a rightness of time, the critical moment to act. Everything Jesus does in the Gospel of Mark is designed to affirm his authority as the Son of Man (Mark 2:10) and to confirm the *kairos* of God's reign: the spirit-possessed are freed (Mark 1:23-27; 5:2-19; 9:17-27), the sick and infirm are healed (1:30-31; 3:1-6; 5:25-34; 6:54-56; 7:29-30), the lepers cleansed (1:40-45), the paralyzed walk (2:3-12), tax collectors and sinners are welcomed (2:15), the sea is calmed and mastered (4:37-39; 6:48-51); the dead resuscitated (5:35-42), the hungry are fed (6:35-44 8:2-9), the deaf hear (7:32-35), and the blind see (8:22-26; 10:46-52). Jesus put his actions in context: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Little wonder, the centurion at the cross declares at Jesus' death: "Truly this man was God's son!" (Mark 15:39).

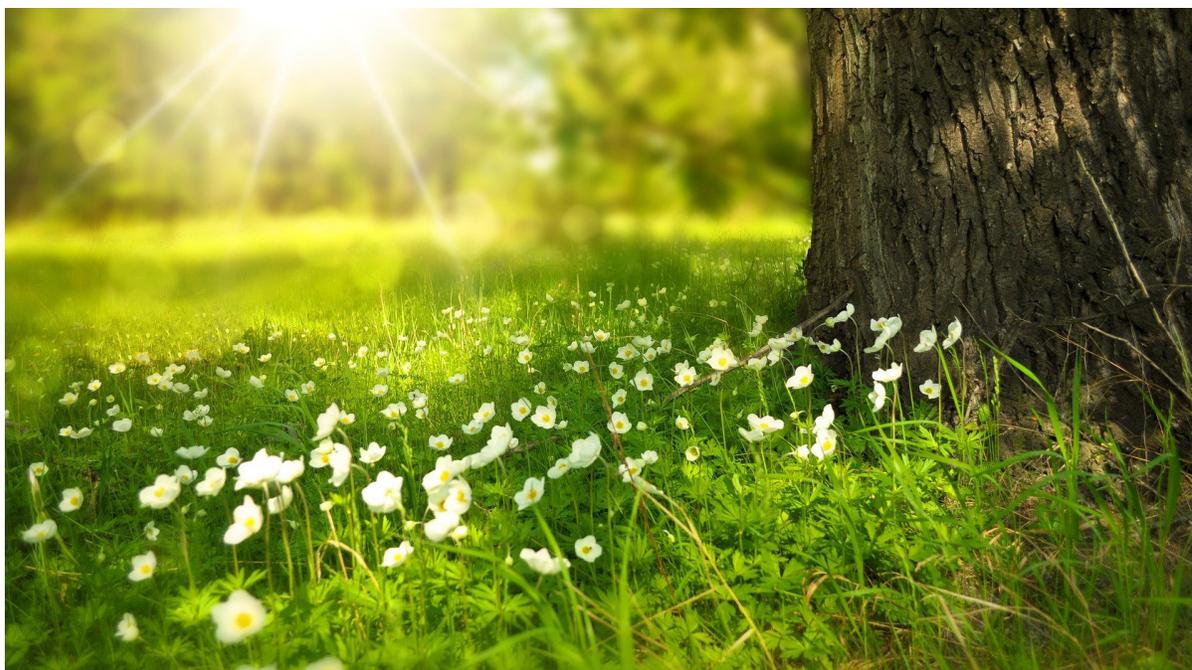
### **An Evolutionary Vision of the Reign of God**

Reading the gospels through an evolutionary lens, we find that creation itself was a source of inspiration for Jesus. Of the sayings of Jesus most often deemed authentic, Jesus' go-to metaphors are drawn from the natural world. Jesus speaks about seeds and soil (Mark 4:3-8), the birds of the air that don't work and yet are fed (Luke 12:24; Matt 6:26), a misfortunate ox in a well (Luke 14:4), the potential of mustard seeds (Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19; Matt 13:31-32), the couture of a field of lilies (Luke 12:27; Matt 6:28-30), the value of sparrows (Luke 12:6; Matt 10:29), hungry dogs at dinner time (Mark 7:27-28; Matt 15:26-27), consoling dogs (Luke 16:21), and sheep—lots and lots

of sheep. There are sheep without shepherds (Mark 6:34; Matt 9:36), sheep among wolves (Matt 10:16, John 10:12), the value of sheep (Matt 12:12), lost sheep (Matt 15:24, Luke 15:4; Matt 18:12), the difference between sheep and goats (Matt 25:32), scattered sheep (Mark 14:27; Matt 26:31), sacrificial sheep (John 2:14), giving one's life for the sheep (John 10:15), obedient sheep (John 10:27), and feeding sheep (John 21:17).

While these multiple metaphors drawn from nature might have worked well in an agrarian society, Jesus himself was no farmer. Or fisherperson, for that matter. Jesus is described as a carpenter (Mark 6:3) from Nazareth (Mark 1:9), a small Jewish village not far from the city of Sepphoris. And yet, this Jesus "gave ear" to the wider created world around him. He paid attention and saw a direct connection between the work of nature and the providence of God.

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does



not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26-29)

As his parables attest, the reign of God that Jesus preached is both rooted in creation and yet still evolving. Jesus understood and acted on his unique role in stimulating the in-breaking of that reign (Mark 10:45). But Jesus' death doesn't herald the completion of the reign. Rather, Jesus describes his departure as "preparing a place" for his disciples so that "where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3). As Acts of the Apostles opens, the disciples desire to know if now—with his resurrection—will Jesus restore the kingdom? "It is not for you to know the times or periods" (Acts 1:7). The biblical canon ends awaiting a vision still unfulfilled of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1).

The now and not yet of the reign of God is similar to Teilhard de Chardin's understanding of the process toward Christogenesis and the Omega Point, that point at which hu-

mans individually and communally find their end and fulfillment.<sup>5</sup> As Teilhard de Chardin presented, the Gospel call means "returning to the world with new vision and a deeper conviction to take hold of Christ in the heart of matter and to further Christ in the universality of his incarnation."<sup>6</sup> Through a theological lens, "the object of evolution is that God should become manifest in the world and the world should attain its final unification in God."<sup>7</sup> Only then is the reign of God complete. In light of God's covenant in Genesis 9, this final unification will include all of creation. Thus, while addressed to human beings first by the incarnate one and later by his disciples, the Gospel is also Good News for the created world. How else could we understand Romans 8?

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. (Rom 8:19-22)

**The thriving of creatures and creation is the realization of the Good News, since "every creature with its relationships is held in existence by the same vivifying Giver of life"**

The thriving of creatures and creation is the realization of the Good News, since "every creature with its relationships is held in existence by the same vivifying Giver of life; and in the end all will be gathered into the new heavens and the new earth."<sup>8</sup> In her book, *Creation and the Cross*, Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, describes God's relationship with creation as one of accompaniment.

Bring creation into the picture, it is not hard to see how such an accompaniment theology can also embrace the natural world. Today's science has made abundantly clear that deep relationality runs through the whole cosmos. Thanks to the evolution of life, human beings are genetically related in kinship to all other species on our planet, and this whole living community is composed of chemical materials available from debris left by the death of a previous generation of stars. As John Muir wrote, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." So when an early Christian hymn sings that Christ is "the firstborn of all creation," and again, "the firstborn of the dead," (Col

1:15-18), we can see not only the human dead but the dead of all creation, every species, included.<sup>9</sup>

It is precisely because of these relationships and the interconnection among all of creation, that Johnson urges a theology of accompaniment in which we are converted from anthropocentrism to a planetary solidarity.<sup>10</sup>

The reign of God viewed through Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary Christogenesis and Johnson's theology of accompaniment provokes a new understanding of mission and therefore ministry in an unfinished universe, an understanding that recognizes the need for a new ethic that supports our evolving sense of mission and a clear statement of direction.

### Creating an Evolutionary Ethic

In the evolutionary process, pain, death, and mass extinction are troubling yet necessary companions of innovation, life, and complexity. Nonetheless, these "natural evils"<sup>11</sup> leave a wake of suffering in their path. But not all pain, death, and extinction in creation is actually the result of evolution. Well, not directly. It would seem that human beings, the so-called pinnacle of the evolutionary process, are actively engaging in cosmocide, the wanton destruction of the created world.

Case in point:

- In last 500 years, 322 animals have gone extinct, which scientists attribute to human causes.
- By September 2019, 2.2 million acres of the Amazon basin were burned, nearly all of the 121,000 fires had human origins—farmers setting fires to clear the land.
- After years of climate change-induced drought, in the Fall of 2019 and early 2020, more than 16 million acres, the size of the state of West Virginia, went up in flames in Australia. Lightning strikes on brutally dry land caused most of fires, but at least 24 persons were arrested for having ignited some fires.
- An estimated billion animals lost their lives in the fires that ravaged New South Wales and Victoria.
- The year 2020 saw similar destruction in the United States where more than 4.6 million acres were destroyed by fires in California, Oregon, and Washington State. Meanwhile, the naming of hurricanes exhausted the 26-letter English alphabet. "Delta" became the fourth major storm to pummel Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama. Both the fires and the hurricanes resulted from climate change and human mismanagement.

Indeed, the researchers and scholars are correct in their assessment that we are living in a new geological epoch. For the past 12,000 years, we have been in the Holocene, the period that began after the last ice age. But now, say the scientists, we live in the Anthropocene, which describes the geological epoch in which human actions impact planetary systems. Sam Mickey explains that, "The Anthropocene is named after humans because it is a time when humans have massive, Earth-changing impacts, altering the chemistry of the atmosphere (climate change), changing DNA (genetic modification), and depositing non-biodegradable plastic, Styrofoam, and radioactive materials around the planet."<sup>12</sup>

As I continue this research on the implications of science and theology, I am shaken out of my academic silo and shamed by my lethargic activism. New theological thinking drawn from new scientific discoveries should lead to new modes of behavior. In other

words, theology cannot be divorced from ethics. What we think about God should have implications for how we act as children of God. And evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley argued it is our destiny to act on behalf of the cosmos:

Humankind is that part of reality in which and through which the cosmic process has become conscious and has begun to comprehend itself. [Our] supreme task is to increase that conscious comprehension and to apply it as fully as possible to guide the course of events.<sup>13</sup>

In light of this evolutionary consciousness (our advancing awareness of our place in the cosmos and interrelationship with all creation), we need to move beyond simply "thinking globally and acting locally." Rather, as Mickey proposes, we should engage in "Whole Earth thinking," which sounds a lot like working toward the reign of God.

Whole Earth thinking calls for dangerous dreams of emancipation, dreams of freedom from the destructive refrains of domination and oppression. It calls for a

**We are compelled to do "Whole Earth thinking" and to see how the devastation of Earth has direct effect on those who are marginalized and impoverished.**

vision of a more peaceful, just, and sustainable Earth community, a vision of participatory ecological democracy.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the first step to Whole Earth thinking is to pay attention. The fires in the Amazon, the drought in Australia, the floods in the United States, the typhoons in the Philippines, the volcanic eruptions in New Zealand aren't happening to those people and that land over there. We are "those people" and the interconnectivity of all creation means we share in the suffering. St. Paul's words have never been more true: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now" (Rom 8:22).

What does an ethic of the New Cosmology and evolutionary consciousness look like? Beyond paying attention, how do we engage in "Whole Earth thinking"? While using different vocabulary, this is precisely the challenge presented by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*:

It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet. . . . In this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems,

we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation. This leads us to think of the whole as open to God's transcendence, within which it develops. Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding. We are free to apply our intelligence towards things evolving positively, or towards adding new ills, new causes of suffering and real setbacks. This is what makes for the excitement and drama of human history, in which freedom, growth, salvation and love can blossom, or lead towards decadence and mutual destruction. The work of the Church seeks not only to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time "she must above all protect [hu]mankind from self-destruction."<sup>15</sup>

The encyclical was well-received in ecumenical, interreligious, and scientific communities, though not by all. When the American President and climate change denier, Donald Trump, met with the Pope in 2017, the pontiff gifted the president with his own signed copy. The 192-page work called for a "broad cultural revolution." James Martin, SJ, enumerated ten significant aspects of the document:

1. *The spiritual perspective is now part of the discussion on the environment.* "The encyclical firmly grounds the discussion in a spiritual perspective and invites others to listen to a religious point of view, particularly its understanding of creation as a holy and precious gift from God to be revered by all men and women."
2. *The poor are disproportionately affected by climate change.* "The pope states that focus on the poor is one the central themes of the encyclical, and he provides many baneful examples of the effects of climate change, whose 'worse impacts' are felt by those living in the developing countries."
3. *Less is more.* "*Laudato Si'* also diagnoses a society of 'extreme consumerism' in which people are unable to resist what the market places before them, the earth is despoiled and billions are left impoverished (No. 203)."
4. *Catholic social teaching now includes teaching on the environment.* "Against those who argue that a papal encyclical on the environment has no real authority, Pope Francis explicitly states that *Laudato Si'* 'is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching.' (No. 15)."
5. *Discussions about ecology can be grounded in the Bible and church tradition.* "In a masterful overview, Pope Francis traces the theme of love for creation through both the Old and New Testaments. He reminds us, for example, that God, in Jesus Christ, became not only human, but part of the natural world."
6. *Everything is connected—including the economy.* "Pope Francis links a 'magical conception of the market,' which privileges profit over the impact on the poor, with the abuse of the environment (No. 190)."
7. *Scientific research on the environment is to be praised and used.* "As the other great Catholic social encyclicals analyzed such questions as capitalism, unions and fair wages, *Laudato Si'* draws upon both church teaching and contemporary findings from other fields—particularly science, in this case—to help modern-day people reflect on these questions."
8. *Widespread indifference and selfishness worsen environmental problems.* "In the world of *Laudato Si'* there is no room for selfishness or indifference. One cannot care for the rest of nature 'if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings' (No. 91)."
9. *Global dialogue and solidarity are needed.* "The pope calls into dialogue and debate 'all people' about our 'common home' (No. 62, 155). A global dialogue is also needed

because there are 'no uniform recipes.'"

10. *A change of heart is required.* "We can awaken our hearts and move towards an 'ecological conversion' in which we see the intimate connection between God and all beings, and more readily listen to the 'cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' (No. 49)."<sup>16</sup>

As Amy Hereford, CSJ, notes in *Beyond the Crossroads: Religious Life in the 21st Century, Laudato Si'* frequently uses "Our Common Home" as both a metaphor and a reality. The term "points to the deep unity of all creation, and the important connection that we all share as part of the natural community."<sup>17</sup> Drawing on the work of scientists and environmentalists, Pope Francis writes:

We need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair. Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems. Still, we can see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation; these are evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises, for the world's problems cannot be analyzed or explained in isolation. There are regions now at high risk and, aside from all doomsday predictions, the present world system is certainly unsustainable from a number of points of view, for we have stopped thinking about the goals of human activity. "If we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations" [Citing Pope John Paul II, "General Audience," January 17, 2001.].<sup>18</sup>

Whether we call it, "Whole Earth thinking" or "care for our common home," the natural evil that accompanies evolution and creation is being accelerated and amplified by rampaging social and moral evil. It is not only Pope Francis who urges action. Earth itself cries out.

These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness.<sup>19</sup>

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the emergence of apostolic women's religious congregations was a direct response to the crises of the industrial revolution, immigration, illnesses, and wars, a response filtered through a particular theology of religious life. Some two hundred years later, our theological understandings have changed, the needs diversified, but the manner of meeting those needs still calls for commitment, flexibility, and creativity. As Pope John Paul II encouraged, "You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also *a great history still to be accomplished!* Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things."<sup>20</sup> We are no longer building institutions; we are cleaning up our common home. Not to save our souls, but to save our planet.

### **Mission for an Unfinished Universe**

Religious life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction. The Church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world.<sup>21</sup>

Within two years of his meeting at the Union of Superiors General (USG), Pope Francis would initiate the Year of Consecrated Life (November 30, 2014 – February 2, 2016) and promulgate his encyclical on the environment (May 24, 2015). The timing is not coincidental.

The encyclical constitutes an invitation for vowed religious to respectfully and courageously enter into a dialogue with other persons of good will. The fruits of scientific research and contributions from varied faith traditions can move our pluralistic society toward a consensus on the urgent need for action. The common good will be enhanced as religious give voice to the poor and marginalized. Finally, by their actions, they will offer a prophetic witness on the value of interpersonal communion and an ecologically sensitive relationship with all creation.<sup>22</sup>

With *Laudato Si'*, the mission of God, the mission of the church, and the mission of religious are now consciously tied to the care of our common home. Whereas under Pope Benedict XVI mission had focused on conversion and transmission of the faith, under Pope Francis the purpose, motivation, and goal of mission has been revised.<sup>23</sup>

Mission clarification requires knowing the God of all creation. Mission motivation

**The Good News of God is that Earth  
and all of its creatures  
have an advocate.  
It is us.**

originates in humans knowing their true identity as ones loved by God *within and through* creation. Mission correction consists in heeding revelation from the "Book of Creation."<sup>24</sup>

As Dawn Nothwehr, OSF, writes, "The point is that Gospel salvation includes human well-being and the well-being of all of creation."<sup>25</sup> What does a mission of accompaniment look like in an evolutionary, unfinished universe? Whom or what do we accompany? Our growing awareness of our place within the larger created world has broadened our concerns beyond human society. We are compelled to do "Whole Earth thinking" and to see how the devastation of Earth has direct effect on those who are marginalized and impoverished. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis makes the point that those who are poor most often suffer from the degradation of our common home:

In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our

brothers and sisters. This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world's goods, but, as I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers. We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good. (158)

As apostolic congregations, our ministries are often on behalf of those in need. Reflecting on the challenges of *Laudato Si'*, Timothy Scott, CSB, recognized that

religious often live and serve on the periphery; in places where the environment is often degraded; in urban slums and places lacking safe drinking water or public spaces. The international character of many of our communities means that we have an awareness of the particular challenges of life in the developing world,



where economic exploitation is often rampant. In the first instance, we need to bring that awareness of life at the margins to the forefront within our own communities and then to the broader society.<sup>26</sup>

The Good News of God is that Earth and all of its creatures have an advocate. It is us.

### ***Charism and Ministry for our Common Home***

The word "charism" comes from the Greek *charis*, which is often translated as "grace" or "favor." We learn from St. Paul that at baptism we receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They are a down payment on the fullness of the reign of God. Paul also calls these "fruits" and they include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness (Gal 5:22). Though these gifts differ, they are all from the same spirit (1 Cor 12:14). By virtue of our baptism, we, too, have a particular grace or charism given to us by the Spirit. Now lest we go the way of the Corinthians who argued over who had the "best"

charismatic gifts, Paul reminds us that spiritual gifts are for the good of the whole (1 Cor 12:1-11-14:14-25).

At profession, our particular gifts are joined with the corporate charism of our congregations, a charism that is not exclusive to our community but one that we recognize is deeply a part of our identity. It is to this charism that we commit ourselves, not to specific ministerial manifestations of that charism. As Pope Francis advised, we need "to strengthen . . . the charism of the Congregation, without mistaking it for the apostolic work which is carried out. The first remains, the second will pass. The charism . . . is creative, always looking for new paths."<sup>27</sup> Despite diminishment from age and a reduction in numbers, the closing of institutional ministries, and the societal upheaval that questions whether religion is even necessary, apostolic religious life continues. Reflecting on the Year of Consecrated Life, the Bishop Emeritus of Limerick, Donal Murray, noted:

That underlying charism continues even when particular ministries can no longer be carried on as strongly as they were or when they are no longer necessary, or no longer possible. When that happens we need to look again to our beginnings to understand what our charism may be asking of us today.<sup>28</sup>

As Murray suggests, our challenge is to live our legacy in the present with passion.

It means believing that the same Christ, the same Spirit, the same vocation, that inspired our predecessors is calling us now to be awake and watchful. The gifts and charisms that marked the beginnings of your institutes of consecrated life are alive today by the same power of the same Spirit who awakened them in the first place.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, the Spirit is active and, just as Paul encouraged the Corinthians that their individual gifts were for the good of the whole, so, too, the charisms of individual congregations must be brought together for the good of our common home.

### ***Crossing Congregational Boundaries***

Even imbued with our charisms, how could we vowed religious hope to contribute to the realization of the reign of God when the challenges are so daunting, the costs too high, and our numbers so small? Jesus seems to have anticipated our question with an insightful parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened" (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). We are no longer the foot soldiers of the church, an army of sisters and brothers marshalling students in parochial classrooms. Nor do we need to be. Rather, as Jesus argued, we are to be leaven. And as the leaven is mixed with flour, we are to join our efforts with others.

Speaking about the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis stated:

I also hope for a growth in communion between the members of different Institutes. Might this Year be an occasion for us to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization, and social action? This would make for a more effective prophetic witness. Communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations can open up a path of hope. No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. Such a communion inoculates us from the disease of self-absorption.<sup>30</sup>

Collaboration among religious institutions is not new. The Sister Formation Conference, the forerunner of the Religious Formation Conference, was founded in 1954 to assure

that sisters were appropriately prepared for their ministries. Following Vatican II, a remarkable collaboration among religious communities of men led to the creation of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and Washington Theological Union in DC, both schools of theology and ministry that served multiple congregations. In the 1980s, collaborative novitiates and novitiate programs brought newer members together across the divide of congregational boundaries. And in the 1990s, a grassroots organization of sisters under the age of fifty formed Giving Voice. As their purpose statement describes:

We seek to live our vocations rooted in our congregational charisms and grounded in God's hope for the future of religious life. We seek to connect with one another to strengthen our commitment, deepen our fidelity to religious life, foster connections that sustain our vocations, and create ways to live religious life in the present and into the future.<sup>31</sup>

Joining efforts and combining resources has led to justice initiatives to address endemic and global issues such as human trafficking, immigration, and environmental degradation. And most of these efforts began as grassroots responses to the emerging needs.

In 2009, an international network of religious congregations in 70 countries formed Talitha Kum, to facilitate collaboration and activities against trafficking in persons. Similarly, Sister Margaret Nacke, CSJ, was moved by "the millions whose lives have been relegated to commodity status, to slavery, and live in a world darkened by the selfishness and greed of those whose own lives are without light."<sup>32</sup> In 2013, she advocated for and helped to start US Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking (USCSAHT), a collaborative, faith-based national network that offers education, supports access to survivor services, and engages in advocacy to eradicate modern-day slavery.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, the thousands of displaced persons seeking asylum across the globe are themselves searching for a life raft of human respect. When Pope Francis participated in a virtual papal audience in 2015, he was introduced to Missionary of Jesus Sister Norma Pimentel, who operates a welcome center at Sacred Heart Church in McAllen, Texas, USA, and serves as the Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley. After listening to the stories of the mothers and children in the center, Pope Francis asked to speak with Sister Norma. "I want to thank you," Francis said. "And through you to thank all the sisters of religious orders in the US for the work that you have done and that you do in the United States. It's great. I congratulate you. Be courageous. Move forward."<sup>34</sup>

That one moment of papal affirmation came during an overwhelming wave of unaccompanied minors from Central America, which began in 2014. Sister Norma and others who work along the border sent out urgent requests for volunteers, a call heard and amplified by Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Since it began sending out requests for funds and volunteers to serve at respite centers on the US/Mexico border, more than one thousand religious have responded.

Launched on the occasion of the Jubilee of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG; 1965-2015), the Migrant Project in Sicily established three intercongregational, international and intercultural community houses, in which the sisters become "a bridge between the migrants who come ashore in Sicily and the people of the area, in order to build a true integration." The project's coordinator, Sr. Elisabetta Flick comments,

We go on tip-toe, respecting the richness of listening to the needs in order to then build, together with our local partners, an ad-hoc project that respects the rights and dignity of those arriving in our country. We wish to be a credible witness that it is possible for different cultures, nationalities and languages to live together, if we are united by a common mission and moved by the one Spirit who acts and is present in each of us and in the world.

While the collaborative work of sisters on behalf of those who are impoverished and marginalized meets immediate and pressing needs, other joint ventures take the long view. On June 18, 2020, the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si'*, a new initiative to promote sustainable development was announced—not by the movers and shakers of some Fortune 500 company. Rather, sixteen US congregations of Dominican sisters joined with the firm of Morgan Stanley to establish a new investment funds initiative aimed at financing solutions to address climate change and assist communities worldwide most at risk. “The sisters provided initial seeding of \$46.6 million in 2018 for the funds, which with additional capital investments have grown to \$130 million. The money will be directed toward global projects pursuing solutions to climate change as well as achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.”<sup>35</sup>

The climate funds initiative is a “fundamental response” to Pope Francis’ call in *Laudato Si'*. As Adrian Dominican Sister Elise Garcia, OP, noted, Pope Francis’ “sense of wanting to have an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature . . . is precisely what the Climate Solutions Fund aims to address.”<sup>36</sup>

Pope John Paul II stated, we have “a great history still to be accomplished.”<sup>37</sup> Initiatives like US Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking and UISG’s Talitha Kum, collaborative efforts on behalf of migrants and immigrants, and the Climate Solutions Fund demonstrate that through our collaborative ministerial efforts, we creatively contribute to the reign of God and thus live into that “great history” together.

## Conclusion

As Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, we are fond of quoting our founder, Venerable Fr. Samuel Mazzuchelli, OP, who urged, “Let us set out for any place where the work is great and difficult, but where also with the help of the one who sends us, we shall open the way for the Gospel!” But in the twenty-first century, as an apostolic congregation, we, like many of you, aren’t always sure to which of the numerous “places” we should go.

Some five decades ago, a novice had a pretty good idea of what ministry she or he would do upon her profession of vows. Enter Vatican II, the Civil Rights Movements, and widespread global cultural changes. A congregation’s founding ministry had set its identity and was often confused with its charism. As fewer members continued serving in sponsored institutions, many religious wondered, “Who are we if we aren’t in teaching anymore?” Reflecting on her post Vatican II vocation, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister offered a helpful reminder: “The new vision says that religious are not called to be a labor force but a leaven, a caring, calling presence that moves quickly into new needs.”<sup>38</sup> The congregation’s mission is larger than its ministerial expression of that mission.

And that mission—as proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth and continued by the church—is to work toward the realization of the reign of God. Precisely because we live in an unfinished universe, the reign of God remains the horizon event for which we yearn. The slow work of evolution confirms that we are moving toward the Omega Point, the unification of all of creation with the Creator. An emergent vision of mission and ministry for an unfinished universe follows its own timeline. But the reality of death and suffering as an effect of evolution and as a result of human sin reminds us that there is work to be done. Today.

Our understanding of cosmology, evolution, and theology should affect why, how, and what we do in ministry, which Maldari defines as “human work energized by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>39</sup> No longer is the “why” limited to only human concerns. Pope Francis’ call to preserve our “common home” challenges us to see the dawning of the reign of God with

new eyes. *Laudato Si'* becomes a charter that redirects our efforts, so that mission moves from a solely anthropocentric concern for evangelization and conversion to an inclusive cosmic accompaniment, care, and advocacy for all of creation. The "how" of our ministry is directly related to the particular charism gifted to our congregation by the Holy Spirit, a charism most readily seen in our founders and foundresses, but no less evident in our members today—if we look. We should ask "How can our charism be put to the service of all of creation?" And with that answer we should measure our ministerial activities.

Finally, "what are we to do" might be better phrased as "what we ought not to do." No longer can individual congregations afford to act alone. Perhaps the demographics and institutional diminishment are simply reminders that ministry in an emerging universe must be collaborative. The integrity of all of creation surely reminds us that we are most effective when we are most connected. Thus, when we consider where the mission of God, our congregational charisms, and the needs of our common home intersect, we find our answer to the question, "Why, how and what is ours to do?" in an emerging universe.

For more information: <https://bit.ly/ForAllTheEarth>

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# TOWARDS THE CULTURE OF SAFEGUARDING: A CHANGE OF PACE.

## THE CULTURE OF SAFEGUARDING APPROACHED VIA CUNNINGHAM'S DEFINITION OF CULTURE

Dr. Angela Rinaldi

*Angela Rinaldi, has a PhD in Social Teaching of the Church and Public Ethics (Faculty of Social Sciences, Pontifical Gregorian University). She is the author of the book Una migrazione che dà speranza. I minori non accompagnati in Italia (Mimesis, 2020), the book Hacia una Iglesia que proteja a los más pequeños (PPC, 2020) and the book Dalla parte dei piccoli. Chiesa e abusi sessuali (by La meridiana, 2018). She studied sexual abuse of minors, even within the Church, focusing on abuse of power, human formation, intra-familial and online abuses. She got a Master's Degree in "Sciences of international cooperation and development" at the University "La Sapienza" of Rome.*

*Since 2014, she has collaborated at the Centre for Child Protection as Research Assistant, and since 2018, she has been Online Learning Admin.*

*On the 1st of September 2021, the Centre for Child Protection changes its name to the Institute of Anthropology. Interdisciplinary studies on Human Dignity and Care. At this new Institute, from September, she is Docente Incaricato and responsible for the teaching staff of the on-site courses (English Diploma and Licentiate).*



*Original in English*

### Introduction

The phenomenon of child abuse in the Church and in society in general continues to shock the faithful and public opinion, often also calling into question the faith of those who make up the People of God.

At a distance of some years from the first discoveries, the plague of abuses continues to create wounds in ecclesiastical contexts, even if for some time now the road has been taken towards an improvement that is gradually ever more solid.

What we would like to highlight here is the importance of a truly structural change in the Church and in society, and thus in the people who are members of it, and we shall do so by offering some points of departure for reflection that can find opportunities for investigation in particular contexts.

It is not a question of wishing to safeguard minors and vulnerable individuals merely out of a feeling of compassion or because of orders from above. Rather it is a matter of creating a rooted system that truly safeguards these individuals who are so fragile.

The objective is to define some elements that are useful for reflection and to consider them within a system that we could label “Culture of Safeguarding”, which involves a structured planning of the way of thinking and acting as regards the protection of minors and vulnerable individuals in terms that are truly longlasting.

### **Culture: principles and norms**

So as to be able to present a clear paradigm in which it is possible to find some common elements that are readily accessible to very different cultures, we can refer to the definition of culture offered by Myrna Cunningham, former president and current member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: “Culture is an active process through which human groups respond to their own collective needs. It involves language, values, norms, and institutions. It also involves the personal and collective memories that give meaning and without which human existence would not be possible, human knowledge and capacities [...]. Culture and language constitute the primary substratum in which the generations receive the stimuli of the present and renew their ancestral ties”<sup>1</sup>.

Even at a superficial glimpse it is possible to understand just how rooted a culture can be, both in the life of every person as an individual and in the collective imagination.

However, to go into the subject in greater depth, we must better analyze certain aspects. In the first place, culture is an active process. That is to say that it is not formed of monolithic, never-changing blocks. Rather it is constantly changing, or, we might say, it evolves and improves.

Through culture, persons and groups respond to their own needs. There are various elements that make up a culture and that can be of assistance in the event of cultural questions that are open and destabilizing. All that is a part of culture manifests itself in the social, economic, and political life of a group, as Cunningham says. Moreover, for example, where there appear phenomena that shift the cultural equilibrium of a given group – and we might refer here to the scandals that followed the discovery of cases of abuse – the culture acts in order to remind its members of those values and norms upon which it is based, so as to guide them on a path that is possibly positive.

In addition, culture involves values, norms and institutions, memories, knowledge, and human abilities.

At that point the discussion deepens. We might put together the elements listed here in three large areas: principles and values; norms; and behaviours. The values are those affirmations in which a person culturally believes, that refer to an ideal or desire<sup>2</sup>, and on the basis of which action is taken. These are propositions that the particular culture creates. For example, “every child has its dignity”. In this affirmation, the principle – that is, what comes first – is the dignity of every person, in particular that of the child, whereas the implicit call to recognize this dignity corresponds to what we call a “value”. It is a matter of a cultural value, in so far as it is born of what the culture prescribes with reference to a particular principle and the subject to which it refers. In fact, the above proposition does not represent a value in all cultures and not all cultures consider it important to recognize the dignity of the child.

Norms concern the whole of laws and prescriptions that must be followed in order for the group to function in terms of social and interpersonal peace. For example, the phrase “children must be protected and cared for” can be considered a general cultural norm that is not always committed to writing, but nonetheless valid even if not in all cultures. So, there belonging to these norms are both those that are committed to writing and those that are transmitted orally.

When we speak of attitudes, we are referring to cultural predispositions that lead to all of those behaviours that every person puts into practice daily in order to “satisfy” the dictates of their own culture. We might assert that it is precisely on this latter element that is played out the dynamic essence of every culture, which is to say every type of change or improvement that can be made to it. This means that human beings, who act in the social structure, have the power to make changes in the group: so they continually produce culture and what they produce is or will be a part of the daily life of everyone<sup>3</sup>.

When speaking of a phenomenon that has attracted as much interest as that of the abuse of children and vulnerable individuals, it is necessary at least to cite some fundamental principles on the basis of which to improve that which in every particular culture can play a role in terms of prevention.

First of all, there is the principle of the dignity of the human person. It must be said at the outset that this refers to the nature of every man, woman, and child and that it cannot be referred to the external aspects of the person. It concerns the intrinsic value that every human being has as a result of being created in God’s image and as a consequence of being a person. To speak of this value is not only the teaching (*magisterium*) of the Church, which in fact dedicates a whole chapter to it in *Gaudium et spes* (nn. 12-23), but also philosophy and lay ethics. Among others, Kant believed in the intrinsic value of the human person, which is the reason why no one can be commodified, treated as an object, or merely reduced to a means<sup>4</sup>.

Even if on different epistemological foundations, both Catholic teaching and lay ethics base themselves on this commonly recognized principle according to which every person possesses his own value that cannot be denied. It emerges in all of these dimensions that human nature requires: relationships with others, the substantial equality of people (regardless of gender, skin colour, or age), sin, freedom, intelligence, conscience, and power.

The other basic principle is that of solidarity, a loving tension towards the others that pushes – or ought to – every human being to act for the good of what Catholic teaching terms “the neighbour”. This principle is profoundly tied to subsidiarity, which involves a movement towards the other that is capable of recognizing and accepting the other’s freedom and ability. These are two principles that, as John Paul II said, ought not to be reduced to assistentialism (solidarity without subsidiarity) or to the attitude of seeing others as means or instruments (subsidiarity without solidarity), but lead every human being to see the other other as similar to themselves, or as the image of Christ<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, affirms John Paul II, these two principles enable development and offer an antidote to what he himself terms “structures of sin” that are rooted in the sin of every human being and “tied to the concrete acts of people”<sup>6</sup>. These are structures that develop in a sense contrary to the attitudes that the Church has adopted in recent years with a view to better prevention.

Another principle that might be important to cite, which is also a human attitude, is responsibility from a personal perspective and from a social perspective.

As a principle, responsibility ought to inspire every person to a positive exercise of power. As an attitude, it is defined as the very manner of exercising one's power. In this connection, we can cite what Pope Francis says in the encyclical *Laudato si'*: Christians throughout the world are called "to 'till and keep' the garden of the world" (67). While "till" means ploughing or working a piece of land, "keep" means protecting, caring for, maintaining, preserving, and looking after. This involves a relationship of reciprocal responsibility between human being and nature"<sup>7</sup>. This responsible and positive relationship, we might even say creative and protective as regards creation, can be and must be seen in wider terms in relation to the guardianship of all creatures, amongst which human beings also figure. This means that all of us, insofar as humans by nature engage in relationships, are



responsible for the well being of the other, for their development, and their protection. That says a lot about how one ought to exercise one's 'power'.

Human beings, as such, have the power to act for good or ill with regard to the other, to abuse (or not) their freedom, their feelings, and their person in physical and psychological terms. Instead, the "lordship" of which Catholic teaching speaks refers to the book of *Genesis*: as John Paul II asserts, human beings are called "to cultivate and look after the garden of the world"<sup>8</sup>.

As "caretakers", they are responsible. They have a power to exercise, and they will answer to God (who, according to believers, is the one who assigns the charge) and to others<sup>9</sup>.

This responsibility, therefore, is not only individual, but also social. All human beings are part of the social structure in which they move and which does not recognize

substantial differences between those who belong to it. As an “agent” or “actor” of the social structure, every person is conscious that their own action entails consequences – sometime even serious – for the life of other human beings. Consequently, when a person makes a negative use of their “power”, which is to say that it is used only for that person’s interests<sup>10</sup> and “no matter what the cost”, accepting to do evil to another person only in order to satisfy one’s own impulses, then that person is no longer a caretaker, but rather opens the road to becoming similar to abusers.

Another important element that helps to understand social responsibility can be taken from the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: when the pope speaks of love, he affirms that it is the force that drives us to seek the best for the life of the other and not to exclude anyone, since love is what “makes us join in universal communion”<sup>11</sup>. Every act of love – and power – entails a responsibility, towards oneself and inevitably towards the other.

**Rediscovering community means, over the long-term, looking at the Church in terms of its being the People and in terms of its ability to transmit preferential love for the little one.**

At this point it is clear that individual and social responsibility are reinforced by the norms that push people to “behave” within the social structure. From 2001 to today, the Church has redacted a series of norms to follow in the event of the abuse of a minor or a vulnerable person. These norms have reflected the process of the growth of awareness that the Church has acquired in these years as regards this subject.

Among these norms, we can cite some that have marked important, historic first steps. The beginning of a real awareness of the seriousness of the phenomenon of such abuse is 2001, the year of John Paul II’s *Motu proprio Sacramentorum Sanctitatis tutela*. In this document (and in the attached *Norms on delicta graviora*), the pope wished to define in a detailed manner the more serious crimes committed against the sacraments and against morality, which remain the exclusive competence of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The crimes of child abuse are expressly mentioned in subsequent documents, among which we can number the *New norms on delicta graviora* of Benedict XVI (2010), which include among new measures the extending of the statute of limitations for crimes of abuse to 20 years starting with the victim's coming of age, the opportunity to transmit the most serious cases directly to the pope, the inclusion of crimes such as the acquisition, keeping, and spreading of pornographic material that has as its subjects minors aged 14 years or less.

At this point there begins a period in which there is awareness not only of the importance of rendering justice to the victims of past abuses, but also of avoiding that certain acts be repeated, and therefore of preventing future abuses. It has begun to be recognized that the abuses of minors concern not only the physical or sexual level of a relationship, but are also closely tied to what are commonly called abuses of power, which can arise both in interpersonal relations and in the institutional setting.

Thanks to Francis's two predecessors, people became aware of the fact that it was fundamental to initiate a process that aimed at a change in direction. This is clear, not only in terms of norms but also in terms of pastoral concerns, from many of the documents that John Paul II and Benedict XVI redacted.

With pope Francis, this process has become more structural and has been situated within the setting of a more ample institutional reform.

Among the various updates to canon law, of particular note is the *Motu proprio Come una madre amorevole* (2016), which, in line with Canon 193 and its envisioning the removal of a bishop from office for serious reasons, lists among these crimes involving the sexual abuse of minors. Therefore, if a bishop or the person responsible for a community protects an abuser or hides an abuse, he must be put on trial and removed from his charge<sup>12</sup>.

About three years later, Francis redacted the *Motu proprio Vos estis lux mundi*, which clarifies and reinforces the procedures already established by ecclesiastical law, among which figure the abuse of office and episcopal negligence. One of the significant innovations of this *Motu proprio* is its definition of a vulnerable person. At this point it is recognized that not only that individuals under eighteen years of age or those who are physically or mentally handicapped can be victims of a crime of abuse that must be punished, but all of those who by virtue of a "privation of personal freedom [are] effectively, even if occasionally, [limited in] their ability to understand or consent or at any rate to resist the offence"<sup>13</sup>.

All of this is fundamental not only at the juridical level since it widens the field of action for the Church in prosecuting the crimes of abuse, but also as regards relations in general and not merely on the level of the physical or sexual. Even from the perspective of scientific research or the reflection of the community in the Church, the introduction of a concept that is so broad and has limits that are so unclear as that of "vulnerable person" imposes a more profound reflection on the true meaning of abuse and drives us to expand our view of the phenomenon. No longer are individuals under the age of eighteen or persons who suffer from some physical handicap the only ones who might be the victims of any sort of abuse, but anyone who within the context of a particular relationship finds it impossible to exercise their own personal liberty or their ability to respond to an offence.

For all of these reasons we cannot reduce the phenomenon of abuse to a restricted area that is only to be dealt with by a few experts. It requires that all of the communities of dioceses, parishes, religious orders, lay associations and movements, and Catholic and non-Catholic institutions – like everyone in their own context – make a real contribution to prevention. Therefore, what must be truly reformed is the culture: this does not mean having to renounce one's own personal identity, but acting to improve every particular culture – dynamic by definition – so that minors and vulnerable persons are truly cared for and protected. That entails that the principles, norms, and attitudes must permeate daily life and guide it in the integral development of the collectivity.

### **Attitudes: culture and a change of pace**

The first step to take, and it would appear that the Church is responding well as regards this, is to recognize the errors of the past. Let there be no doubt that the road ahead is long.

Admitting being touched by the “structures of sin”, which are difficult to root out, is a way of recognizing that some individuals – within and outside the Church – have allowed themselves to be conquered by the thirst for power, with the intent of imposing themselves and their own will on others and on their life “at any cost”<sup>14</sup>: all of that has focussed the human being on himself and resulted in a lack of attention for the other.

All of this contributed to the creation of the so-called “culture of silence” or the “culture of abuse” on account of which, to the detriment of the most vulnerable and youngest, there has developed a generalized indifference and there has disappeared the feeling of membership in a community and therefore a sense of social responsibility.

There no longer seems to exist an appropriate attention for the Church as the People of God. Rather, it has been substituted by the institutional church, towards which the loyalty that is felt is such that the denunciation of the abuses that occur there seems to be a betrayal rather than a form of justice.

In this “culture of silence”, the principles of human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and individual and societal responsibility seem to fade into the background, giving way to indifference, to a desire not to compromise oneself, to feeling like “monads” without a community to which one belongs. The institution seems to be the only authority to which to look when an abuse – physical, sexual, or spiritual – is discovered, in the expectation that it will “resolve” the imbalance that has come to be. Subsidiarity fails because both the ability of each individual to make autonomous decisions (i.e. their substantive freedom) and the fact that the faithful constitute a community, a People, are deemed less important. The Church no longer seems a People, but merely an institution.

These attitudes have their roots in the behavior of every culture, which seems to forget its creative and constructive side and thereby leaves space for the ruin caused by indifference and isolation, things that are not natural for the human person. Consequently, as Pope Francis asserts, “We have not known to stand where we were supposed to stand, [...] we have not acted in a timely fashion, recognizing the size and the enormity of the damage that was being done in so many lives. We have neglected and forsaken the little ones”<sup>15</sup>.

In his *Letter* of 2018, the pope speaks not only to the bishops, to the religious, and to priests, but to the entire People of God and, citing St. Paul, asserts that if one member suffers, the whole body suffers (nn. 1-2).

In a letter that is not prolix, he evokes the body of the Church – one might say the same thing of society in general – and its constituting a People. He wishes to drive us change direction and way of life, so as to see to it that everything that has characterized the “culture of silence” is substituted by the principles described above. These principles, thanks also to the norms that derive from them, can make it possible that attitudes which are opposed to indifference and isolation will permeate the culture of every people.

It is a matter of responding to silence with the *culture of Safeguarding*, which involves an inverse movement capable of bring the human person to act under the inspiration of a preferential love for the poor<sup>16</sup> that has profound roots. It is not a question of merely

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looking at the poor in the more common sense of the expression, but more generally of looking at the little ones, at those who live in conditions of vulnerability from which they are unable to emerge. One might speak of a preferential love for the little ones.

That involves a change of perspective. In other words, we must no longer look up to the institution as the source of authority that resolves every problem. Rather, we must look at the person and act so that real primacy is again accorded to the person. The institution is not to be annulled or eliminated, but adapted to the needs of the community. In particular, the institutional church has the task of accompanying men and women – of every age – in their own personal and social development. If, as the Catholic *magisterium* says, everything is a function of the person, then the institution too is nothing other than an instrument that is clearly to be used for attaining the good of the community and full development.

Since asymmetrical relations can degenerate into an abuse of power and give rise to vicious circles from which it is difficult to emerge, real change ought to lead to the rediscovery of the centrality of the community, in which everyone works in their own context for the good of the whole – because “the whole is greater than the parts”<sup>17</sup> and takes priority over personal interest.

Rediscovering community means, over the long-term, looking at the Church in terms of its being the People and in terms of its ability to transmit preferential love for the little one, its profound concern for the person and, therefore, the naturally constructive attitude of relating to everyone (each at their own level), without a perspective from on high that can have as its only result the limitation of the personal freedom of everyone both as an individual and as a part of the whole.

In the same manner, we must look at the “little ones”, not from on high but from their own level, in order to rediscover what they have to offer for the good of the community. This change of step entails not only a different relationship with the “little ones” of today, but also a lasting cultural change that allows the generations of the present to involve themselves and take account of the guardianship of future generations. Moreover, it entails the creation of a more humane culture that is attentive “to the whole” along the lines indicated by the Council: “With [...] «culture» we wish to indicate all of those instruments with which man refines and develops the manifold abilities of his spirit and body; [...]; it renders social life more humane [...]; lastly, with the passage of time, it expresses, communicates, and preserves in its works great experiences and spiritual aspirations, so that they can serve for the progress of many, indeed for the whole of humanity”<sup>18</sup>.

It is a matter of “initiating processes”<sup>19</sup>, which is to say exercising one’s own “power” for the good of the whole community, not only that of today, but also that of tomorrow and after. Therefore, it is necessary to enter into a relationship both with the current generations and with those of the future, so that the construction of the *culture of Safeguarding* answers not only to today – and therefore to space – but also to tomorrow – and to time. Therefore, if we wish to achieve this, we must not think in terms of processes that begin and end in the present or be obsessed with achieving “immediate results”<sup>20</sup>. Instead, we need to be aware that we are engaging ourselves today in order to lay the basis for a continuous improvement that future generations will be able to enjoy.

Since “time is superior to space”<sup>21</sup>, in order that this cultural process be real, it must be able to be transmitted to the men and women of tomorrow: the principles and values, the norms and attitudes of the *culture of Safeguarding* need to be able to permeate the daily life of every member of the People of God – and society in general – so as to take root to the point where they make possible change that is truly structural.

Every human being, by virtue of belonging to a community or to a People, is individually and socially responsible for leaving to future generations a world that is truly attentive to the little ones and to the most vulnerable.

- 1 M. Cunningham, La cultura: pilar de desarrollo para el buen vivir, in "Cultura y Desarrollo", n.9, 2013, p. 29.  
The translation follows that of the author of this article (NdT).  
Here is the original text: "La cultura es un proceso activo mediante el cual los grupos humanos responden a sus necesidades colectivas presentes, involucra la lengua, los valores, las conductas, las normas e instituciones; las memorias personales y colectivas que dan sentido y sin las cuales no hay existencia humana; los saberes y capacidades humanas [...]. La cultura y la lengua constituyen el sustrato primigenio con el que las generaciones vivas reciben los estímulos del presente y renuevan su legado ancestral".
- 2 See D. Paéz y E. Zubieta, Cultura y psicología social, in I.S. Sedano et al., "Psicología social, cultura y educación", Cap. II, Pearson Educación, 2004, pp. 25-30.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 31.
- 4 See I. Kant, *Fondazione della metafisica dei costumi*, a cura di V. Mathieu, Milano, Bompiani, 2003, pp. 141-145.
- 5 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 30 December 1987, n. 40.
- 6 *Ibid.*, n. 36.
- 7 Francis, *Laudato si*. Enciclica sulla cura della casa comune, 24 May 2015, n. 67.
- 8 John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 25 March 1995, n. 42.
- 9 See R. D'Ambrosio, *Il potere e chi lo detiene*, Dehoniane, Bologna, 2008, pp. 108-110.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Francis, *Fratelli tutti*. Lettera Enciclica sulla fratellanza e l'amicizia sociale, 10 March 2020, nn. 94-95.
- 12 Francis, *Motu proprio Come una madre amorevole*, 4 June 2016, n. 1: "può essere legittima mente rimosso dal suo incarico, se abbia, per negligenza, posto od omesso atti che abbiano provocato un danno grave ad altri, sia che si tratti di persone fisiche, sia che si tratti di una comunità nel suo insieme. Il danno può essere fisico, morale, spirituale o patrimoniale."
- 13 Francis, *Motu proprio Vos estis lux mundi*, 7 May 2019, art.1.
- 14 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1987, n. 37.
- 15 Francis, *Lettera al popolo di Dio*, 20 August 2018, n.1.
- 16 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1987, n. 42.
- 17 See Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, nn. 234-237.
- 18 Council of Vatican II, *Costituzione pastorale sulla Chiesa nel mondo contemporaneo Gaudium et spes*, 1965, n. 53.
- 19 *Ibid.*, n. 51.
- 20 *Ibid.*, n. 223.
- 21 *Ibid.*, nn. 222-225.

# HOLISTIC FORMATION OF LEADERS OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS FOR MISSION IN A FAST CHANGING WORLD

Sr. Chinyeaka C. Ezeani, MSHR

*Chinyeaka C. Ezeani, a Missionary Sister of the Holy Rosary served on her congregation's leadership. Presently, she is Vice Postulator for the Cause of Canonisation of their founder Bishop Joseph Shanahan CSSp. She's the author of "Rooted in Christ - Insights into Contemporary Religious and Priestly Formation". and "Interculturality in Religious Life - A Blessing in Different Colours".*



*Original in English*

## Introduction

Two images from the Gospels stand out whenever I reflect on the subject of leadership. The first is where Jesus stooped and washed the feet of his disciples, and urged them to do the same (cf. Jn 13: 3-17): "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (vv. 14, 15). The second is when Jesus went away to lonely places to pray (Matt 14:23; Mk 1:35; Lk 3:21; 6:12; 9:28). At every opportunity, he modelled for his disciples a personal relationship with the Father. He taught them that authority is service, and humility the hallmark of true discipleship.

God chooses and calls anyone according to divine wisdom and design. Saint Paul reminded the Christian community of Corinth that their calling was not out of any merit of theirs, but because of God's intention for the world (cf. 1Cor 1:26-31). This equally applies to the call to leadership in religious congregations – a poignant bell of reminder, lest pride take over the leader's heart and direct his or her thoughts and deeds. To be authentic disciples of Jesus and stewards of Christ's body, leaders of religious congregations are to be grounded in the values of Jesus Christ.

The world is changing fast. The experiences of those who entered religious life about twenty to forty years ago strikingly differ from those of persons entering in these present

times. Leaders today are dealing with a more complex world than that of our forebears. For instance, the new members of religious congregations are mostly children of the cyber-age. They are the generation that grew up with mobile phones, access to internet and social media. Leaders are equally facing many new challenges including those posed by the present Covid-19 pandemic, and struggle to find helpful ways of dealing with them. There is hence, an ever growing need for holistic on-going formation of leaders to adequately prepare them for mission in these challenging times.

I will focus on the following elements in exploring this topic:

- (1) brief reflection on the importance of leadership in the Christian community and Religious Life.
- (2) the graces as well as the challenges of leadership in the Religious Life of today's context
- 3) different dimensions of holistic formation of leaders for effectiveness in their dual vocations of the consecrated life and leadership ministry
- (4) the exercise of leadership in relation to the Evangelical Counsels as an equally essential part of holistic formation of leaders.

(The article has been divided into two parts, and published in two issues of the Bulletin. The first part has been published in Bulletin N. 176)

## **Second part:**

### **Different Aspects of a Holistic Formation of Religious Leaders**

#### **Spiritual Aspect**

##### ***"Where is thy heart?"***

An important personal question which every religious leader needs to often ask him or herself and honestly respond to is "Where is my heart?" As a leader, what is important and really matters for me?" Jesus clearly stated that where a person's treasure is, there will his/her heart be (cf. Matt 6:21). If one's heart is in the values Christ expressed through the consecrated life, the person's interest and attention will be in those values and living them. However, if the heart is centred on worldly affairs, one is ruled by that. It is unlikely the latter would lead to greater love of God and neighbour and authentic living of the religious values. Overly pursuing and embracing the matters of this world can lead to a loss of meaning in the religious life and the essence of leadership ministry. It is therefore crucial that leaders have their heart in the right place, for that is what will guide their decisions and actions.

Holistic formation will help in the realisation of where one's heart and treasure should be. It is the responsibility of each leader to ensure integral formation continues in his or her life. The responsibility for development and personal growth belongs to the individual adult. No one outside of one's self should be encumbered with this obligation. In his book, *Your Weaknesses are Your Strengths – Transformation of the Self through Analysis of*

*Personal Weaknesses*, David Edman (1994) maintained that every human being not only has the responsibility to discover the truth about himself or herself, but has also been equipped with the necessary tools for doing that. Self-transcendence, according to him, is after all a prominent characteristic of the human race.

### ***Cultivating the Inner Life: Watering the Roots***

Before planting, the soil is first cleared and prepared well for the seed to thrive. No one can successfully plant on fallow overgrown ground. Watering the roots is what makes it possible for a plant or crop to grow and thrive even in the dry season! The inner life is indispensable for effective, Christ-centred leadership. A leader cannot live superficially or on the surface and be effective in the ministry of leadership. The spiritual life must have first place in the programme of the consecrated life, in such a way that every congregation and community will be “a school of true evangelical spirituality” (John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 93).

Why is it important that the leader cultivates a solid inner life? The power that leaders possess cannot be underestimated. Leaders have the power to reflect both shadow and light on the people they lead. Parker J. Palmer (1990; 2000) defined a leader as someone who possesses an unusual degree of power to project on other people his or her shadow as well as his or her light. A leader equally possesses an unusual degree of power to create the conditions under which other people must live and function – and these conditions can either be “as illuminating as heaven or as shadowy as hell” (p. 7, 1990, cf. p.78, 2000). For this reason, he maintained that a good leader “must take special responsibility for what’s going on inside him or herself, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good” (p.7; p.78). Palmer warned against extroversion that ignores what is going on inside of oneself, a neglect of internal awareness and a screening out of inner consciousness. (p.79). A viable inner life, filled with the light of Christ that cannot deceive or lead astray deliberately or inadvertently – that is what a leader needs to cultivate and regularly water.

The following are ways through which the leader cultivates and nurtures the inner life for effective and Christ-centred leadership.

### ***Time for Solitude and Encounter with God***

One of the useful tools for cultivating the inner life and nurturing the soul is setting aside times of silence, prayer and solitude. Do you have a regular set time in the week or month when you deliberately switch off the mobile phones, computers and gadgets *just* to be in total communion with God, thoroughly nurturing your inner being? If the answer is “no”, then this is a wake-up call. This is a practice that safely brought a leader through turbulent waters of leadership ministry. A religious once commented to me that she could miss “saving a life” by switching off her phone! My response to that was that there is only one Saviour, and that is Jesus Christ the Lord! Those deep moments of silence and solitude can actually strengthen one for the trials of life and the vicissitudes of leadership in religious congregations.

### ***Spiritual Nourishment through Reading***

Just as physical food nourishes the body, spiritual reading is good nourishment for the spirit. No matter how busy, leaders ought to continue this helpful practice. Spiritual sus-

tenance through reading can help them remain grounded in their Christian and religious vocations. During initial formation, this laudable practice for spiritual growth is usually emphasised and given the important place that it deserves. Becoming too busy with “the work of the Lord” can rob a leader of an effective tool for spiritual nourishment and personal development. Good spiritual books abound in book/media centres and also online. A leader who values and practises spiritual reading can actually inspire others to do the same.

### ***Cultivating Self-Acceptance, Self-Compassion and positive Self-identity***

Self-acceptance is an important tool and a great inner disposition for the acceptance of others. So is self-compassion. When a person has that, it is usually easier to accept others and to feel compassion towards them. Acceptance of oneself and having compassion can be a good cure for perfectionism that breeds self-hatred or depreciation. When people are comfortable in their own skin and appreciate themselves, they do not have the need to put others down for their own self-elevation. According to Palmer, one of the largely unconscious aspects of the personality of many leaders is deep insecurity about their

**The heart of the leader is to be filled with joy. Cultivating joy is an integral part of holistic formation.**

own identity and self-worth. He noted that for extroverted individuals this insecurity is usually hard to notice, because often the extroversion is there precisely because such leaders tend to be insecure about who they are, hence they try to prove themselves in the external world rather than wrestle with their inner identity (Palmer, 1990, p.13). Usually more common in men, from his own observations, this struggle with identity is due to a strong inclination towards external institutional functions. There is a serious danger in organizations (and religious congregations) when leaders operate with “a deep, unexamined insecurity about their own identity”. That can create institutional settings that deprive others of their own identity due to the leader’s unexamined fears and insecurity (2000, p. 14).

Holistic formation embraces healthy self-acceptance and clarity of identity. This entails being at peace with and at home in oneself. Contentment with who God has made one to be can create inner peace, self-acceptance and respect for the other.

### ***Nurturing the Ability to Play***

There is the popular aphorism which states that “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”. The same is true for leaders. The child in each one of us can help to maintain a sense of wonder, awe and sheer playfulness that simply keep the heart alive and happy. The capacity to play is in fact, one of the signs of an emotionally healthy person. Play is for everyone. It is not only for children. No one really outgrows that precious gift of play. Leaders need to build it into their regular schedule and give play and recreation an important place in their lives. Play, like physical exercise, can awaken a sense of joy and total relaxation in a person. It is a good and harmless health booster. Holistic formation of the leader needs to embrace play: All work and no play can make Mother or Sister an irritable exhausted woman! All work and no play can make Father or Brother a cantankerous exhausted man!



### ***Cultivating a Grateful and Joyful Heart***

In Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation of 2013, *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*, he invited all the faithful to a renewed daily personal encounter with Jesus Christ for everyone is included in the joy brought by the Lord (cf. n 3). The Bible constantly invites us to a life of joy – “rejoice!” (cf. Deut 12:7; Ps 32:11; cf. Lk 1:47; Phil 4:4; 1 Thess 5:16). “Everywhere in the world joy is the true expression of gratitude” (Steindl-Rast, 1984, p. 18). The religious leader, in order to serve effectively, needs to cultivate a grateful and joyful heart. It is important to remember that leadership is a gift from God to serve God's people. One is chosen by God for this gift not because of one's personal worthiness. To constantly hold this in image can be helpful. Despite the challenges and trials, there is always cause for joy. Jesus made it known to his disciples: “You will be sorrowful, but your

sorrow will turn into joy" (Jn 16:20) (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* n. 5) and "no one will be take your joy from you" (v. 22).

The heart of the leader is to be filled with joy. Cultivating joy is an integral part of holistic formation. Joy and gratitude usually go together. Prayer of gratitude instead of always petition further enlivens the spirit with joy. It is worth reflecting regularly on the following questions: When last was my prayer time spent in just gratitude? Have you ever thought about starting a "*Gratitude Journal*"? It is generally believed that gratitude is a great awakener of joy.

### **Affective Aspect**

Integral formation also embraces this equally important aspect of human life and development. This deals with the affective or emotional area of life as well as physical well-being. An integrated inner life enhances physical wellness and harmony within the self. Persons in leadership roles are often exposed to positive as well as negative emotions and reactions from certain members for various and often complex reasons. Affective formation, therefore, equips leaders to adequately modulate their own emotions as well as deal with such from others, especially the negative ones.

### **Availing of Supervision, Mentoring and/Counselling**

Supervision or mentoring and/or counselling are usually helpful for the leader's effective functioning. In these, a leader can have the freedom and a safe environment to bare his or her soul and get the necessary support needed in a totally confidential and truly holding space. Respect for the integrity of the members is of utmost importance. No matter how heavy the load is for the leader, or how hurt they feel about experiences with certain individual members of the congregation, the leader still has the obligation of upholding and respecting their dignity and integrity. Keeping confidence is sacred and cannot be compromised. That is why leaders need a safe and professional space for dealing with the issues of leadership rather than talking about his or her confreres and sisters to anyone who would care to listen! When counselling is necessary, the leader need not be ashamed to avail of it. Leaders are human like everyone else. Supervision, mentoring and counselling can help in 'detoxing' emotional wastes that can clog the heart of the leader and build up cynicism.

The expression 'Emotional Intelligence' (EI) has become of great interest in discussions about human behaviour and development. It is the ability to be aware of and recognise one's own emotions and those of other people, to discern these different emotions and use that to guide one's behaviour and manage relationships with others more empathetically and effectively. When an individual is emotionally intelligent, empathy tends to come more easily because it helps a person to connect their own experience with those of others.

### **Healthy Lifestyle and Wellbeing**

The exercise of the ministry of leadership being quite demanding, can take a toll on a leader's health. Physical activities and exercises are helpful tools for keeping body and spirit buoyant. These are so important that it would be hard to find a convincing and

acceptable excuse for not building physical exercise of some sort into a leader's daily schedule. At a minimum, thirty minutes of brisk walking three to four times a week has been recommended by experts in these matters. Exercise usually stimulates in the human brain the hormone and neurotransmitter *dopamine*, popularly known as the "feel-good hormone". Anyone who engages in aerobics and physical exercises would know the happy feelings that come with such activities. I have heard of people who develop chronic and debilitating health conditions soon after assuming leadership roles in their congregation or diocese. In addition to physical exercise, a healthy and a wisely regulated diet is highly recommended. Other life sustaining activities that can positively stimulate positive energy are also good to practice. Self-care is crucial for healthy functioning. It is never a selfish act, instead it is simply good stewardship of a precious gift we have, the gift that we were put here on earth to offer to others (Palmer, 2000, p. 30).

### ***Cultivating a Spirit of Forgiveness***

In the exercising of leadership, hurts and misunderstandings inevitably happen. One of the mantras of leadership which I have personally found life-giving in dealing with interpersonal relationships is "Always forgive". The other is "Do not take things personally". That is why having a mentor or supervisor in whom a leader can confidentially offload his or her personal "woes" and "pains" of leadership is very essential. Working through issues, letting go and keeping focused on the One who has called one to leadership can unclutter the leader's heart, and free it up to truly forgive others. The less "baggage" a leader carries, the freer and more effective he or she can be in both one's personal life and the leadership ministry.

### **Psycho-Social Aspect**

#### ***Cultivating and Embracing Authenticity***

Authenticity, according to Brown (2010), is "the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are" (p. 50). It is not unusual for leaders to live under the illusion that everyone has to be "happy" with them. There can be pressure – from within and outside of themselves - to be or appear to be what they are not, in order to impress the members and be liked by them. Given that leaders, like everyone can feel a strong need to be liked or at least accepted by their congregational members, courage to be true to oneself may not always come by easily. A story was told about a woman who had a near death experience. She found herself before God and asked, "Lord, so this means it's time for me to come Home?" God replied, "No, my child, you still have thirty years, seven months and twelve days more to live". When she regained consciousness, she decided to stay on in hospital and get the plastic surgeon to perform face-lift and tummy-tuck on her. "I might as well look good if I still have all these many years to live", said she. On discharge from the hospital, she was hit by a car while she crossed the road. Meeting God, she questioned, "You had said I had those many years still to live, why did you not stop the car from knocking me down?" "Because I did not recognise you, child", said God. Brown (2010, p. 50) spells out what the choice to be authentic entails. For her, that means cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow oneself to be vulnerable; exercising the compassion that comes from knowing that as human beings we are all made of strength and struggle and nurturing the connection and sense

of belonging that can only happen when we believe that we are enough. When a leader comes before God just as he or she is, it engenders freedom of heart from unnecessary complications.

### ***Intercultural awareness and sensitivity***

With the trends around the globe of divisions and hatred of the other, based on cultural or national differences gaining centre stage, religious leaders are called to be beacons of hope and bearers of witness to universal brotherhood and sisterhood. They are to be champions in modeling that it is possible to truly love other people outside their own race, nation or ethnic group, and live harmoniously with them. A climate where hate thrives calls for self-education and that of the members in matters of interculturality and sensitivity. Leaders are to foster unity, not division. Their on-going formation in this area will enable them to make sure that tribalism, racism and nepotism have no place in religious life.

### ***Continued Education and Learning***

The world is changing fast! Healthy and realistic adaptation is necessary. For example, we are living in a cyber age. It is helpful to learn the basics of computing and the world-wide web. Nowadays, most of the young people who join our congregations seem to greatly inhabit the cyber world. Previously, the source of information for young people seeking to join religious congregations was Catholic newspapers and publications. Today, they gain their knowledge through Facebook and other social media outlets. To keep abreast of both local and global trends and happenings, every leader needs to be adequately informed and connected.

At times, after final vows and having been elected either Provincial or Superior General, some religious may have had the erroneous notions that they have reached the pinnacle of life as a religious and in their congregation in particular. Such a notion can breed a sense of self-sufficiency, making one to think that he or she has nothing more to learn! To be effective in leadership ministry, one has to have a completely open mind and keep learning. Each new day brings new surprises of life, hence, we can never know it all. Humility is required for continued learning and adjustment to the signs of the times, lest one be left behind and lost in the world. Although religious are not of the world, they are surely in the world. They are therefore encouraged to learn and be relevant in the world.

### ***Peer Support***

When faced with challenges or difficulties sometimes one might feel so alone, thinking that such issues are exclusive to him or her. Peer support can be quite helpful for leaders to thrive in their ministry. Mutual sharing and support can have calming effects, assuring one that he or she is not alone. Relaxed social interactions with fellow leaders, laced with a sense of humour and playfulness equally constitutes peer support. Fellow leaders can help one feel grounded and at home with self, not taking life too seriously. After all, no matter what happens, God is always capable of looking after us and any challenges we may be dealing with. Look! The birds of the air have no barns but God feeds them, so are the flowers in the fields. They do not sew, yet, God clothes them! (cf Matt. 6: 26, 29).

**Collaboration instead of Competition**

In human encounters and dealings, there can be an inclination to compare oneself with the other. Comparison of oneself with others can breed envy and competitiveness which leads to discontentment. By comparing oneself with others, it is inevitable to judge oneself to be either better or worse than others. The sense of “better-than-thou” paves the way for depreciation of others, while the opposite opens up the door to self-pity, jealousy and wishing to be that other. A story was told about a woman who decided to sell her house. Carefully, she penned a detailed description of the house for advertisement in the national newspaper. A couple of days later, she read the advertisement and exclaimed: “Wow! But this is exactly the kind of house that I have always dreamed of having!” What did she do? She cancelled the sale of the house immediately, and decided to settle down with greater equanimity in *her* house! When a person subjectively judges the grass to be greener on the other side, there is a temptation to envy and competition. At times, a

**Self-acceptance is an important tool and a great inner disposition for the acceptance of others. So is self-compassion.**

leader can have such an attitude in relation to other congregations. Such attitudes can constitute obstacles to authentic Christ-centred relationships and growth in the religious vocation.

**Third Part:****The Exercise of Leadership in relation to the Vows****The Poverty of Christ**

Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. This is part of Jesus’ response to his disciples who were arguing about who was the greatest among them (cf. Matt. 18: 1-5). The leader is to model humility and poverty of spirit to his or her brothers and sisters. Saint John Paul II used the term “pastoral charity” in describing the heart of the Catholic priesthood. Pastoral charity equally captures the heart of leadership of religious congregations as a guide of his or her actions. The

poverty of spirit modeled by Jesus Christ, the servant leader, is the kind to which religious leaders are called and enjoined to live.

### ***Trust in God's Providence***

Leadership modeling the living of evangelical poverty is expressed in complete trust in divine providence and benevolence. Total trust in God's providence is to be lived and encouraged in the membership. The Son of Man had no place to lay his head, yet, he trusted in His Father to take care of him (cf. Lk 9:58). There is no doubt that it is good to plan adequately for the needs of the congregation and its members. Nevertheless, over emphasis on and excessive attachment to material goods and survival contradict the essence of the consecrated life and evangelical poverty. Does God not look after the birds of the air and flowers in the fields? (cf. Matt. 6:26-28). Such trust sustains commitment to the life and apostolate.

In the African context, the observance of the vow of poverty poses multiple challenges; desire for better living conditions, prevalence of economic hardship, constraints of natural family bonds and cultural divide within religious congregations (Nwagwu, 2017, p. 15-16). The desire for improved living conditions, adequate social amenities, personal comfort and the need to help family members can influence the actions of religious. The challenges of living the vow of poverty are to be honestly faced. Bringing them to the fore, engaging members and proffering ways of dealing with them in a manner in line with the vows is essential. This can help to prevent abuses and loss of meaning in the life. Leadership is to humanely inspire and motivate the members in this.

### ***Spirit of Sharing***

The vow of poverty also entails a spirit of sharing. The way of life of the early Christian community serves as a model for the consecrated life. The early Christians shared all they owned together, ensuring that no persons lacked their basic needs simply because they could not afford it (cf. Acts 4:32-37). A common fund within congregations, like the early Christian community, can create equity and solidarity, ensuring none is unnecessarily deprived. The common life demands that all the members of the congregation share equally whatever God's providence brings, be it through salaries/remunerations or gifts.

Although religious life is not one of luxury and extravagance, leaders are to ensure that members are adequately cared for. Avoiding such responsibility is unjustifiable. When congregations admit new members, they are obliged to cater for them. It is unfair to deny members their bare basic needs and subject them to near destitution. This can expose them to abuse and exploitation by so called benefactors claiming to help with their needs. Female congregations in particular are to take special note and protect their young members from such abuses whether by lay or clerical.

### ***Care of Members***

As a matter of fairness and compassion, members should be provided with the basic means for human dignity and simple living. Such can help minimize the temptation to steal from the community or ministry funds, as well as seeking assistance from so called benefactors, friends or family.

The spirit of sharing needs to have an important place in the observance of this vow. A discerning heart will wisely guide the leadership in this. For example, in cases of abject

poverty of the family of a member, like where an old widowed mother of a community member lives under an annoyingly leaking roof, the spirit of solidarity and sharing needs to guide the leader's decision. Such charity can be helpful to a son or daughter who has no peace of mind in the community where he or she is living in relative comfort while the mother lives in extreme human degradation. It is true we do not enter religious life for the benefits we might gain, nevertheless, charity and solidarity are necessary – to share even in our poverty in such dire situations. Leadership can discreetly, without publicity, render some little assistance in circumstances like this where possible.

### ***Mission or Survival?***

Living evangelical poverty can put a good check on the temptation and preoccupation with survival. This can be particularly true in contexts where economic hardship and instability are a daily reality. Similarly, in other places, dwindling number of new entrants into the congregation can be a source of anxiety and preoccupation with future survival. What is the mission and charism of your congregation? Part of the role of leadership is to constantly remind and animate the members in the mission and charism of the congregation. This also involves how to live it out in concrete ways. It helps to remember that religious are neither entrepreneurs nor business men and women. There is no arguing that members have to be fed and sustained to carry out the mission, nevertheless, it is important to differentiate between ministry and income-generating projects for the maintenance of members. Where a leader is under pressure to accumulate wealth for the congregation, there is the danger that economic gain could sway decisions and actions including ministry choices. This is the way that a congregation can lose its soul and subtly give full-time service to Mammon! Remember that you cannot serve both God and money.

### **The Chastity of Christ**

#### ***“Greater love has no one than this...”***

Consecrated chastity is truly an invitation to love all of God's children without discrimination. That is Jesus's command to his disciples: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:34-35). This is not just an exhortation, it is a command, hence, an imperative. In addition to the grace received in vowing chastity, leadership in religious life provides ample opportunity for loving one's brothers and sisters, serving them with all the goodness of heart that is possible. And the God of love surely makes this grace of authentic loving available to everyone, every religious leader who sincerely seeks it with all their heart!

This means, therefore, that religious leaders are to love every brother and sister including those whose ways challenge them in their ministry of leadership. Having cliques or some set of “chosen people” to whom the leader gives all the privileges can be damaging to a genuine spirit of love and care for the brethren and sisters. Where a leader believes in creating a spirit of inclusivity, where every member of the province, region or congregation is treated with equal dignity and respect, a positive spirit tends to pervade the membership and encourages cooperation and commitment to the common life.

The “son of the soil” mentality is breeding animosity and damaging religious life in some

countries especially in Africa. It constitutes a form of ethnic discrimination which is an excessive love or attachment to one's land and ethnic group (cf. Ukwuije 2013, p. 212; Ezeani, 2019, p. 49). Such a mentality can feed into tribalism which is another menace to the authenticity of the call to discipleship. It is true that human beings generally tend to be tribal by nature. It is 'normal' for human beings to look out for 'their own'. In pre-historic times, that served our ancestors. They needed to form those close-knit human communities for their safety, mutual support, survival and security from attacks of other groups. As society progresses, however, and efforts are made for more unity and collaboration between peoples, tribalism no longer serves the common good of all peoples.

An essential part of the work of leaders of religious congregations is to unite all our brothers and sisters in love. It is a pity when instead the leader becomes a promoter par excellence of tribalism, son-of-the-soil mentality or racism in thought, word and action.

**The ministry of leadership is not about the leaders; it is about service to God in (and through) our brothers and sisters. In obedience, the leader is called to be a servant, not a master.**

That makes a caricature of the gospel and the evangelical counsels (Ezeani, p. 49). Once other members notice that their leader favours his or her own tribes/town people, it can spark a fire of anger and resentment that will be difficult to quench.

Unselfish prodigal loving and giving is an essential way the religious leader lives out the vow of chastity in the exercise of his/her ministry of leadership. The great Sufi poet and mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi's poem succinctly captures the essence of this unselfish loving of our brothers and sisters:

*Love is reckless; not reason.  
Reason seeks a profit.  
Love comes on strong, consuming herself, unabashed.  
Yet, in the midst of suffering,  
Love proceeds like a millstone,*

*hard surfaced and straightforward.  
Having died to self-interest,  
she risks everything and asks for nothing.  
Love gambles away every gift God bestows.*

### **The Obedience of Christ** ***Servant, not Master***

The ministry of leadership is not about the leaders; it is about service to God in (and through) our brothers and sisters. In obedience, the leader is called to be a servant, not a master. Jesus called his disciples together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be



your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..." (Mk 10: 42- 45). T

his is a good guide for the leader in the practice of the vow of obedience in the leadership role. Unfortunately, in the African context, it has been observed that some communities insist on obedience as "*a strategy to exact compliance to status quo in all spheres of life*" (Nwagwu, 2017, p. 14).

Although the vow of obedience properly emphasises submission to the will of lawful authority, the laws of the Church state that such be done through dialogue, sense of responsibility and subsidiarity. Leaders are therefore, to invite and maturely welcome collaboration, suggestions and ideas from members. They are to show respect for the right of others, equality in dignity and opportunity, and recognize members' privacy and personal sphere of freedom (Nwagwu, pp. 14 -15). Being the leader does not give one the

impetus to violate members' privacy, give orders without dialogue or simply bypass them in important matters pertaining to them. Leaders are to be aware of the limits of their authority and function respectfully within the boundaries. For example, when a member is ill, he/she should be allowed to be an active player in the decisions pertaining his or her health and treatment. The leader is to treat them as fellow adults instead of treating them like children. Any discussion with the medical personnel is to involve the brother or sister in question and *not* just the leader and the doctor.

When members are respected and given consideration in matters affecting them directly, they are likely to collaborate and be willing to live under authority. Conversely, "*when superiors exceed their limits of authority, grounds are created for acts of indiscipline and insubordination*, like opposition and resistance. Acting *ultra vires* (beyond one's legal power or authority) is of itself gross indiscipline negating expected exemplary behavior." (Nwagwu, p. 15). It helps to constantly remind oneself that "in Christ's kingdom, authority is service." (Constitutions of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, no 80). The leader is to serve his/her brothers and sisters - not to be their emperor or empress.

### ***Prudent Use of outside Experts and Professionals***

Any organization that plans well usually enjoys more effective and non-chaotic functioning. Good planning also reduces stress, making life and tasks more manageable. It is true that no one can say what will happen this evening or tomorrow, yet planning can help a congregation to be better disposed and prepared for adjustments when life brings some of its challenges and surprises! There are experts in the fields of team building, projective-future planning - both finance and personnel, etc. It is worth availing of these. Openness to the use of the expertise of professionals including lay faithful is to be encouraged. Some lay brothers and sisters who are willing to do anything that will facilitate and help consecrated men and women. They do so for the sake of their love of God and for the Church. Presently in some countries, congregations have employed lay professionals to manage their finances and advise on investments, etc. Nevertheless, prudence and wisdom are highly necessary. The Holy See has wisely cautioned that strict parameters in this area be established if such a choice is made, as some religious congregations have been deceived and seriously harmed by finance managers of great dishonesty.

### ***Listening, Cooperation and Team spirit***

As leaders, apostolic obedience can be lived in cooperation with fellow pilgrims on the journey. Temptation to go it alone is real for leaders of congregations. A one-man or one-woman show kind of leadership in which the leader functions alone and dictates to others is to be checked. In such a way of functioning, even important information is not shared and council members deprived of the right to necessary and appropriate information. In this way, the leader can appear to be like a dictator. Perhaps, it might help to consider the use of the nomenclature of "superior" in relation to religious leaders. One wonders whether this does inadvertently create the impression that others are "inferiors". Where there are 'superiors', there have to be inferiors. It is important that the leader works with his or her council members as a *team*. This can help to check the human tendency of absolute power vested in one person. The Constitutions of each congregation is a good guide for every leader and all the members.

For the leader, obedience ought to be listening deeply to the voice of the Spirit in his or her life in prayer, solitude and in various events and persons. God can speak through the

voice of council members and other sisters and brothers. At times, it could be novices or postulants that God can use to convey some messages of inspiration to the leader. That is why it is important that the leader is always disposed and attentive to the promptings of the Spirit in the daily events of life. Humility will check the propensity to control in a leader. Leadership is not about control. It is instead at the service of God's unpredictable grace. The former leader of the Dominican Order, Timothy Radcliffe (2005, p. 169), beautifully captures this notion:

No one owns grace and can bend its happening to his or her agenda, especially not the superior. The role of leadership is to make sure that no one takes possession of God's grace, neither the young nor the old, neither the left nor the right, neither the West nor any other group. God is among us as the one who is always doing something new, and those in leadership will usually be the last to know what this might be. They have the role of keeping us all open to the unpredictable directions in which God might lead us, for as God says in Isaiah, "Behold I am doing something new". So leadership will be shown in helping our communities to take risks, to not always go for the safe option, to trust the young, to accept precariousness and vulnerability. It will be in keeping the windows open to God's unpredictable grace. So, in this culture of control, Religious Life should be an ecological niche of freedom. It is not the freedom of those who impose their will, but of surrender to the abiding novelty of God.

## Conclusion

Holistic formation is essential especially with myriads of challenges faced by religious leaders in these present times. Leaders today are to be commended for accepting to lead in these challenging times. There is reason to believe that every leader is doing their best as they know how. The One who calls people to leadership always graces and equips them well for this task. Hence, there is no need to be afraid. Jesus' words "Be not afraid" (Matt. 28:10) do not mean that one does not have fear. Every human being has fear, and for those who embrace the call to leadership, fear is often aplenty! "Be not afraid" means rather that we do not have to *be* the fear that we feel. It is not good to lead from a place of fear "thereby engendering a world in which fear is multiplied" (Palmer, 2000, pp. 93 - 94). Remember that "You are the light of the world." (Matt. 5:14). Within you, there are places of charity, faith, hope and trust. You can choose to lead from one of these places of promise instead of fear and anxiety. We can still feel fear, but leading from those places of promise and hope, we can confidently "stand on ground that will support us, ground from which we can lead others toward a more trustworthy, more hopeful, more faithful way of being in the world." (Palmer, 2000, p. 94). As leaders, "your light must shine before others so that they may see the goodness in you and give praise to your Father in Heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Jesus did not promise comfort. He did promise faithfulness though: "I will be with you until the end of time" (Matt. 28: 20b).

Brothers and sisters, be not afraid. Let your light shine!

For more Information: <https://bit.ly/BecomingIntercultural>

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# TO BE AN ACCOUNT OF GOD'S TENDERNESS

Carlos del Valle, SVD

*Father Carlos del Valle is a Missionary of the Divine Word. He is Doctor in Moral Theology and since 1983 he worked in Chili and was Editor of the 'Testimonio' Magazine. In June 2013 he was appointed Rector of Saint Peter College in Rome.*



*Original in Spanish*

## Introduction

In the Consecrated Life, we are moving. Immersed in a discernment that is taking us to new peripheries. There is a growing awareness of unity, of the encounter between consecrated persons and with human beings. We live our lives betting on relationship, encounter, communion. We understand life as a reciprocity of gifts, a way of creating fraternity. Blessed are those who have entered into God's dream, making themselves an account of His tenderness. There are two forces that save the world and save men and women religious: beauty and tenderness. Tenderness is one of the faces of fraternity.

A religious... who chooses to put life in God, centered in God, configured by God, and given to Him. One can have clear values, but live motivated by interests and needs. The dissociation between what one proclaims and lives, between what one lives and what one thinks he is living. The illusion of health is not healthy. Looking at the reality of religious life that shapes us, more than the ideals that inspire it, concerns the degree of adhesion of religious men and women to those ideals.

In our reflections, we suffer from words linked to life, capable of uniting the authenticity of those who use them with the profound needs of those who receive them. Words that caress the mind and heart are scarce. Words that open the skin pores, windows to the soul, in order to break the distance between ideas and life. Let us put the word at the service of hope, listening to men and women with serene ideas, warm hearts, and gazing

towards the horizon. It is not a question of saying new things, but of saying them from the heart, giving them life and a stamp of our time. Listening to lessons from the heart makes one capable of giving lessons to scholars.

### 1. The Image of the God of Encounters

We religious men and women are used to calculating, measuring, analyzing, reasoning. It's time to dream. To dream something other than self-referential narcissism, one must listen to God and to life. If we don't listen, we'll talk without touching anyone's heart. With his life, Jesus tells us about God's dream, in order to awaken the same desire that sleeps within us, thirsting for fraternity.



The Gospel is like the ripples produced by a stone when it falls into a pool of water. The nucleus is Jesus, God's human face: he shows the most human way of living, dies on the cross because of a life at the service of the Kingdom, and rises again. Life, death, and resurrection, where God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are present. This is the heart of our faith. The rest is concentric waves that amplify this truth. Consecrated Life is there as a "confession of the Trinity," a "sign of fraternity," and the "service of charity" (*Vita Consecrata*).

Jesus is God's human face and the face of man as the heart of God has dreamed it. He is not a mixture of God and of a human being, interested in what he has from God, not so much in what he has from man. Jesus has the highest possible human quality. In his humanity, he narrates God and opens the way to Him. However, in Jesus, God does not become a man generically but concretely a poor, humble, common man. We have diffi-

culty recognizing the supreme human greatness: the Son of God in a poor human being. God's life told in the life of a man made a people.

In Jesus, we find God, ourselves, the relationship between God and ourselves, our destiny, and the path that leads to Him. Jesus is defined by relationships: He is from God and for others, being one of them, and being with them. He lives off-center, drawing attention to the Kingdom. In Jesus, attracting is God's art. To follow Him, means being drawn by Him to be human with his humanity. Let us not seek God beyond what is human. Every experience of God is valid if it produces growth in humanity.

The Gospel not only teaches us to be better; it teaches us what God is like, in the life of Jesus. We focus on what Jesus did, how he lived, what concerned him, whom he cared for, his relationships with men and women. His words, deeds, and encounters are glimmers of his humanity. Jesus changes God's name. He calls him Father. He relates to Him as Father. Knowing God does not come from knowledge, but from experience. Jesus is the living humanized presence of God. What he offers is relationships that humanize by fraternizing. The Beatitudes show how to live these relationships.

**Life has meaning if we are beings of communion, encounter, with united hands, shared projects.**

There are two ways of understanding life: those who think of their own interests, and guides by them in their decisions and behavior; and those whose first motivation is to enjoy life by seeking the happiness of others. Orienting our desires according to the happiness of others makes us happy. God reigns in the reorientation of desire. We seek God in what is spectacular, and God's greatest revelation is in His densest hiding place: the Cross, one's own pain, and the pain of others (God's pain). With his life, Jesus reveals that the center of history is in the margin. Encountering Jesus means living in function of him (and of others in whom he is present), to live for him (and for others) and to live like him (and like those who resemble him).

If we say that God humanized Himself, we are saying that God is found in what is human. Each day seeds of humanity come into the soil of your heart, words, gestures, encounters, and, in order to grow, they need to be welcomed in that soil. Welcome them with tenderness, care for them, and defend them with energy, feed them with wisdom. Let us preoccupy ourselves not with our weakness but with nurturing a great love, strong ideals, deep veneration for the forces of goodness, attention, mercy, acceptance, freedom,

justice, peace... seeds that God has sown within us. The Gospel is not just "bread to eat." Jesus wants it to be "yeast in the dough."

Father, Son, Spirit: God-for-us, God-with-us, God-in-us. The Trinity is relationship, union, encounter: us-in-the-bosom-of-God. God-Trinity is the vocation of Consecrated Life, a community of transformed relationships. Community is another word for building fraternity. It leads to being next-to and in-function-of. Shared experience of the Spirit in the Church, who invites us to move from an ecclesiastical community to a people-Church. Today, there are lay people in a clerical Church, not clerics in a lay Church. The account of the multiplication of the loaves in Mk 6:35-44 describes the Church: Jesus-disciples-crowd, nourishing life, together and united, not by doctrines or rules, but by bread and compassion, both of divine origin.

The Trinity is the vocation to create bonds. Bonds are the most important thing under the sun. Life has meaning if we are beings of communion, encounter, with united hands, shared projects. The Trinity is the mirror of the heart of human beings and the meaning of the universe. We are the image of the God of encounters. Accepting the Trinity does not mean grasping it with one's thoughts, but being reached by it, until I see my brother in the other, in the mirror a disciple, and the face of Christ within me.

Receiving the Father, source of life, beauty, and goodness, and welcoming the brother. Accepting the Kingdom means living from God and the brothers, with them, and for them. There are religious who let this transformative dynamism of the Kingdom enter into their lives as a blessing for all. Blessed are those religious who have entered the dream of God. The Church offers Her truth not as a system of dogmas but as a path of tenderness. Tenderness is sensitivity, capacity of attention, and care. A religious man or woman is someone who realizes the truth in love. Truth without love kills. Love without truth is sterile. Ask yourself if your community is an elite of pure and hardcore people, or a caravan that welcomes pain and questions with tenderness.

The Spirit is not in the I or the you, but in the I-you relationship, the we. The other, the different one comes as salvation. If there is someone who sees things differently, I will know that my understanding of life is partial. Fruitfulness comes from the exchange between different people. The Spirit promotes differences and relationships in which we become meaningful to one another. The fundamental thing in the Church is not to be hierarchical or democratic but synodal, a set of different paths. Plurality, caravans on different tracks, but all coming from the center like the spokes of a wheel.

Jesus does not free us from sin to divinize us; he frees us from our dehumanization to humanize us. We meet God on the path of what is human, not through spiritualized perfection. Faith, before being a body of truths, is a set of convictions that produce a way of living. You can know a lot about Jesus without believing in Him. Anchored in supposed perfection, we can fall into intolerance, judgment, and condemnation. God save us from those perfect people, who only succeed in perfecting the patience of others. The world says that you must be perfect. The Spirit tells you to accept your weakness, that others do not need you to be perfect, but rather coherent, human. A child draws the beginning of his joy from the feeling of his helplessness. He trusts his mom. His life is embraced in the smile of a gaze.

We must move from sincerity to truth, as Peter does in the Gospel. "*Even if everyone abandons you, I won't.*" Peter is sincere, but he must reconcile himself with his truth (he denies him three times): The truth, in Peter, is his weakness, as well as the look of forgiveness that Jesus directs to him. He embraces his own weakness and the experience of forgive-

ness (wealth in God). That is his humanity, with which he presents himself in face of the threefold question that Jesus asks him: Do you love me? This is the only way Peter can feed the flock. Let us imagine a Peter without having experienced his truth: weakness and God's forgiveness. He would be a proud Peter, full of himself, unbearable, unable to welcome other sinners. There is no lack of these sincere "pebbles" either in the Church, of those who do not live in their truth.

## 2. You Can't Look at the Sun without Your Face Being Illuminated

How much exposure to God's sun is necessary to have a unified heart! Consecrated life today has more evangelical orientations. That does not mean that we religious live the Gospel any better. Theology is not little explained; it is little lived. A beautiful dream and mediocre reality, with the danger of our getting used to a tolerable mediocrity that is *"neither cold nor hot"* (Rev 3:15). The thermometer is not the number, the age, but life's quality in dynamism.

There are preoccupying symptoms: partial surrender, internal secularization, individualism, search for spaces that compensate for loneliness and emotional voids. Like weeds, disenchantment and monotony grow. The levels of belonging to the Consecrated Life are situated on the periphery of existence. With a certain "apology of the decline" by the impoverishment of motivations. When convictions are darkened, conducts are shattered. Without solid values, we religious end up in hedonism. If we lose the integrating center, we fall into stress, activism, lack of spiritual life, little appreciation for life in fraternity, inner disharmony. We cling to medications that do not prolong life but delay death.

We've perhaps fallen into organized mediocrity. There are men and women religious who are not much more than honest professionals or very self-centered, living a colorless, odorless, tasteless life. Today, mediocrity has nothing to say to society. No one goes into a cold, dark house. We don't need individualities who professionally accomplished and harmless busy-in-spiritually commitments (Dolores Aleixandre). When the prophetic soul is sick, dreams and worries are diluted.

The wind of the Spirit does not let the dust that accompanies us settle. We need the ferment of prophetic passion and evangelical audacity. If a person has a center, everything outside can be anchored to it. But we may be suffering from the Samuel syndrome: we hear voices and do not go to the real source. The Gospel offers us the icon of men and women religious today, not in Peter walking on the waters towards Jesus, but in Peter on the verge of sinking who cries out to the Lord *"Save me!"* and is seized by him.

Life does not come from nothingness; it comes from the heart of God. Care, translated into services, is not enough. We need to cultivate life from the heart, life expressed in listening, patience, generosity, gestures of peace, justice, dignity. Having a heart means knowing how to give what those who are eager for life need: affection, welcome, tenderness. That is what transforms the disenchanted, melts the inflexible, challenges those who say that nothing will change, harasses the neutral, and drives away the doomsayers. It carries within it seeds capable of destroying indifference.

Nothing is transformed by the Gospel if it does not change hearts. A heart possessed by a trusting faith in God-Trinity, and commitment to human beings, brothers and sisters in Jesus. We religious do not love others for God's sake; we love them in God's love, where Jesus has united us. We can give access to the other person's heart because we have

given Christ access to ours. Perhaps we sin by paternal and paternalistic love, without reaching the experience of fraternal love.

Fraternal love produces meaning in the Consecrated Life. What creates meaning is worthy of faith, and what creates meaning makes us live. Human beings seek the transmission of felt experiences. We find it hard to produce meaning without producing standards. We produce meaning when, as brothers and sisters, we become a place of encounter between God and human beings. The lifestyle starts with having a center to lean on: the person oriented towards the Mystery.

*"Life was the light of men"* (Jn 1:4). If you want to have light, look at life, listen to it. The life of our world has been grafted into the life of God, like the branch and the vine with the same sap, one single thing. Life leads us to an egoless land, where the divine seed is patiently developing. As part of life, people are never a problem; they are an opportunity.

**There are religious who let this transformative dynamism of the Kingdom enter into their lives as a blessing for all. Blessed are those religious who have entered the dream of God.**

Look deeply, and you will see people who are experts in self-giving, self-denial, and joy, who teach you to think more broadly to love more deeply. People whose contact drives us to become better. We need to have them close by to rehabilitate a language of kindness among us. People that God puts on the path to passionately engage us not only limiting damage, but in expanding different and new opportunities for growth and witness.

Where life is given, there is light. There is the Spirit. Before wanting to transform life, we must look at it, listen to it, recognize it, enjoy it, be grateful for it. In consecrated life, the signs announcing *"where"* to walk don't raise great interest. Readers of life, who can understand and encourage the *"why"*, attract much more attention. Our center will always be following Jesus, living in a mystical way, not only devotionally, and welcoming the Spirit in the passion for life, the place of his presence.

Religious Life is perceived as being somewhat unconcerned about being life, no matter

how religious it may appear. Dislocated by the deep transformations of history. Instead of caring, we take care of ourselves. Instead of inserting ourselves into the movement of life, where the Mystery dwells, we shut ourselves in, defining and redefining a supposed charismatic identity. Rusty in our habits, we do not respond to calls for change. Living implies changing; repeating leads to fossilization.

To acquire the treasure, the relationship in the Trinity and the brothers, one must sell everything. To define oneself as a son and brother, one must stop defining oneself by separation, power, wisdom, honor, protagonism, states of perfection... and recover the taste for being a people.

Our lifestyle is subject to quality control. We must die to many realities that keep us tied to the absence of God. We religious men and women, breathing clericalism, have taken refuge in power. Power is like alcohol on an empty stomach: it makes your head spin,



you get dizzy, you lose your balance, so you end up hurting yourself and others... When power does not fall on a stomach full of humility and tenderness. With tenderness and humility, power becomes a service, and does good to oneself and others. Without humility and tenderness, we cannot relate in a humanizing way. We will never grow by following recipes for happiness other than the Beatitudes.

### **3. Community: The Womb Where the New Future Growing**

"Martha and Mary", plural subject: the "we" of the fraternity. Martha is the helper; Mary, the listener. Martha, the being-for; Mary, the being-with. Martha is service; Mary, company. We need to be helped and listened to. It is rewarding to be helped, but it is even more rewarding to have someone who listens to you. For Jesus, the best thing is to be available to listen, to dedicate time, attention, interest to others. To focus my interest on

the interest of others, their need, concerns, desires. We are nourished one by the other, through listening and speaking, in silence and conversation, in giving and appreciation. Jesus does not tolerate that women are locked into a role of service. The Church would truly change if the hierarchy called women, as real sisters, to share thoughts, horizons, dreams, emotions, roles, knowledge, wisdom.

There is a strong movement towards relationship, dialogue, consensus. And another towards difference: people and groups defend their identity. We are haunted by the dream of a plural and harmonious humanity. We breathe a culture of relationship with others. The culture of encounter has permeated Consecrated Life, which will always have a future if it cultivates relationships. In personal encounters, hearts are softened. They allow the transformation of identity, assuming evangelical identification.

Meetings not ideas change a person's life. If we change little, that is because we rarely meet. Jesus creates community by creating encounters. He communicates the Spirit, the energy of fraternity. The dilemma among the followers: a sectarian group or the embryo of a fraternal people? Our utopia of the future is called community: a treasure to be placed in the heart. *"Where your treasure is, there is your heart"* (Mt 6:21).

In the community, one believes and belongs. There are those who give themselves with joy, and joy is their reward. God gives joy to those who produce love. We have the task of being in the *gaudium et spes* community. The community is not duty; it is pleasure. Let us not be so busy redoing it, but rather love and care for it. Being attentive to the needs of the brothers and to dialogue, to console, to correct, to heal wounds, to suggest paths, to thank, to enthuse, to overcome little clericaloid battles. In community life, there are no recipes, but dedication, commitment, affection, and a lot of handcrafted work. Community life is played out "in the green," the day-to-day of ordinary time. We can turn it into a maze, when we disregard the ordinary days, and complicate what is simple.

The community is a garden threatened by indifference, individualism, yawning boredom, and the nightmares of fear. You can't build a different world with indifferent people. The Gospel is fire that burns away tranquility. Committed to guarding the garden, like the peasants, let us sow with confidence, and something beautiful will grow: a group of brothers, friends in the Lord, happy to be together. With friends it is easier to be a man or woman of God. Friendship with God's friends allows one to enjoy God. Let us save in daily scenes the fraternal meetings of the Lord's friends. The community is either an extension of a love story received or a burden in which we support one another within our limitations. To build fraternity, one must experience God.

The most difficult and demanding thing in life is human relationships: knowing how to live and live together with others. There, you can see the quality of a person and the density of a project. Siblings are recognized as siblings when they have the same parent as their reference. In a religious community, we recognize that we are gathered around the Father. That makes us feel like a family. *"You are the body of Christ"* (1 Cor 12:27): the primary identity of our communities. The reason for the existence of a community is to live together around the mystery of faith. Consecrated Life gains nothing by highlighting specificities, but by deepening what is evangelical. This is not the time to put survival before consistency. So many initiatives are suffocated by the stress of survival.

Jesus spreads beauty because he lives from God and for others. The beauty of a pure heart turned towards others. Someone so human as only the Son of God can be. The

foundation of our fraternity is to live united in Jesus. The community is the quest for those who are passionate about God and human beings. We men and women religious come together to build fraternity. The first thing is to be a brother or sister. A gift that we share in the community and pass on in the mission. Following Jesus is the experience of meeting him and a community experience. Joy and happiness come not only from meeting Jesus but also from finding him in the community of his followers. Follow means living in a community of followers, where community life is the human reward that a person needs.

Good wine can also turn into vinegar. We suffer centrifugal forces that cause dispersion, parallelism in lives, and disconnection from projects. We suffer from hurtful silences that feed the desire to get off that train. Vertical relationships that produce communities of crowded solitude. People who live together and navigate separately. They can even elect an arsonist as a fire chief. These are experiences that feed the crisis as a "house specialty."

Let us not look at Consecrated Life as it is, asking ourselves: Why? Let us look at it as it could be, asking ourselves: Why not? A good leader leads from the emerging future, with the long distance ahead of fireworks, and the door of hope always open. The Spirit does not awaken nostalgia, but hope. The best climate for hope is found close to the poor. Union with God has two characteristics: good relations with others and closeness in solidarity with the weakest. Let us try to discover fraternal keys to the 21<sup>st</sup> century; ways to build community as a space of belonging and joy. It will be a mystical fraternity that emerges when the dynamics of faith shape coexistence and shared desires.

We do not strive to maintain what exists. We want to generate a possible future, by filling community life with the Gospel. When we lack ideals, we settle for facts. An injured bird cannot fly, but a bird that sticks to a tree branch cannot fly either. The importance given to the future reveals the vitality in the person and the community. Nostalgia for the past comforts but does not build. We do not speak of community by referring to a stable, organized and outdated style, based on the vitality of those who cannot change. We love the Gospel and its weak results. We believe in and love the imperfect community, a community of the thirsty people who are unsatisfied. We are authentic when we live in our weakness and share it in friendship. Human relationships are our strength and our weakness. When those relationships offer you a lemon, squeeze it and make lemonade.

## LIFE AT UISG

Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM

*Sr. Pat is the Executive Secretary of UISG.*



### From the desk of the Executive Secretary

During these past few months a number of significant events have been held at UISG. In late January, UISG offered a training workshop on interculturality to teams of sisters from the ACWECA region (Association of Conferences of Women Religious of Eastern and Central Africa). This workshop had been scheduled to take place in Nairobi in July 2021 but was postponed due to the Covid pandemic. Each member Conference of Religious from ACWECA was invited to select a team of sisters to participate in this training of trainers programme. Over 100 sisters registered and they gathered in groups in selected locations where they were sure of a reliable internet connection. The facilitation team included Sr. Sia Temu MM, Fr. Tim Norton SVD (recently appointed as Auxiliary Bishop of Brisbane), Sr. Paula Jordaó VDMF and Sr. Pat Murray IBVM. The format of the programme was an interesting one. Each morning there was one presentation followed by group discussion and a lively plenary session. In the afternoon participants were asked to watch a video recording on a dedicated topic and to engage in group discussion. While it would obviously preferable to meet in person, this methodology worked exceptionally well. The themes covered were as follows:

- Interculturality: terminology and definitions
- Interculturality & Religious Life in Africa / Intercultural Journey of Jesus
- Intercultural Community Life / Intercultural Journey of the Early Church
- African Worldview & Interculturality / Socio- & Individual-Centrism; Power-Distance
- Personality & Culture / Interculturality & Spirituality;

- Congregational Charism
- Leadership, Vows and Interculturality / Action Steps

Members of the team and specialists from Africa presented which ensured that the perspectives presented were both local and global. We hope to offer further training during 2022 or early 2023.

A second important initiative which commenced in 2022 has focused on the care of Sisters who are living with Alzheimer's. This is joint initiative of the LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious – USA) and UISG funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. An international committee has been established which quickly determined that the remit of this initiative should include all forms of cognitive impairment.

This initiative will be formally launch on May 9<sup>th</sup> during the Council of Delegates meeting. Two webinars have also been offered to determine the type of support needed worldwide to ensure that sisters who are aging can live full and healthy lives. These webinars will help determine needs in various parts of the world in order to make the best use of future funding.

As a member of the synodal Commission on Spirituality, the Executive Secretary has attended regular meetings at the Office of the Synod. This Commission has three working groups – one of which has developed Biblical Resources for Synodality. It can be accessed by using the following link: <https://www.synod.va/en/resources/spiritual-and-liturgical-resources.html>. The Synod website contains various official documents and resources in different languages. The site is constantly updated, therefore please register for the synod newsletter to keep up with developments. Currently the group of four theologians representing UISG and USG are reading and reflecting on the hundreds of submissions received from Superiors General and their Councils. They will prepare a synthesis to present to the Synod and will also offer some theological perspectives for further reflection at congregational level. This is an important step in our synodal journey as religious women and men as we seek to engage in this process “of spiritual discernment, of ecclesial discernment, that unfolds in adoration, in prayer and in dialogue with the word of God... That word summons us to discernment and it brings light to that process.” (Pope Francis, Oct.10, 2021).

The first steps in the UISG Assembly took place on March 14 and April 4. These were online session which focused on the theme of the Assembly – Embracing Vulnerability on the Synodal Journey. At the first meeting the participants shared on what the theme meant to them personally. The fruits of their reflective listening in groups were then shared on padlet and some voices were heard from different parts of the world, in different languages. Sr. Jolanta Kafka rmi, the President of UISG, shared on the vision of the Executive Board in choosing this theme.

At the second session Fr. James Harvey SJ presented on *Dimension: A Spirituality for a Synodal Church*. In his presentation Fr. Harvey outlined key aspect of today's context which impacts the Church. He pointed to what is emerging that is new:

- Recovery of the Trinity as the life and form of the Church
- A synodal Church in mission (interior mission and for the world)

- A vulnerable and joyous Church
- Fullness of the People of God: realizing all the gifts/charisms
- Spirituality of synodality - renewing the ecclesial life of the Spirit: a way of being and becoming
- Attending to the margins – expanding our ecclesial life
- Conversion: “the love of Christ impels us” 2Cor.5:14:  
Institutional conversion – power in service.

And so as we prepare for our May meeting we pray with Pope Francis:

*Come Holy Spirit. You inspire new tongues and place words of life on our lips: keep us from becoming a “museum Church”, beautiful but mute, with much past and little future. Come among us, so that in this synodal experience we will not lose our enthusiasm, dilute the power of prophecy, or descend into useless and unproductive discussions. Come, Spirit of love, open our hearts to hear your voice! Come, Spirit of holiness, renew the holy. And faithful people of God! Come, Creator Spirit, renew the face of the earth! Amen.*

## STAFF

### SECRETARIAT

**Sr. Patricia Murray, ibvm** segretaria.esecutiva@uisg.org  
Executive Secretary 0668.400.236  
**Sr. Mary John Kudiyruppil, SSps** vice.segretaria@uisg.org  
Associate Executive Secretary  
**Rosalia Armillotta** ufficio.segreteria@uisg.org  
Assistant to the Executive Secretary 0668.400.238

### FINANCES

**Aileen Montojo** economato@uisg.org  
Financial Administrator 0668.400.212  
**Sr. Sunitha Luscious, zsc**  
Assistant Financial Administrator  
**Patrizia Balzerani** assistente.economato@uisg.org  
Membership Secretary 0668.400.249

### COMMUNICATION

**Patrizia Morgante** comunicazione@uisg.org  
Communication Officer 0668.400.234  
**Sr. Thérèse Raad, sdc** assistente.comunicazione@uisg.org  
Communication Office (Volunteer) 0668.400.233  
**Antonietta Rauti** bollettino@uisg.org  
Coordinator UISG Bulletin 0668.400.230

### SERVICES

**Svetlana Antonova** assis.tec@uisg.org  
Technical Assistant General Services 0668.400.250  
**Riccardo Desai** tecnico@uisg.org  
Technical Assistant for computers 0668.400.213

### PROJECTS

**Sr. Florence de la Villeon, rscj** rete.migranti@uisg.org  
Migrants Project 0668.400.231  
**Sr. Gabriella Bottani, smc** coordinator@talithakum.info  
Coordinator Talitha Kum 0668.400.235  
**Sr. Mayra Cuellar, mb**  
Talitha Kum Database  
**Sr. Mary Niluka Perera, sgs** ccc@uisg.org  
Catholic Care for Children International 0668.400.225  
**Claudia Giampietro** safeguarding@uisg.org  
Office for Care and Protection 0668.400.225  
**Sr. M. Cynthia Reyes, sra** formators.programme@uisg.org  
UISG Formators Programme Coordinator 0668.400.227  
**Sr. Paula Jordão, vdmf** formation@uisg.org  
Formation Coordinator 0668.400.245  
**Giulia Oliveri** gm@uisg.org  
Grant Manager 0668.400.229  
**Consiglio Canoniste** canoniste@uisg.org  
0668.400.223