



Sowers of Prophetic Hope  
*Seminatrici di speranza profetica*  
*Såerinnen Prophetischer Hoffnung*  
*Sembradoras de esperanza profética*  
*Semeuses d'espérance prophétique*  
*Semeadoras de esperança profética*



## A Vision for the Future of Religious Life

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*Original in English*

### Called to Restore!

Sowers of Prophetic Hope, here we are! I am grateful for the invitation to be here today, to the UISG President Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA, and the UISG board, and to Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, thank you for your trust. As we begin our assembly today, I know hope is in this room simply because we are gathered.

I prayed, struggled, and consulted about this reflection, wondering what gives me hope? What is hope? How do we hope together as women religious? How do we hope in the vision of the emerging future? A few stories came to mind, over and over again, little stories, local stories, simple stories. Pondering them, in my different moments of despair, I began to find hope, and perhaps I am beginning to understand how the vision of the future of our life unfolds around us gently, softly, like my little stories.

The first happened after hurricane Maria had devastated my beloved island of Puerto Rico. My Boricua friends desperately writing on *Facebook* and *Twitter* trying to communicate with loved ones, “*does anyone know if...*”, “*can you communicate.*” During the terrible weeks that ensued, I happened on a story about an organization that was working to restore the magnificent coral reef destroyed by the winds — volunteer divers carrying little buckets, restoring one coral at a time. My first reaction was a cynical smile, how ridiculous and futile. I just wanted to cry because that beautiful Puerto Rican rainforest and its breathtaking coral reef were gone, and here are these fools; what could they ever achieve?! And, suddenly, gently, I felt it-- the hope, the call: simple efforts, the seed of hope. They were restoring the dignity of creation, one coral at a time!

My next story happened during a trip to the Mexico-United States Border with all the sisters from our religious leadership conference’s region in Texas. We visited with the agencies and organizations that have been working to welcome the men, women, and children seeking hospitality in our country. Sister Norma Pimentel, director of Catholic Charities for the Rio Grande Valley, shared her story with our group. When the first wave of unaccompanied minors reached the border, she hustled to create a welcome center in a parish. Calls for help went out, volunteers and donations started coming in. Everyone was busy when the local authorities came and asked Sr Norma, “*what is going on here?*” She replied: “*I am restoring human dignity.*” The men left and returned with more volunteers and donations. Again, as I heard Sr. Norma, I thought, thousands of people, thousands of children, overwhelming numbers. How on earth are we going to welcome them all? And, again, simple hospitality, another seed of hope. At the Mexico-U.S. border, they are restoring human dignity, one person at a time!

My third story comes from Colombia. Visiting Cali, I heard about the long and painful peace process after the cartels, the military, and hired paramilitary had left cities and families scourged by their bloody and violent confrontations. A group of women has been breeding butterflies to work for peace in an organization called *Alas Nuevas*. They gave me a beautiful butterfly, and as I looked at it, I wondered, how can breeding butterflies make a difference in such a traumatized place? And again, gently, simply, hope came upon me. They are restoring peace, one butterfly at a time!

We need to hope as they do, standing firmly and humbly in this painful and overwhelming present reality that is ours, with bare feet. This time that has normalized crisis is our holy ground. Among all the different crises we are called to live and hope in, the one close to our hearts must be named from the start of this conference: the crisis in our Church. History will judge how we responded to this crisis. One day, women religious will be either accomplices, or prophets, or victims. We simply cannot sit this one out on the sidelines, even when we are being sidelined!

Here we are called to hope in the vision of God for the future. We need to go through this time together, religious women called to communion, called to the discipleship of Jesus, called to be sacraments of the presence of God in our world, consecrated women. We can only hope as religious; we hope because we are religious.

Sisters, we are gathered here to share our stories. What stories can we tell one another about receiving the gift of hope? For hope is a gift given gently, simply, in the midst of despair. A gift we must notice, receive and make real for each other in the sharing. Our gift of hope will overcome fear. We must tell these stories of the simple, quiet, gentle prophecy of compassion that restores, that tells the surprising truth of what God is already doing among us!

I suggest with this reflection that the prophecy of compassion will get us to hope provided we hold a VISION, foster our MEMORY, cultivate our NOTICING, and dare to LEAD.

### **VISION: To See With Prophetic Hope**

Our Assembly calls us to be “*Sowers of Prophetic Hope*.” This week we need to reflect with each other, how do we hope as women of the Church? We know “*hope is the gift of communion*,” as I reminded our conference in the United States last year. Hope is the result of the encounter of community. Gustavo Gutiérrez writes that “Hope is a gift, a grace, and when we receive a gift, it is not for us; it is for our neighbor.” With faith we must seek the vision of hope found in Jeremiah: God promises a “future with hope” if we seek with all our heart (Jr, 29:11-13, NRSV). LCWR, our conference in the United States, has learned that this vision of the heart can only be found by tapping the spiritual wisdom of our life in contemplation, engaging in communal discernment. Women religious must be women of vision: seers of hope.

This vision of hope for our challenged and suffering present and for a future filled with life requires that we enter deeply into the mystery of our consecrated life. We hold a public commitment to discipleship in communion, as stated in *Vita Consecrata*: “The fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion.”<sup>1</sup> Our exodus journey of renewal that began with *Vatican II* has been a beautiful gift with unyielding challenges; questions about style, ministry, and orthodoxy have fascinated and haunted us. The Plenary Session on the occasion of the 50 years since *Perfectae Caritatis*, held by Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, recognized that:

Even after the wide-ranging and rich process of adaptation and renewal [*accomodata renovatio*] which took place after the Council, the consecrated life may still find itself presented with open challenges that must be faced “with determination and an eye to the future.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Vita Consecrata*, No. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II*, Guidelines, 2018, introduction.

*“Who are we? Where are we going?”*--- are unyielding questions that have divided and haunted us. The renewal debate needs to be left to rest for the sake of the vision of the Reign of God we were called to witness, the people of our time are desperate for hope.

The vision of hope in the promises of Christ requires living into our principles not answers. We are required to live with a nobility of spirit, into the grace and mystery of our consecration. The time for major “undertakings” or apostolic works is over, remembering Sr. Márian Ambrosio’s beautiful loom - three years ago in this very room—“we are to live into the ‘power of the how.’”<sup>3</sup> We will journey to the promise of hope by remaining steadfast in our identity. We need to be women of character and virtue now more than ever. To find hope we need to be prophetic, and to be prophetic, our lives need to witness to what we believe and who we are. The way to hope is through prophecy. How do we prophesy as women religious?

The time for words is over, so forgive the ones I am using here! We need a new way of witnessing that will manifest our values, that will be more intelligible and accessible for our time. Gospel news needs to be told in art, symbol and gesture. These are times to share the kind of deep meaning that cannot be found in words. A friend reminded me that the crisis around the world could not be reasoned or problem solved. We need to give our rational minds a sabbatical so that the creative, non-linear, subconscious can help us navigate through story, poetry, art, symbol, and gesture. We have a new apostolic call to offer meaning to a suffering world, with the non-verbal language that our consecrated life can speak with such beauty. We need to offer a prophecy the world can see.

The vision for this kind of prophecy will emerge from the narrative of hope embedded deep in the soul of our charisms. We are a people with a vision, a vision of the love and compassion of God for all creation. Women religious, as we are, young and old, many and sparse, must witness to compassion, like the people in my little stories. Our prophetic vision is in our hearts, hands, and feet. The places we walk, the people we touch, the way we accompany, the prayers we pray, tell the story of compassion embedded in the hope for the Reign of God, where Jesus calls us to follow. We witness restoring dignity to all human beings, to our planet, one simple, loving spiritual act of compassion at a time. José Antonio Pagola writes that “for Jesus, compassion is not just one more virtue, but rather the only way to imitate God, the only way to see the world, to treat people and to react to human beings in a manner most like God’s.”<sup>4</sup> Our way to prophecy is through compassion. Compassion all can see, not read or hear, but simply see. We need not do anything more, or anything less.

Prophecy and hope dance in the endless cycle compassion weaves into the future promised by God. Our small simple acts of compassion offers this vision of creation to every single human being as prophecy because we believe!

## **MEMORY: To Trust our Prophetic Call**

The future of religious life is embedded in our memory! For too long we have been obsessed with the future. I cannot even count how many books I have read about the future of religious life, and I can read only in two languages! We have been asking about the future far too long. And yes, we have been worried about the future; in fact, we have been downright afraid of the future. Something went amiss after the fervor that followed the Vatican Council; this was not supposed to happen. Our respective responses, enthusiastic or not, were expected to bring about a new heaven and a new earth!<sup>5</sup> We have played numbers games with statistics and projections. Our questions about size betray our insecurities, our fear of the future: *“we have more, you have less,” “how many novices,” “how many ministries”*. We have played this game across institutes, conferences, hemispheres, for so many years, I wonder when we will get off the useless merry-go-

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<sup>3</sup> Márian Ambrosio, IDP, “Weaving Solidarity for Life-Living and Witnessing as Women Religious of Apostolic Life”. “Tejiendo una Solidaridad para la Vida – Para vivir y dar testimonio como religiosas de vida apostólica,” UISG Plenary Assembly 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Jose Antonio Pagola, *Recuperar el Proyecto de Jesús*, PPC, 2015, Kindle, Loc. 823. Translation Mine.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Pedro Arnold has spoken of this in Latin America, during the 80s he says “We assisted to what could be called the loss of illusions. Far from embracing the libertarian proposals, the poor accommodated and adapted to the “pots from Egypt,” preferring the security of neoliberal slavery to the unconverted hypothetical freedom,” *¿A dónde vamos? Una teología de la vida consagrada para un tiempo de crisis y esperanza*, Paulinas, 2012, p. 49. Translation mine.

round that has exhausted our creative and spiritual energy. We need a collective *examen*, as women religious, but also as a Church, to own the demons that have driven our ridiculous quest for numeric significance. I hope to thank Pope Francis one day for saying that our “founders and foundresses never thought they’d be a multitude”<sup>6</sup> All the time we have spent on numbers reminds me of the mirror in the *Snow White* narrative, “*mirror, mirror on the wall who is the fairest one of them all.*” Pride is unbecoming to our life, but it has been so tempting, so shiny!

I offer a different lens instead: The quest for the future must begin by remembering. To understand the future we need to take time to remember. “Remember” in Spanish comes from *re-cordis*, to run through the heart once more. We need to “*re-cordar.*” Memory is the sacrament of presence. As leaders, we must call our sisters to sacred memory and dialogue with our cloud of witnesses to believe in our future. We need to enter into the mystery of our memory, sometimes selective, sometimes painful, sometimes hidden. We need to tell and retell the stories that made us: our pioneer stories, our founding stories, our stories of renewal and conflict; we will find the seeds of hope we need to sow there. How do we remember as a community?

A historian friend of mine warned me about our utilitarian use of history. We tell stories not to find the way, not because we need to solve a problem; not as a nostalgic view of what is gone; we tell stories to know who we are! She pointed me to Umberto Eco’s reflection about the forest. In a short essay, he wrote that there are two ways to enter the narrative forest:

The first is to try one of several routes (so as to get out of the woods as fast as possible, say, or to reach the house of grandmother, Tom Thumb, or Hansel and Gretel); the second is to walk so as to discover what the woods are like and find out why some paths are accessible and others are not....We enter stories in much the same way; the first kind of reader enters the text seeking to know “how the story ends”... so it is usually enough to read it once. In contrast, to identify the model author, the text needs to be read many times, and certain stories endlessly.<sup>7</sup>

Our most sacred responsibility as leaders of religious institutes lies in symbol and meaning-making. We need to be artisan storytellers so we remember who we are.

When Sister Veronica Openibo, leader of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, addressed the Vatican Summit on abuse, again I was filled with hope. We all stood with her as she witnessed for women the world over. Last month I was in Rome, and thought of her as I stood before every statue of a woman I could find in St. Peter’s Basilica after the celebration of the Eucharist. Wandering from one pillar to the next, I prayed to each of them, and asked what witness got you to this place? How did you hope? And, what will we discover about ourselves in dialogue with your stories?

Listening to Sister Veronica, and reflecting on the history of our Church women, I realized why memory is critical at this time. The story of Sr Juana Ines de la Cruz, a seventeenth-century Mexican nun, living in a cloistered convent of the Spanish Colonial period came immediately to mind. Challenged by the Archbishop of Puebla about women and learning, she wrote a defense known as the *Letter to Sister Filotea de la Cruz*. What she did was to remember the story of all the women who had come before her!<sup>8</sup> Like other learned women of the Church, she found the strength to resist in her stories. Their power allowed her to acknowledge the gifts that God had given her, and to this day her poetry and learning challenges and mystifies historians and critics.

While in Rome, I made a pilgrimage to the tomb of one of those women, St. Catherine of Siena, to pray for guidance, to remember this moment in our Church is not unique, that hundreds of years later, the questions about the role of women in the Church continue to claim our attention. We need to bring forward the names of the resilient women who came before us, just like Sor Juana did. We need to remember them, to make them present to the current situation in the Church, not because we want a place at the table of clericalism,

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<sup>6</sup>Cindy Wooden, “Spread hope, preach Christ, don’t worry about numbers pope says”, CNS, 2017, <<http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2017/spread-hope-preach-christ-dont-worry-about-numbers-pope-says.cfm>>

<sup>7</sup> Umberto Eco, “the Woods of Loisy”, in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Harvard, 1994.

<sup>8</sup>Sor Juana Ines writes in defense of her writing by remembering all the learned women from antiquity and then the Christian tradition, *Respuesta a la Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 1691. The University of Georgia has her works on line at: <https://www.ensayistas.org/consejo/about.htm>

but because we are called to make the Church whole! The litany of the women of the Church that have challenged us and called us forth must be prayed in our institutes. The sacrament of memory will make them a real presence in our world today.

I invite you to consider the women of your traditions we need to invoke at a time such as this. Who are the women in every continent, in your institute, whom you remember, whose names need to be recited and invoked at this time?

But we also need to remember the women who have been resilient in the face of terrible odds, women of the margins, indigenous women, enslaved women, abused women. We must honor their names as well. The images that emerged around the world from the most recent *Women's Day* come to mind.<sup>9</sup> All of them echo the words of Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century African American abolitionist who fought against slavery in the United States and challenged white women by saying: "*Ain't I a woman.*"<sup>10</sup> Women the world over are showing this resiliency; they continue to be pillars in the face of incredible adversity and suffering. We need to remember that women everywhere of every culture and faith, in every hemisphere, stand again and again as prophets of compassion. Their story is also our story!

So much has happened since the last UISG meeting. The headlines in country after country have claimed our attention and should challenge us. Recovering our memory should also help us with the divisive and myopic concern about feminism that we frequently hear voiced in society and our Church. Perhaps now we need to recover the memory of our feminist legacy. Precisely at this time when all institutions around the globe are challenged to ensure the dignity of human beings is always protected, our feminist legacy has a word of integrity to offer. *We should all be feminists, our brothers, and fathers, and priests should be feminists!* Yes, I said it, religious sisters should all be feminists, Christian feminists, who committed to struggle and resist to ensure that women and men, and children are all treated as human beings. We need the feminism of compassion found in the stories that have inspired our courage as women religious over the centuries. These stories began long ago with Jesus and the women he encountered. Women who teach us to treat women like Jesus did, respectfully, lovingly. Women who, like Jesus, teach us to take counsel from Mary, his mother, advising him at the wedding in Cana. Women who, like Jesus, teach us to find wisdom in women like the Samaritan at the well; Women who, like Jesus, teach us to accept the challenges of the Syrophenician woman; and women who call us to notice suffering like he did when the hemorrhaging woman touched him. Christian feminism calls us to love, trust, and challenge the men who journey with us. . Adopting a feminist perspective will actually make us more faithful to God, our church, our communities, and our families.

We need to remember that Christian feminism finds inspiration in the Genesis story, recognizing that half of all those created in the divine image and likeness of God are undervalued in nearly every social, civic, political – and certainly every ecclesial arena. Christian feminism calls us to notice that women bear the effects of poverty, illness, and violence in disproportionate degrees in nearly every country in the world – and we need to change that reality. We need to embrace the cause of women because we are women religious and this is like Johann Metz said, our “dangerous memory.”<sup>11</sup>

As women religious, we need to join women around the world in their effort to humanize their lives. I bring to mind the images of women dancing to resist violence, the *One Billion Rising Revolution*.<sup>12</sup> Have we danced with them? Women need us as we are, fewer and older, but present. Memory will remind us, that their cause has been our cause: standing with women who are vulnerable to violence and marginalization is our story. We cannot be absent from the forums where women are in conversation about bringing about the

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<sup>9</sup>An example is the exhibit “Mujeres que no bajan los brazos: Historias de mujeres resilientes y valientes,” Médicos sin Fronteras, <https://www.msf.mx/event/exposicion-mujeres-que-no-bajan-los-brazos>

<sup>10</sup> AIN'T I A WOMAN, Sojourner Truth, 1851 Women's Convention Akron Ohio

<sup>11</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All be Feminists*, Vintage Books, 2014. She says in the book published from her TED talk: “Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. I am angry. We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change. In addition to anger, I am also hopeful, because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to remake themselves for the better.” P. 21.

<sup>12</sup> “One Billion Rising is the biggest mass action to end violence against women (cisgender, transgender, and those who hold fluid identities that are subject to gender-based violence) in human history. The campaign, which launched on Valentine's Day 2012, began as a call to action based on the staggering statistic that 1 in 3 women on the planet will be beaten or raped during her lifetime. With the world population at 7 billion, this adds up to more than ONE BILLION WOMEN AND GIRLS.” <https://www.onebillionrising.org/about/campaign-one-billion-rising/>

humanization of all peoples, that echoes the touch, friendship and validation of women by Jesus in the Gospels. We have to share with them the stories of our women, our sisters, who fought in the face of adversity as prophets of compassion. We need to return to our storytelling of the women of faith, the women of wisdom, the women of spirit, on whose shoulders we stand. We need to tell the stories of courage of the women in our institutes who journey with other women creating and sowing hope simply, hopefully, and respectfully. Sister Andrea Lee, IHM, President of Alverno College, recently spoke about these women saying:

We respect each other, enjoy each other and support each other, right until the moment we yield each sister to the welcoming arms of the Lord at the moment of her death. It is that good and that powerful. That very evident strength and what it is capable of accomplishing is part of what drew me to religious life. Watching women teach each other; wanting them to teach me. Seeing joy, goodness, intelligence and commitment coalesce. Slowly coming to see that the power, the boldness we could have together, is power and boldness none of us would have alone. Embarking on a lifelong adventure with like-minded women. Good and wise women taught me that. And that is part of how I came to be where I am today.<sup>13</sup>

Sister Andrea did not say this, but I will: I am sure they were all Christian feminists, like we should be!

Memory will bring out so many stories: the women of the Bible, of our Church, of our institutes, of our time, will speak to us of faith and courage, and resiliency. The call to remember lies beyond the careful narrative of complementarity or even collaboration, this is about the mission of humanization. We need to join our hands, our voices, and our prayer to every cause that restores human dignity because we remember who we are. As leaders, for example, we should be champions of the *Talita Kum* networks in our countries. But humanization also needs to happen within our institutes. We need to honestly share our stories of complicity and silence, because we have them. We need to lead into transparency and accountability in every area of our institute's life. We need to tell our ongoing story of struggle and courage to build up the Reign of God in the midst of our own Church.

Our memory will inspire our courage. Religious women bear a responsibility for the integrity of human life in their DNA. The time for standing as women with other women is now. The time for standing at the foot of the cross of suffering of so many is now, like the women that have come before us. Otherwise, the compassionate humanization that Jesus called us to witness might be lost on a new generation of women who need to know why we remain self-respecting women who are Catholic.

### **NOTICING: To live our moment fully**

We have been called to lead during a time of profound transformation. I do not need to say this to you as leaders of your institutes. Is this transformation more significant or less than others? Historians will remind us that it is not, but this is the one we get to live through! Whether it is the most significant or not matters little. Change is everywhere -- big, massive, challenging, often scary. Borders are changing, maps are changing, the world is "moving," massive migrations of people, ideas and goods are now possible like never before. Even climate and our understanding of gender are changing. And, the Church which I confess I thought would take another century to ask itself some critical questions, is now asking them! Could it be that our Church is also on the brink of change? Movement will describe our time. Leading when everything is moving requires a whole new set of skills, leading a religious institute looks different than it did before or after the Council. The global south looks different because it is not the same before as after colonial rule, or before and after the missionaries left. No matter what focus or angle we use, these are different times!

We need to be horizon watchers! We keep watch for dawn because we believe, because we know the night will end. "However long the night"<sup>14</sup>, we persevere because we believe the gift of God, the gift of hope, will

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Lee, IHM, "Profundo Encuentro: An Adventure of Many Surprises", National Catholic Sisters Week, March 10. 2019.

<sup>14</sup> LCWR published a book sharing the experience of the conference during the Vatican Investigation, the sisters wrote they learned that: "That the Spirit works in and through groups, not solely through individuals. That contemplation is a powerful gift from God. That God loves not only us, but also those in conflict with us, equally and extravagantly. However long the night, we were made for these times." *However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis*, LCWR, 2018, p.10

be ours. We need to be spiritual sentinels for all humanity. On the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life offered us the document “*Scrutate*”, *Keep Watch!*, calling us: “To search the horizons of our life and our times, in watchful prayer; to peer into the night in order to recognize the fire that illuminates and guides, to gaze into the heavens, looking for the heralds of blessing for our dryness. To keep awake and watch, and to make intercession, firm in our faith.”<sup>15</sup>

To respond to our call to prophesy so we can journey into hope, we must lean into our contemplative identity; we must notice everything! Noticing contemplatively is a new asceticism; noticing with prophetic hope requires a long loving look that holds everything before it, no matter how strange, painful or different. We need to be the advance of the *Iglesia en Salida*, the Church that goes forth, because of who we are. The future of our life as religious will be intimately related to our courage to enter into a spirituality of noticing how God’s spirit is stirring new insights and hope around us.

We need to start by noticing the shifts that are taking place in religious life, overcoming the usual temptations of leadership. The temptation to stay busy with minor tasks that are important but not critical. The temptation to nostalgia, to keep rewinding the videos, when we *used to*, when we *had*, or *were*, or *did*; obsessed with declining numbers and aging, only focused on what is dying. The temptation of our good works! We have done amazing work for our church and the countries we serve: built and staffed healthcare ministries big and small, taught generations of children, but maintaining the “ministries,” however important, can also keep us from noticing the amazing movements taking place before us. The temptations make us shortsighted; they blur the capacity to notice the new.

Overcoming the core temptations of leadership, we might then begin to notice joyfully what is emerging around us — the “shift” of energy for religious life from the global north to the global south. The fourth wave of religious migration currently underway differs from the sixteenth and nineteenth-century missionary migrations, because it is flowing in the opposite direction, or could it be in the right direction today!<sup>16</sup> The entire center of gravity of the Church is moving south, and our noticing is “colored” by our prejudice. How many more times do I have to hear about women seeking entrance to our congregations from countries in the global south that: “*they only want a visa, or an education, or a comfortable life*”? How many times will I hear that “*celibacy is a challenge in their culture*” but clearly not in ours? We also need to notice how we notice!

We need to be asking the right questions, not because we will find the answers but because questions will guide our noticing. Where is the need? What is ours to do? Who are we today? Who are we globally? How are we globally? Where are we being invited to collaborate, network, build bridges within and across religious life?

A spirituality of noticing will move us to the small meaningful acts of compassion that restore hope. Then we will join the restorers around us, restoring creation, human dignity and peace, one little step at a time!

### **SOW: To Own our Call as Leaders**

The seeds of prophetic hope need to be planted, watered, and tended. This work requires leadership. As UISG convenes the leadership of women religious institutes from the whole world, here we are, the supreme moderators, the general superiors, the leaders of our communities. What is ours to do so we can continue that journey to hope? We have a legacy of leadership. Sisters have been in leadership roles for centuries in institutions, ministries and pastoral work long before women could vote, register in a university, or even own property. This is our legacy; our story is proof that women can lead even in the Church! And when they do, they weave solidarity and sow hope!

We sow hope by doing what is ours to do as leaders elected by our institutes. We are women in the service of leadership, called by our sisters to serve our charism. We need to own this leadership with integrity together with our councils. We lead into a vision of hope by convening, advocating, calling forth, inviting, gathering,

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<sup>15</sup> *Keep Watch!*, Congregation of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2014, No. 1.

<sup>16</sup> See Mary Johnson’s et al new book, *Migration for Mission: International Catholic Sisters in the United States*, Oxford, 2019.

inviting to see the whole! We need to dare to lead, as Brené Brown defines a leader as “anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential.”<sup>17</sup> Our sisters have called us to lead, someone else can plan a funeral or rearrange the furniture in the motherhouse. Of course, we call forth the gifts of others; we take counsel; we delegate, and we must lead into community. Leadership in our religious institutes must foster, care, nurture, and create the sacred space that will ensure community, collegiality, and collaboration. The future of hope promised in Isaiah is embedded in communion. Hope is the gift of communion!

To sow hope, we need to lead our way out of our version of clericalism. We need to do our work, name it, call it and confess it. We need to work hard to expel the demons around the service of authority, by exercising the kind of prophetic leadership that will sow hope. We must both recognize the authoritarianism and also call out the rogue individualism that breeds around it. The conference celebrating 50 years since *Perfectae Caritatis*, had some serious admonitions about the abuse of authority in our institutes.<sup>18</sup> An honest examination of conscience will identify the shadow side of our exercise of authority found in all our institutes. While respectful of culture, we should never use it to justify abuse of authority, favoritism, or even the “new tribalism” that is emerging among us, where belonging requires ideological alignment and which is prone to condemnation of the other and polarization. Our turn to lead is now, we are called as custodians of the body which is the congregation. I pray that when it is our turn to hand on the leadership of our respective institutes, we will do so with a healthier understanding of the vulnerability of its power and authority.

We can offer something from our collective wisdom, our years of discussion, our special chapters, our efforts to make the renewal called for by the Vatican Council real and tangible. Our institutes have been slowly, painfully, sometimes even comically moving from vertical models for authority to horizontal, even circular models. We need to lead this shift- to sow hope! Respectful of legitimate authority, we have learned to share our gifts. But none of this can happen if we do not assume the responsibility given to us by our institute, if we are not the ultimate “moderators” of our community.

We are leading a life in motion! We cannot afford the time to dock our respective fleets; instead, we need to sail, and repair as we go. We need to lead into a “both-and” where we continue to encourage the transformation and yet offer our sisters sufficient structural certainty that will hold the movement. Vicki Wuolle, CSA images this by saying: “I often refer to the experience as building the ship while we sail, which is an image that helps us in holding the balance between having enough structure in place to offer support to the mission we serve, while also being fluid enough to allow ourselves to be shaped by the reality.”<sup>19</sup> We need to lead beyond the hierarchical model, where we are still the “reverend mother” surrounded by “obedient daughters”- beyond the “tyranny of consensus”<sup>20</sup> where because sometimes when there is a leader in every chair, there is no leader! Hope will not thrive in communities with absolute leaders or in leaderless communities. We need to lead into a new way of exercising authority, not by shying away from it, not by hiding behind the flower arrangements for the next feast, but by daring to be real, daring to lead from our vulnerability. We need to be real and honest about ourselves in leadership, the days we wonder why, the days we cannot see the way forward, the overwhelming and grief filled days.

We need to lead into collegiality, collaboration, and networking like never before! The model of solidarity that UISG represents needs to be owned and cultivated. We have been convened; this assembly is a place of collegiality. I would even dare to say synodality! Both collegiality and collaboration also need leadership. One of the most sacred responsibilities we hold is “connecting/networking” our institutes with other institutes, with our conferences, with religious around the world, with other organizations, and of course with the Church. I pray that when Pat Murray comes to the United States in August, she will challenge us to do just that: weave global solidarity. Leaders have the privilege of seeing the whole; leaders have the privilege of meeting other leaders. Sisters, may this Assembly be more than a photo-op with Pope Francis! May this Assembly motivate us to enter into our role as leaders of collegiality and collaboration.

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<sup>17</sup>Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead, Brave Work, Tough Conversations*, Whole Hearts, Random House, 2018, p.4.

<sup>18</sup> *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges Since Vatican II*, Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2018, see numbers 19-28.

<sup>19</sup> Vicki Wuolle, CSA, “Leading: Com(with)passion(suffering),” *LCWR Occasional Papers*, Winder 2019, p. 25

<sup>20</sup> Marissa Guerin, “Resisting the Tyranny of Inclusion in Organizations”, Blog April 12, 2018, <https://www.guerinconsulting.com/blog/resisting-the-tyranny-of-inclusion>

We lead so we can witness to compassion as a congregational body. We collaborate and network so that this journey of prophetic compassion can lead us to a future filled with hope!

## **CONCLUSION: Called to Restore Simply, Gently**

Movement is all around us. The ground beneath us is shifting. The institutions that have shaped much of our lives are required to enter into a profound examination of conscience. Just beyond the challenges that will transform religious life, just beyond, we will begin to see the dawn. A new smaller, more nimble but global religious life is emerging. Leadership will come from a different hemisphere; new cultures will inspire our charisms. The shift has begun and will probably be complete in our lifetimes, perhaps even during our tenure as leaders. And, all this is happening in the midst of massive changes in our world, our countries, and hopefully also our Church. We know this! Perhaps this is why we came to this Assembly to find inspiration in one another, to encourage and call forth, to know deeply, and profoundly that this moment must be faced in collaboration and collegiality.

Pope Francis offered a TED talk where he said that the future has a name, and the name of the future is hope!<sup>21</sup> We need to lead our institutes in this faith because we love our charism, our sisters, and those we serve. We lead because we remember, and we lead to create memory. Can we journey into this new time trusting that the core of our stories will be retold in new and creative ways as the new maps emerge and get redrawn? Can we hope as the center of gravity of religious life shifts to the south making a new future possible, less homogenous, less Euro-centric, more diverse, more colorful, more like God's creation?

We are called as leaders by our communities to lead at this time of great movement is. Are we ready and willing? Can we be brave enough to retell our stories of compassion and courage? Can we show our sisters how they are and have been the soil from which new life will emerge? I believe that when we trust our own stories, when we trust our voice as women, when we stand in our faith in the gift of hope-- we will join all those quiet men and women who are gently, simply, lovingly restoring creation, restoring peace and restoring human dignity.

We too will breed beautiful, small and frail butterflies!

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<sup>21</sup>Pope Francis, "Why the only future worth building includes everyone", 2017, [https://www.ted.com/talks/pope\\_francis\\_why\\_the\\_only\\_future\\_worth\\_building\\_includes\\_everyone/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/pope_francis_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone/transcript?language=en)



## **Sowers of Prophetic Hope for the Planet. The Responsibility of Religious Life: A Biblical Perspective**

**Sr. Judette Gallares, RC**

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*Original in English*

### **I. Introduction**

We are all aware of what is happening to our planet today. It is undeniable that devastating events concerning our planet are accelerating faster than imagined, marring the beauty and goodness of God's creation and hastening changes that threaten life-sustaining eco-systems.

Religious life has long taken on the responsibility of caring for our planet through our efforts in Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. However we need to have a more concerted and unified effort to do our part in engaging in prophetic action on behalf of our planet.

In this paper, I would like to address the theme of this talk, which is the responsibility of religious life to be sowers of prophetic hope for the planet from a biblical perspective. In preparing for this talk, several questions came to mind: "What can we learn from the biblical prophets about hope and the contexts of their hoping?" "How do we understand this hope within the framework of the creation texts in the bible?" "What are the important elements and characteristics of prophetic hope?" As coming from the prophetic lineage, how can we as religious live our responsibility to be sowers of prophetic hope before the severity of today's planetary reality?"

I will attempt to answer these questions by exploring the religious concept of hope in prophetic literature and its development in Christian scriptures, connecting this concept with our human responsibility to care for God's creation and gift of life. We shall place this discussion within the framework of what Christian biblical scholars call the grand "inclusio" in the Christian scriptures which begin and end with stories of God and creation: the creation stories of Genesis 1-2, and the eschatological reflections on the new heaven and earth, and the river and tree of life in Revelations 21-22. In between these two "book-ends" are stories of faith experiences of God's people, their reflections on who God is based on their interactions with the Divine in the midst of creation. These

stories and reflections place us in the larger picture and give us metaphorical concepts of where we come from, where we are going, what is our calling and who we are in relation to all that is created.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. What does Scripture say of Prophetic Hope?**

First, we need to locate prophetic hope in the greater context of the biblical prophet's vocation and one's understanding of such a vocation.

### ***a. Prophetic Vocation.***

In the biblical tradition both in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, God appointed individuals—women and men—and poured out upon them the gift of prophecy to serve the purpose of interpreting the divine will and to speak with divine authority. It also involves acting on behalf of God to build up the community (1 Cor 14:3-5). They were also visionaries, worship-leaders, healers, miracle-workers, conscientizers, counselors, deliverers, etc. In the Christian tradition, the prophets have been regarded as visionaries of the future whose words pointed to the coming of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Let us then glean from the biblical literature some of the salient features of the prophetic vocation.

First, the true vision of Israel's prophets has permeated the manner of his thoughts so that he sees things from God's perspective. The Spirit of God enables the prophets to feel with God and to share God's attitudes, values, feelings and emotions. This enables them to see the events of their time as God sees them and to feel the same way about these events as God feels.

Second, the prophet is also the conscience of a community and a nation. The prophet is out there watching for what might happen to the community, issuing a warning, trying to alert everyone and seeing implications in what is going on if the community does not respond to the "signs of the times."

Third, the prophet announces darkness and gloom whenever the community is disobedient to God's word and unfaithful to God's covenant, but also prepares the community for the renewal of the covenant and to be open to a future full of hope. Thus, fundamental to the prophet's mission is obedience to God's word. The prophet always goes forth, albeit reluctantly, bearing a message that is not one's own. That message is always extended to our world with an urging to return to what is essential, to discover a relationship with God whose love is eternal.

The prophet holds in one's person the tension between present realities and future possibilities, between temptation to despair and fidelity to God's promise, between images of terror and glimpses of a new tomorrow. It is within this very tension that prophetic hope is located. What then is prophetic hope and what elements and characteristics can we draw from the insights about how it is perceived and lived by biblical prophets?

### ***b. Prophetic Hope.***

Inherent in the prophetic vocation is to be a sower of hope, to be engaged in prophetic action that will eventually bring about a restoration of faith and life. The biblical prophets holds together both critique of their present time and hope for the larger meaning and purposes of God. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the prophet is not only an apocalyptic doomsayer, but also a hope-giver.<sup>3</sup> The characteristic atmosphere all throughout the Hebrew Scriptures is that of hope even if there is no Hebrew word which corresponds exactly to "hope," and no precise concept of hope in the sense of "desire accompanied by expectation."<sup>4</sup> The motive of hope remains the same in the prophetic literature: only Yahweh can give Israel a future and a hope (Jer 29:11; 31:17); each prophet may differ from one

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<sup>1</sup> Cherice Bock, "Climatologists, Theologians, and Prophets: Toward an Ecotheology of Critical Hope", *Crosscurrents*, March 2016, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, Gen. Ed., *Harper's Biblical Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), p. 826.

<sup>3</sup> See Bock, pp. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> John McKenzie, SJ, *Dictionary of the Bible*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1998. Originally published in UK: Geoffrey Chapman: 1976, pp.368-9.

another in the way the message is presented depending on the historical period and context of the prophetic message.<sup>5</sup> It is almost commonplace that the living has hope, but when death becomes certain, hope ceases. Hope and life are held in one breath. However, Hebrew prophetic literature shows flashes of hope that the power and covenant love of Yahweh will find a way to exhibit themselves even beyond the grave (Pss 16:16; 73:25), but this hope takes no definite form.<sup>6</sup>

Let us glean from this general description of prophetic hope elements and characteristics that distinguishes it from the hope that people are more familiar with, which is a more passive experience of wishing, desiring, or even optimism.

### ***c. Elements and Characteristics of Prophetic Hope.***

1. *Prophetic hope is rooted in contemplation and mysticism.* One thing is clear at the outset: prophetic hope is rooted in the prophetic experience of mysticism, which aligns the prophet with God's plan and vision. The prophets describe their experience in imagery and symbolism accompanied by an acknowledgement that the Word comes from Yahweh.<sup>7</sup> This element is principally a compulsion by a personal external will, which the prophet cannot overcome in spite of his own unwillingness to speak the word of Yahweh, an unwillingness which is manifest in Jeremiah (Je 1:7; 6:11; 20:9; Am 3:8).<sup>8</sup>

The prophet's closeness to God enables him to see the entire creation—the universe, the planet and everything in it from God's perspective.

2. *Prophetic hope is critical hope.* It critiques the internal and external human structures of domination that destroy the original beauty and meaning of God's creation. It is based on the discipline of critical thinking that leads to a discerned action-oriented response to despair and negativism. Unfortunately, many of us still find ourselves longing for the restoration of the old world and its standard modes of operation, however such inclinations do not bode well for what our planet needs today. There is a urgent need for Christians in general and religious in particular to move from a space of uncritical hopefulness into critical hope, where one spurs into action from the place of discernment.

Critical hope involves letting go of the old structures, and old ways of thinking. Critical hope "subverts long-held beliefs, dismantles trusted social structures, and exposes illusions and trivialities."<sup>9</sup> Instead, it demands wholehearted obedience—a deep listening to God's voice saying to Jeremiah, "Look, today I have set you over the nations and kingdoms, to uproot and to knock down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (Je 1:10). It involves telling the present to lament environmental destruction and evoking the memory of God's dream for creation, raising consciousness of the global ecocide that threatens humanity and the entire planet in the here and now.<sup>10</sup>

3. *Prophetic hope exists on the margins and is rooted in solidarity with the sufferings of those in the margins.* It is prophetic hope which gives people courage to act faithfully, even in the face of oppression and suffering. The prophets spoke words of hope to God's people when they were in exile and as they returned to their destroyed homeland.

Biblical scholars have contended that prophetic literature may be full of fractures, tensions, and contradictions, but it is firm in the conviction that conventional power structures, settled religious

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Stulman, Louis, Kim, Hyun Chul Paul.; *You Are My People : An Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, EBSCO : eBook Collection Account: ns101917.main.ed.s. (EBSCOhost) - printed on 1/25/2019 2:08 AM via USJ UNIVERSITY OF SAINT JOSEPH, p.95.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Scott, "Greening the Vows: *Laudato Si'* and Religious Life, *The Way*, 54/4 (October 2015), p. 85.

categories, and robust geopolitical systems are the wrong places to look for hope and God's blessings.<sup>11</sup> For instance, by the end of the book of the Prophet Jeremiah, it becomes clear that God's place in the world is not in the settled religious and political structures and among the powerful, but among the broken and dispossessed, the captured and conquered, among the vulnerable and innocent victims, thus unmasking for us today's illusions of power and reveals God's solidarity with the exiles of old and the exiles of today.<sup>12</sup>

4. *Prophetic hope encompasses meaning-making in communities of faith.* The biblical prophet urges the community of faith to move forward into a future full of hope by enabling them to make meaning of the situation in order to transcend their suffering. The prophet does this by engaging people's imaginations so they can adjust the way they look at the present in order to have a broader view of a future beyond their situation of suffering.

According to theologian Cherice Bock, in the biblical books, especially those of prophecy and wisdom, one finds two major types of hope: (1) the relatively easy hope of Proverbs, which is the hope for living faithfully within one's own lifetime and providing a safe and livable future for one's children, and (2) a long-term hope of participating in the community of promise.<sup>13</sup>

I agree with her that it is the second kind of hope, which requires a much broader story, that will make sense of one's life. For instance, during the time of the Israelites' exile from the Promised Land, one would endure exile knowing the deeper meaning of their suffering based on the hope of God's promise of faithfulness to the community. The paschal mystery of Christ's life invites us to hope in the story of suffering, redemption, and liberation God enacted through him. The hope that the paschal mystery carries draws us to participate in that story, making meaning of one's life through the lens of that past, present, and future hope.<sup>14</sup>

5. *Prophetic hope is textual.*<sup>15</sup> The written prophecy takes on a life of its own, often independent of the spoken word of the prophet. The text serves as a lasting reminder for future generations that God alone is the "source of our hope" (Ps 62:5). We need to return constantly to God's word and contemplate it lest we forget to hope in times of trial and difficulty.

### III. Prophetic Hope within the Framework of the Biblical Texts on Creation

We simply cannot discuss our responsibility towards our planet without considering the biblical texts on creation. These texts serve as a framework in understanding our call as religious to be sowers of prophetic hope for our planet. Within this framework, the message is clear that from the abundance of God's wisdom and love, everything is created, and creation invites us into a covenant, calling forth from us a commitment to and responsibility for creation similar to God's own.

#### *a. The Grand "Inclusio" of Genesis 1-3 and Revelations 20-22.*

The theme of creation at the beginning and at the end of the Bible is highlighted as an important element in interpreting everything that falls within.<sup>16</sup> Interpreted this way, the story of creation, sin and the Fall in Gen 1-3 and the cosmic, embodied redemption in Revelation 20-22, as well as the cosmic redemption of creation in Romans 8:18-23, present convincing evidence for the Christian

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<sup>11</sup> See Louis Stulman and Hyum Chul Paul Kim, p.95.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Bock, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See Louis Stulman and Hyum Chul Paul Kim, p. 95. They assert that hope is enshrined textually in the Bible.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Bushlack, "A New Heaven and a New Earth: Creation in the New Testament" in Tobias Winright, editor. *Green Discipleship: Catholic Theological Ethics and the Environment*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, Christian Brothers Publications, 2011, p.106. These texts, according to the author, are referred to as an "inclusio," a literary tool used by the authors of Scripture, in which an important theme occurs at the introduction and then again at the end of a text and highlights the theme as an important element in interpreting everything that falls between.

expectation that the redemption offered in Christ will entail a transformation, but not destruction, of the physical and material existence of the universe.

To correct the traditional narrow Christian understanding of eternal life spent where the “soul” goes in a disembodied existence, there is a greater need to reread creation texts in the Bible in order to appreciate the wisdom of God’s plan in gifting us with a created world and to restore our relationship with our planet.<sup>17</sup> This has become more urgent as we are living in an age when the threat of ecological and nuclear destruction is real and pervasive. Theologians cite the irony that it is our very technological creativity and sophistication that have apparently given us the ability to destroy our planet and humanity as well.<sup>18</sup> The consequences of these advances are making an increasing number of people view the profound holistic sensibility of our biblical ancestors and of the more “primitive” peoples with greater respect, and thus in this context we ought to listen to the biblical stories and texts to get a sense of their vision of our planet.<sup>19</sup>

Christian hope is prophetic hope for the future of our world and of our planet which is based on God’s faithful, sustaining, creative power. God’s powerful Word, which brought the world into being is powerful enough to accomplish God’s desire for what God has created.<sup>20</sup> God has called us humans to be in partnership in this divine endeavor and creativity. As Christians, we are part of a biblical tradition that asserts this explicitly of God. The world has a future because in Jesus Christ it has been chosen intentionally, labored and sacrificed for by God, as expressed powerfully in John 3:16: “For God so loves the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). The key word here is world,<sup>21</sup> not just me, certainly not just my soul, not even us or our collective souls. The Christian understanding of salvation must recover its inherent universality and inclusiveness. It is something which involves not just human beings, but the whole of creation.

#### ***b. Cosmic Redemption of Creation in Romans 8:18-25***

Paul in his Letter to the Romans writes that “The whole creation is groaning in labor pains until now” (Rom 8:19). In bondage to decay, creation waits to be set free in order to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God, who are themselves groaning while waiting in hope for the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8:18-25). These words from Romans speak to us of prophetic hope that inspires and sustains the Christian on the journey to God.

Why would creation itself wait with eager longing for redemption? How can we imagine the gracious, compassionate love of God for the created world? Biblical scholars in answering these questions suggest that perhaps creation itself has been affected by human sinfulness as Paul suggests in these following two verses “creation was subjected to futility” (verse 20) and that “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (verse 21).<sup>22</sup> In this section, the text refers to the curse placed upon Adam and Eve as a result of their sin in Genesis 3:17 when God proclaims, “cursed is the ground because of you,” which indicates a curse has been placed upon creation as well.<sup>23</sup> In Paul’s thought, there is no radical separation of the body from the soul, neither of the body and the flesh from the rest of created existence; all of these elements will participate in the redemption offered through Christ.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>18</sup> John R. Sachs. *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 21. The author cites Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> The word “world,” as doctrinally defined in the Bible, is NOT referring to other planets in outer space but to defined ages and prevailing conditions during those ages on planet Earth, be they past, present, or future.

<sup>22</sup> See Bushlack, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

It is clear that the world is not as it should be. In prophetic hope, we reread the passage from Romans with critical minds where we look at the reality of our world and realize that things need to change. Suffering and hope are contrasted. We see the system that causes us to suffer anxiety and fear, while at the same time we hold on to hope because we can envision the world as it should be.<sup>25</sup> The whole creation participates in this lament as in “groaning” while simultaneously critiquing, suffering, and hoping.<sup>26</sup> When we participate with creation in this “groaning and longing” with prophetic and critical hope which is continuous, active and expectant kind of hoping, we receive the benefit of this action in that our act helps us become conscious of our place in this process of hoping.<sup>27</sup> Hope engenders hope.

The Book of Revelation states that “the curse of destruction will be abolished” (22:3) as proclaimed in the cosmic redemption in Romans 8 and the undoing of the curse upon creation in Gen 3.

In the final vision in Revelations, the author ends his description of the revelation given to him by leaving his readers with a compelling image of a redeemed world in which the natural elements of creation (light, earth, water) all maintain a significant role within the new and heavenly Jerusalem, established by God. This image is beautifully portrayed in the tree of life, whose leaves “are for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2).<sup>28</sup>

It is clear from our rereading of biblical texts that creation has an intrinsic value to God; it is not merely instrumental. The entire creation, not just humans have roles to play in God’s plan of salvation; the two cannot be separated.<sup>29</sup> Neither can God’s justice be conceived of without incorporating a healing care for, and transformation of, creation along with the transformation and redemption of God’s people.<sup>30</sup> Therefore because of this interdependence, any harm inflicted upon creation is ultimately harm inflicted upon humans, and a real affront to the plan for all of creation that God has revealed in Christ.<sup>31</sup>

If the reality of the world and our planet as a living, active intentional and self-constituting whole is what God wishes to save, then God’s saving activity is not something that happens outside of the world’s activity, especially in and through human action.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the necessity that salvation comes from God and the necessity that human beings take responsibility for the well-being of the world and the planet are directly proportional—the greater our belief in God’s salvation, the greater is our obedience of faith in acknowledging our active responsibility for the whole of creation.<sup>33</sup>

#### **IV. The Responsibility of Religious Life in Sowing Prophetic Hope for our Planet**

The impetus to reclaim the prophetic dimensions of biblical narratives arises from the fact that God calls us to think and act in relation to all spheres of human experience—social, geopolitical, economic, technological, ecological and religious. Religious life is precisely situated today where there is tremendous challenge to live out the call to be sowers of prophetic hope.

Paul, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, affirms that God appointed in the church first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers (1 Cor 12:28). These three branches make up the structure of the church as we know now—with the bishops belonging to the apostles’ branch, consecrated life to the prophets, and theologians to the teachers. Although the three branches are not totally exclusive to one another in certain positions, what is essential to the consecrated vocation is its prophetic functions—discerning God’s will for the church, presenting new models of following Christ, and playing a

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<sup>25</sup> See Bock, pp. 26-7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> See Bushlack, p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>32</sup> See Sachs, p. 24

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

corrective role in the church whenever the values of the gospel are forgotten or compromised.<sup>34</sup> If one of the primary goals of the prophets was to bring about the repentance of Israel—or, in some cases, the surrounding nations, it therefore implies that religious today must act as the prophets did: to usher people to repentance over the sins humans have committed against the goodness and beauty of God's creation.

Religious congregations all through the ages have given witness to their prophetic vocation in the service of the church and of the world. However, our prophetic vocation is a calling that needs continual renewal lest it becomes rigid, stale and irrelevant before the challenges of our rapidly changing times.

This continual renewal involves the following movements:

### ***Movements of Ongoing Renewal***

1. *From Repentance to Conversion.* To be sowers of prophetic hope, we need to undergo continual conversion, especially conversion to the planet Earth as God's beloved creation. Repentance precedes conversion: a healthy realization that I have contributed somehow to the rapid devastation of the planet by my complacency or unmindful action. This type of awareness leading to repentance can only happen if we have a contemplative stance before God's creation and can see the beauty and goodness of God's creation from God's vision.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson is increasingly convinced that the conversion needed today is "a turning that will impact our whole lives."<sup>35</sup> She describes this kind of conversion in the following way:

*"It will expand our understanding of the God we are called to love with all our heart and soul, mind and strength, making clear that the Creator is also the Redeemer who accompanies the whole natural world with saving compassion. It will also expand the neighbor we are called to love as ourselves, since the beaten-up traveler left by the side of the road whose wounds we must tend to, includes needy and poor human beings along with natural ecosystems and all their creatures. Doctrine, ethics, and spirituality now become ecological as we deal with pressing human concerns in a broader planetary perspective."*<sup>36</sup>

Pope Francis in his exhortation, *Laudato Si*, has given us ample motivation and guidance in allowing God's creation to awaken in us the mystic spirit so that we can see through God's perspective his plans and intentions by inviting us to contemplate on creation. This "contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us," since "for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice"[LS 57]; and we can understand better the "meaning of each creature if we contemplate it within the entirety of God's plan: ...Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other"[LS 63].

2. *From the Center to the Periphery.* This is a movement from the security of our established institutions to the vulnerability of being in the periphery. Prophecy necessarily leads religious to the periphery, which for Pope Francis constitutes the privileged setting for religious life. Prophetic hope therefore exists in the margins and is rooted in solidarity with the sufferings of those in the margins. By standing at the margins and not at the center of the church, religious are able to challenge the hierarchy and the entire church to respond to the "signs of the times." For instance, even before the publication of Pope Francis' Exhortation, *Laudato Si*, religious women, have already been in the forefront of the ecological issue, raising people's consciousness in front of devastations brought about by global warming and other forms of manipulation of nature. This prophetic action was a fruit not only of many discussions but also of periods of prayerful consideration on how religious must

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<sup>34</sup> Based on the lecture notes of John Fuellenbach, S.V.D. on the Church, East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1999.

<sup>35</sup> See Johnson, p. 195.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 195-6.

respond to the challenges of our times.<sup>37</sup> This was a way of awakening the people to be more sensitive to the ecological problems of our planet by leading through example and raising people's consciousness about their responsibility towards the environment.

3. From critical thinking to discerned prophetic action. In order to engage in prophetic action, we must engage in critical thinking and discernment, and allow ourselves, as a fruit of contemplation, to be personally transformed. The process of prophetic hope is not easy or comfortable. It is bound up in the essence of what it means to be human and all the capacities God endowed us in our humanity. We have the ability to choose to live with a sense of meaning sustained by hope. Theological reflection must be well-equipped to uncover narratives that advance our critical powers, our capacity to use our knowledge, imagination, intuition to distinguish what leads to death and destruction or to life and wholeness.<sup>38</sup> Such reflection offers hope in the midst of fear. Standing between the tension of hope and fear is the location of the biblical prophet who speaks truth in the midst of fear like in the case of the prophet Jeremiah who from the outset names and breaks a surplus of denials and deceptions, and dares to critique social structures, domain assumptions, and prevailing values that anesthetize the community to its true condition.<sup>39</sup>

Critical thinking must be embodied, spurring us to speak and act against the system of worldly domination that tends to destroy by interpreting the term domination as human appetite for power and wealth, rather than as the providential care God displays in creation and in salvation history. Critical thinking that leads to discerned prophetic action has the audacity to not just envision but also to move toward liberation of the entire community of creation still longing and groaning for redemption.<sup>40</sup>

4. *From an exclusive human community to an inclusive planetary community of creation.* Constructing a prophetic environment cannot be the work of one individual but of a community of faith where everyone is involved in a communitarian prophetic response. By prophetic response, it means an intentional call to engage in passionate and courageous action to help uplift the plight of and stand in solidarity with those rendered most vulnerable in our planet.<sup>41</sup> We need a vision of consecrated life as something much bigger than ourselves, something that reaches out beyond the here and now. We are about the anticipation of the new heaven and the new earth, of a universal and cosmic communion of a kingdom where "God will be all in all."<sup>42</sup> With communities of faith moving towards revisioning the meaning of community, there is an urgent need for religious life to enter into this ongoing reflection and glean insights from biblical exploration into the relationship between human beings and the rest of creation.

A careful rereading of biblical texts on creation will provide a broader context within which to situate the special and distinctive roles of humans in creation, recognizing these without lifting humans out of creation as above God's other creatures.<sup>43</sup> Although biblical writers were not able to plot such interconnections based on the insights of modern science, they offer much more than science can offer in matters of value, ethics, responsibility and, especially creation's relation with God.<sup>44</sup>

All earthly creatures share the same planet and participate in an interdependent community, orientated above all to God our common Creator. Our prophetic vocation must open us up to others and to the

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<sup>37</sup> UCANews.com, Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2009, <http://www.ucanews.com/2009/10/05/religious-add-green-vow-to-consecrated-life/>. Retrieved 2009-10-18.

<sup>38</sup> Clingerman, Forrest, "Theologians as Interpreters—Not Prophets—in a Changing Climate," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83.2 (2015), p. 346.

<sup>39</sup> See Stulman, Louis, Kim, Hyun Chul Paul, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> See Bock, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Angela D. Sims, Douglas Powe Jr., and J. Bernard Hill, "Reclaiming the Prophetic: Toward a Theology of Hope and Justice in a Fragmented World," *Religio-Political Narratives in the United States*, p. 95.

<sup>42</sup> See Scott, p. 84.

<sup>43</sup> See Bauckham, p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

world, to offer ourselves, our communities and our planet earth as a place of inclusive hospitality for humanity and the whole of creation.

In the Christian scriptures, relationships and community are important in finding and maintaining hope. In the community of creation, we need an interdependent network of care. Caring for our planet is becoming an imperative in expressing our love of neighbor. We sow prophetic hope for our planet when our communities understand and live the commandment of “love of neighbor” in the wider context of caring for our vulnerable planet. Loving our neighbors must include doing what we can to enable our planet to sustain the flourishing of our fellow human beings. It requires us to assess our lifestyles and priorities in light of the sustainable life of all our “neighbors”—those who live next door and those on the other side our planet.<sup>45</sup>

## **V. Conclusions and Implications**

Having explored the various biblical dimensions of our prophetic vocation against the background of our planet’s vulnerable condition, we return to the question of what is the responsibility of religious life as sowers of prophetic hope for our vulnerable planet.

Here are some salient points based on our rereading of biblical texts:

1. Like the biblical prophets, religious life must provide encouragement for the people of faith to move forward into a hoped-for future by assisting them to make meaning out of the devastating situations our planet is going through and to challenge them to discern prophetic action. This cannot happen without forming religious develop a capacity for contemplation and critical thinking that leads to discerned prophetic actions for the sake of our planet.
2. We saw in the Christian scriptures that relationships and community are important in finding and maintaining prophetic hope. Beginning with ourselves and our institutions as communities of faith we go through the process of repentance towards ecological conversion. We lament for the sins of omission and commission towards God’s creation as we move from repentance to conversion. Each individual religious is invited to begin with one’s own inner ecological conversion as part of ongoing formation. In fact, we are challenged to integrate the process of ecological conversion in all levels of formation.
3. We are challenged to revision our understanding of consecrated life and the vows within the context of our relationship to all of God’s creation. This requires rereading the biblical references in coming to a renewed understanding of our consecrated vocation. This must be integrated into all levels of formation.
4. We are called to enter into greater solidarity with those in the periphery as this is the location of our prophetic vocation. To speak and act on behalf of our suffering brothers and sisters due to the many devastations happening in our planet.
5. Our prophetic vocation calls us to be agents of healing in the broken relationships of humanity and of our vulnerable planet.

Thus, to be true to our prophetic vocation, we can only be sowers of prophetic hope for the planet if we are rooted and immersed in God’s word, contemplating it as Jesus did who was deeply connected with everything that came into being as spoken by his Father. With poor, chaste, and obedient Jesus, our prophetic vocation calls us to situate ourselves in the periphery. It demands that we live our vows as a public commitment to remain open to the God of surprises who disrupts our established lifestyles and mindsets, and invites us to ecological conversion in order to help bring wholeness and healing to

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas J. Moo and Jonathan A. Moo. *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*. Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan. ePub Edition©February 2018: ISBN 978-0-3204-1655-5.

our broken and vulnerable planet. Like the biblical prophets, we are called to give counter-cultural witness to the pervading culture of domination that is spiraling our planet towards destruction. It is through prophetic hope that we groan with the whole of God's creation as we await the redeeming power of God's love restoring the original goodness and beauty of all there is.

**Reflection Question:**

Given the particular charism and mission of your Congregation, what do you discern as God's specific invitation(s) for you to live out the call to be "sowers of prophetic hope" in the different insertions in the world where your Congregation is found?



Sowers of Prophetic Hope  
 Seminatrici di speranza profetica  
 Säerinnen Prophetischer Hoffnung  
 Sembradoras de esperanza profética  
 Semeuses d'espérance prophétique  
 Semeadoras de esperança profética



## UISG Campaign for the Planet: *Laudato Si* and the Way Forward Presentation of a Commitment on the Environment

Sr. Sheila Kinsey, FCJM

“When we speak of the ‘environment’ what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it.” (LS#139)

### Foundation

On June 18, 2018, the UISG Board launched the campaign: *Sowing Hope for the Planet*, sharing efforts of women religious in putting *Laudato Si* into practice. Already, *Laudato Si* was spreading throughout religious communities, becoming a deeply meaningful connection with people and the earth through faith and the words of Pope Francis. This realization led to the awareness of this phenomenon developing into a deeper interconnection, carrying the message to a global network of religious working together to “hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” (LS #49) This collective listening creates a collective voice and a collective action that carries a powerful potential for making the message a reality rather than doing it as individuals. Emphasizing the fundamental connection that exists between the environmental crisis and the social crisis that we are currently experiencing, Pope Francis asks us for a personal and communal ecological conversion, often reminding us that “everything is interconnected.”

### History

The timing of the campaign comes with the growing awareness and urgency of climate change and the need to address its impact on the environment and society. *Laudato Si* offers a spiritual relationship and solutions to a seriously critical situation that are so desperately needed in our world today. It begins with awareness and unfolds with inspiration, giving our Sisters’ voice the influential power to make a difference, coordinating experiences that provide them and their connections the opportunities to become fully sensitive to the situation of our common home, so as “to dare to turn what is happening to the world into their own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.” (LS#19)

This provided an opportunity to not only develop a network that could help to spread what is being done, but also to highlight the work of women religious. For a long time, many have actively been working to stop the Earth’s devastation and its people, and this gathering, highlights their action and commitments.

The concept note was developed through the collaborative efforts of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Secretariat and the Global Catholic Climate Movement through the initiative of the International Union of Superior Generals (UISG), bringing together the richness and connections of its member congregations, so that the “interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan.” (LS#164)

Having a carefully developed plan has enabled us to fold into the framework new ways forward that would emerge from our experience with the webinars and our knowledge of the evolving needs of our care for creation. The structure of the plan was to:

- Coordinate efforts of the members of UISG
- Utilize the best means of communication
- Evaluate the effectiveness
- Find the best way to strengthen coordination
- Partner with organizations
- Develop a statement for the campaign at the Plenary to promote the position of UISG

Original action plans included:

- Webinars to announce the campaign and as an ongoing way to coordinate
- Coordinating prayers in various translations

- Celebrating the Season of Creation
- Observance of World Water Day on March 22
- Celebrating Earth Day on April 22
- Promoting GCCM ongoing opportunities for participation

Developing a timeline by means of the five webinars that have taken place offers a view of the organic development of the campaign. Topics were not initially planned, but rather unfolded as we opened the space and allowed the action to transform, following the natural passion and creativity of those involved. Thus, as Pope Francis states “change is impossible without motivation and a process of education.” (LS #15)

**Webinar #1: *Laudato Si'*: Everything is Interconnected**

- Launching the campaign with objectives, actions, witnessing potential, and beneficiaries
- ***Developing the foundational relationship that we are all interconnected...*** with each other, with the earth, with all living beings

**Webinar #2: *Saving Our Common Home and the Future of Life on Earth***

- ***Developing the awareness of the critical situations our world is in as well as opportunities to meet the challenges presented therein.***
- Third anniversary of *Laudato Si*.
- Pope Francis asks: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?”
- Focus on how to create a massive movement to meet the crises in our world.

**Webinar #3: *Inspiring Action with Love: Stories from Around the Globe***

- ***Developing the Presence of Strategic Plans in Global Action.***
- Focus on the promotion that has occurred and hearing for the first time from women religious who are engaged in action.

**Webinar #4: *In Solidarity: Interconnecting Global and Local Concerns***

- ***Developing the Impact of Major Meetings for the Life of the Planet and Coordinated Action.***
- Campaign progress with the upcoming launch of the website.
- Contributions from those who participated in major meetings and who could offer best practices for major concerns.

**Webinar #5: *Growing Seeds of Hope: Listening to the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor***

- ***Developing the Integration of Attending to the Needs of the Earth and the Poor.***
- Contributions from speakers whose communities have a process for the action they are engaging in globally.

Guided by the basic flexible framework for the campaign, we became more aware of the situations and the needs expressed by the Sisters and the richness shared with their resources. Expectations became clearer.

We affirmed the work which was already being done. We had a balance of sharing the work of the Sisters in various countries, in diverse ministries and in different stages of development. We also included information from the major events such as the third anniversary of *Laudato Si*, COP 24, Preparations for the Synod on the Amazon and updates from GCCM which is involved in a number of Catholic Church related experiences. Honoring guidance from *Laudato Si*, indeed, the process was recognizing the work of the Sisters, “to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.” (LS#210)

## Events and Resources

With ongoing development from the experience of women religious, the need became clear for an interactive platform that could hold the enormity of all the Sisters have been doing and be entirely dedicated to their works and which could be an interactive tool for them to both share and organize their efforts. A dedicated website would fulfill all of the needs which became apparent as we made our way forward... thus, the website was born.

The website, in six languages, offers various pages of information about the campaign and goals, with interactive and unifying areas which are updated regularly.

- Home page: highlights, news, and an action map which are updated with current information and the map growing a leaf at each location of action a sister has shared.
- Goals page: informational, with the goals of the campaign.
- Events page: updated with both upcoming and past opportunities for participation; this can include international days such as, World Water Day, Earth Day, webinars, Season of Creation, etc.
- Resources page: the heart of the website... it is the joint effort of the sisters and their willingness to share what they are doing and materials they are using in their efforts.
- Contact page: for contacting campaign coordinators.

A newsletter has been created to highlight what is happening, what is coming up, and as a way for congregations to get the big picture of where we are at. Through regular e-mail, a condensed version of what is happening is provided.

Moving to the heart of the campaign with the Sisters listening to the “cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor,” and what they are doing about it, we have prepared a video demonstrating some of the situations which are “both cries of the earth and of the poor.” The second part shows the various works that Sisters have shared with us from their congregational action and missions.

## Where We are At

As seen in the video, congregations are engaging in many important works. There is much that we can learn as we network and encourage one another to share resources. These works are occurring all over the world and we have the opportunity to bring them all together here to allow them to grow and spread in a joint effort gathered under a unifying perspective. From a Sister's efforts, certain themes emerged and categories of action determined how their efforts would be organized, with their selection and appropriate placement.

- Local and global communities
- Advocacy
- Parish
- Congregation
- *Laudato Si* study/course materials
- Schools: elementary, middle school, high school, and college

To understand the effect of both the campaign and the work of the Sisters, the following data were gathered:

- Video statistics:
  - Season of Creation in 4 languages: Nearly 2000 views
  - World Water Day in 5 languages: Nearly 17,000 views
- Webinars participants: for the April 11 session, 359 registration and many of those included groups of Sisters who gathered to view the session together

Interviews were also conducted with important connections:

- Sr. Alaide Deretti, FMA, Daughter of Mary Help of Christians and General Councilor for Missions
  - *Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology. She will explore the importance of the synod; insights from the preparation process; helpful information for the universal church; and, suggestions for engagement during the synod.*
- Tomás Insua, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM) and Collaborator of the UISG Campaign: Sowing Hope for the Planet
  - *Discuss the mission of GCCM; programs and events of Season of Creation; Engagement with the synod; COP25; Celebration of Earth Day 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary; 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Laudato Si; efforts to include Sisters in various offerings and in major events.*
- Fr. Jostrom Kureethadam, SDB, Coordinator of the sector on Ecology and Creation in the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development (DPIHD)
  - *Discuss the purpose of the section and describe some of the upcoming program opportunities: 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Laudato Si in Nairobi, Kenya (July); World Water Day (22 March); Celebration of Earth Day 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary; and, 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Laudato Si.*

## Moving Forward: Where are we going? Where do we want to go? Next steps

One major opportunity provided by the campaign is to raise a united voice and develop a collective strength to impact what is happening in our world. What is clear in our world history is that designated power structures usually are given the bigger say in what is happening and, often, the loudest voice. The UISG is a unifying voice for the Sisters around the world. Through this campaign, we have the opportunity to organize the voice of the Sisters in the effort on many levels of structures in order to enhance and recognize our contribution to the care of our Common Home.

Again, our hope is that the campaign will be a platform that brings these works together in a global movement by banding together in our efforts. The uniqueness of the campaign is that it is a myriad of efforts in many areas which can be brought together under the broad umbrella of "hearing the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor."

We join our efforts with the universal Church and our partners with local, national and global influence. The next steps include planned events and participation in points of action, and use of the momentum and energy of established days/events as tools to further spread the message of all. These are opportunities we want to promote and ensure we are participating in.

## Future of Campaign

### Survey Comments

Some themes that emerged from the survey about the future of the campaign offer us an opportunity to listen to the participants and to allow them to influence the unfolding of the campaign. It is important for their voices to be heard.

There were a number of suggestions for us to consider in the future for the campaign:

- Have the resources available in even more languages
- Provide a practical orientation for those beginning to be involved in the campaign
- Promote the use of a survey as a guide in helping to develop the spirituality of a congregation for Sowing Hope for the Planet
- Sessions on divestments in fossil fuels and investments in alternative energy resources
- Interest in information on the carbon footprint
- Have a place for sharing ideas
- Affirmation of working in solidarity
- Continue collecting such good resources from our religious communities

Much gratitude is continually expressed for the networking that has taken place because of the campaign. Groups have gathered to hear the webinars in their different languages and to discuss this experience in the common language of the group. The experience has increased the awareness of what the Sisters and their connections are doing to live *Laudato Si*. The live space of the webinars, even at global distances, allows us to come together in a dynamic way and to grow together as religious Sisters. We are seeing what we all are doing and experiencing our pain, we are engaging our efforts in the spiritual contexts of our congregations following of the Gospel and carefully thought through actions. Celebrations have brought joy to our efforts to bring hope.

The campaign needs your support in order for it to thrive and realize its potential. If you have not done so, please submit the name of a contact person from your congregation who would be responsible for sharing the information of the campaign with all of the Sisters. While we send out information to everyone in our contact list, it is still an important aspect to have one person who will be responsible for disseminating any campaign information and opportunities to their congregations, so all sisters are having the opportunity to be involved.

*Commitment for the common good in our environment, our common home*

After a year of reflecting on the work we have been doing together and taking seriously the call to take into our hearts the pain of the world, we accept the responsibility to determine what is ours to do. As international congregations we need to look at the ways we have been guilty of environmental destruction and disregard for these consequences to one another and especially to the poor. Sisters are present in countries where the lifestyle negatively impacts the rise in temperature, effecting climate change and where they are most affected by climate change. Our communities are both intimate with the cause and effect. With our personal commitment to one another, we are ideally positioned to respond compassionately in an integrated effort. As a community of Sisters living the Gospel, in solidarity with one another, we know that everything is interconnected, and we wish to live our religious life for the common good in our environment, our common home.

Therefore,

*We commit ourselves to both personal and communal conversion and*

*We wish to move forward together in an orchestrated and coordinated response in*

*Listening to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor*

*As we go forth as instruments of hope*

*In the heart of the world.*

As Pope Francis reminds us, “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.” (LS14)

As a result of our commitment, each General Superior is asked to discern appropriate action in one of the areas:

1. Observing of the Season of Creation (September 1 to October 4)
2. Engaging in the experience of the Synod “Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology”
3. Following prayerfully the events of the Synod
4. Advocating for the rights of indigenous people
5. Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Earth Day (April 22)
6. Celebrating the 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Laudato Si*
7. Supporting youth involvement in the campaign
8. Advocating for the commitment for countries to sustain targets to not exceed of 1.5 Celsius rise in global temperature
9. Deciding to divest from fossil fuels and investments into alternative energy projects
10. Choosing to observe international days
11. Considering other suggestions

Thank you for all you do to make the world a better place!

Respectfully submitted: Sheila Kinsey, FCJM

Franciscan Sisters Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary

Executive Co-Secretary of JPIC Commission UISG / USG

Coordinator of UISG Campaign *Sowing Hope for the Planet*

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## Intercultural Life as a Sign of Prophetic Hope

**Sr. Adriana Carla Milmanda, SSpS**

*Sr. Adriana Carla Milmanda is a member of the Missionary Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit and current Provincial Superior of her province of origin: South Argentina. She is a Bachelor and Professor of Theology at the Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina, and she obtained a Masters in Intercultural Studies and the Bible at CTU (Catholic Theological Union) Chicago, USA. She has accompanied and worked mostly on projects designed for the promotion and empowerment of young people and women in situations of socio-economic vulnerability, both in Argentina and in the Fiji Islands, in the South Pacific. Since 2013, she has been part of an international committee that, in conjunction with the Society of the Divine Word, develops programs intended to raise awareness and to form the members of their Congregations as well as others who require it for Intercultural Life and Mission.*

*Original in Spanish*

Dear Superiors General,

It is an honor for me to be speaking today before you, who are the representatives of so many Congregations and so many Sisters dispersed throughout the whole world. This is certainly a situation and an experience that I never imagined, and I appreciate the confidence that the UISG shown me by inviting me. I, therefore, thank the organizers for granting me this honor, and I thank God for making my adolescent dream of “reaching the ends of the world” a reality. God, sooner or later, fulfills our deepest dreams... though in His own way and in His own time! ... Instead of reaching every corner of the earth, He brings those corners to me, through you and so many other encounters that I have lived because of the theme of intercultural life and mission, which I have been deepening in a special way for a few years now.

As a Missionary Servant of the Holy Spirit, I belong to a Congregation where multicultural and international life and mission are an essential part of our founding history and of our charism. However, my particular interest in this topic was really sparked by my personal experience of joy, frustration, pain, and learning when I was sent to launch a new missionary presence in the Fiji Islands (in the Pacific). We belonged to our Congregation’s Australian province, and I had to live—in a span of 5 years—in community with Sisters from Papua New Guinea, Germany, Indonesia, India, Benin; and I am from Argentina. Most of the time, we were only 2, and only one remained for 2 years. At the same time, we were advancing on our path in a country that, in turn, is composed of the local population and an almost numerically equal group of people who have come from India. Motivated by this experience, full of joy, discoveries, pain, misunderstandings, frustrations, and much learning, I then decided to study the topic of cultures and mission from the academic viewpoint in order to process and learn from the experience that supports me in the present situations and encourages me as I look towards the future.

Contact and exchange between cultures of the most diverse corners of the world are increasing and being imposed on us in a progressively accelerated way. Favored by our globalized era’s means of communication and transportation, today, there are indeed very few groups that remain isolated from contact with others. The

phenomena of migrations and massive displacements that are compulsive or provoked by violence, the climate change, political or religious persecution, poverty, xenophobia or the lack of opportunities, means that every day millions of people are moving from one side of the world to the other.

In the last 20 years, multiculturalism and interculturality have become a cross-cutting issue that is debated in fields as varied as education, health, philosophy, and the business world, among others. At the theological level, we have been concerned for many years with the “inculturation” of the faith, the Gospel, the liturgy, the missionaries, and so on. Inculturation answers the question of how to incarnate the faith, shared by the missionaries coming from the “outside” or “ad-gentes,” in the local culture in such a way that the transmitted faith can become part of the local culture and be expressed through the symbolism, values, and imagination of that culture. This question responded to an ecclesial context where the mission was predominantly one-directional: from the “evangelized” countries to “non-evangelized” countries or pagans (as they were called). Today, the reality is much more complex and multidirectional, so that in missiology we have already begun to speak of the Church’s “inter-gentes” mission (instead of ad-gentes) and of inter-culturation, which, without canceling the still existing challenge of inculturation, incorporates the challenges and opportunities of the new multidirectional context in the world and the Church today.

Through the consecrated life, called to be at the margins of the Church, this reality also reaches us, makes us move, impacts us... within our communities and beyond, in the mission and the apostolates. However, I am convinced that we have a “treasure” of lived experience of which we are not even aware. Many of our Congregations were already at the forefront of multicultural life for nearly a century before the world started talking about it. For others, the experience is more recent. However, it is this capital of experience and knowledge that we are called today to share with one another and to put at the service of humanity and the Church. On the other hand, in order to capitalize on this wealth of experience, we are challenged to open up to the tools that other, more specific fields are developing on the basis of philosophical thought, communication sciences, education, sociology, etc.

This combination of life experience, theological reflection, and the indication of possible tools is what I am going to try to present today in the short time that we are going to share. Can intercultural life become one of the seeds of the prophetic hope that we, as consecrated women, want to sow in today’s world? I am convinced that the answer to this question is positive and that it is urgent for each of our Congregations and the entire Church to consider it.

Yet, the most pressing issue, about which most Congregations are concerned, is how to live it and how to do it. I will, therefore, try to present this topic in four steps:

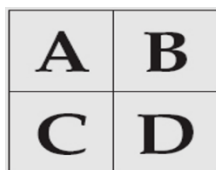
1. Clarification of the concept of interculturality and related concepts
2. How to live in an intercultural key
3. The weakness and power to become a sign
4. The urgency of an intentional choice based on prophecy and for hope

## **1. The Concept of Interculturality and Related Concepts**

We cannot approach the concept of interculturality without clarifying other terms that are related and/or frame what interculturality means and proposes:

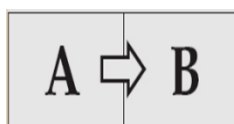
**Multiculturalism:** When we talk about a multicultural group, event or life, we are highlighting the fact that its participants or members come from different cultures; for example, a parish, a company, a city, and even a country, can be multicultural. To emphasize the fact that people also come from different nationalities, we will say that the group is multicultural and international. However, this fact, in itself, does not imply any relationship or interaction between its members. I can live my whole life in a city inhabited by neighbors of

different cultural origins, but this will not necessarily lead me to want to learn their language, taste their food, understand their values, etc. Using a diagram, we could represent the situation as follows:<sup>1</sup>



Trans-cultural experience: Now, let's say that a person of culture "A" decides to move to the neighborhood of culture "B." The person would be going into a cross-cultural experience. Note that we are talking about a "move" for a certain extent in time and not a mere tourist visit. The move, in this example, implies a degree of commitment and risk that is not assumed when we are just passing through and consider ourselves tourists, visitors, explorers or, at worst, conquerors or colonizers...

On a diagram, it would look like this:



This experience of learning and adapting to another culture, different from the one in which we have been socialized, is called acculturation. Acculturation is, in itself, a challenging and enriching experience once we have overcome the stages that normally occur to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the magnitude of the cultural difference and a person's personality and/or preparation. In general, these stages go from a first idyllic love of the "different," to a deep rejection of that same "difference," until a balance is reached between the appreciation for the qualities and the recognition of the shadows of the other culture and of one's own.

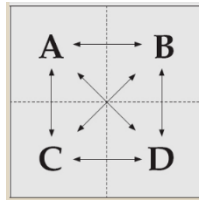
When that balance is not reached, a person risks being stuck in a dream that does not correspond to reality (Sisters who "maternalize" the assumed culture and, then, act and speak of "them" as "poor little ones..." or who are unable to develop relationships with the local people, while all their friends and references continue being, despite the passing of time, those of their place of origin and they maintain excessive contact with them and/or with the news from home). Or, on the contrary, they suffer a cultural shock that plunges them into depression, apathy, hypochondria, excessive concern for their health and/or cleanliness, excessive sleep or food, etc. These are "symptoms" of a cultural shock to which we should pay close attention when they continue in time after a transcultural transfer.

I mention these processes that occur in transculturation because they often coincide with the formation of the multicultural community. It is, therefore, very important to bear in mind that in many cases people are not only adapting to the culture of a new place and perhaps also learning a new language—which, in itself, is already highly demanding—but are also, at the same time, interacting with multiple cultures within and maybe also outside of their community. Sometimes, when forming multicultural communities, we do not take into account or adequately accompany the personal processes of transculturation and inculturation that each of the Sisters is going through, on a personal level in parallel with communitarian and pastoral challenges. In fact, truly intercultural processes can only be initiated with people who have already lived through at least 3 years of transculturation.

Interculturality: Let us now use the diagram of cultures A, B, C, and D to illustrate the difference between multiculturalism and interculturality.

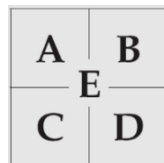
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<sup>1</sup> The following diagrams and the general way of presenting them are taken from Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis*, Liturgical Press, 2015, 621–746 [Kindle].



While the first diagram outlined the coexistence of different cultures in clearly demarcated compartments, in this second diagram we see arrows coming out of each group or person in the direction of the other groups or people, thus illustrating the interrelation between them. At the same time, the arrows do not indicate a single direction but rather a round trip. Going to meet the other person and the other's welcome. Moreover, the dividing lines are not continuous but punctuated, thus indicating that the boundaries between some cultures and others are no longer sharp and clear.

However, this diagram does not yet illustrate the intercultural community. Good relations, communication, and good coexistence—although very important and necessary—are not enough. The intercultural community is called to take a step beyond the tolerance of differences and to live a process of transformation or conversion that challenges it to create, as a result of this interrelation, a new culture.



In this diagram, we will call “E” the new culture that is the fruit of intercultural living. The “E” culture will be made up of a new and unique combination of some elements from each of the participating cultures, making each person feel at the same time “at home” while facing something “new.”

This combination will emerge as an always dynamic result of the process of interaction and of agreements reached between the parties. In this process, each community enriches itself with the values and lights brought by the other culture, but both also take on the challenges and face their respective shadows and blind spots (e.g., victimization, superiority or inferiority complexes, imperialist mentality, racism, historical prejudices, and so on). This model of community interaction between cultures, on a level of symmetry and equality, is diametrically opposed to the assimilationist model that prevailed (and still survives?!!) in groups where minority or presumably underdeveloped, uncivilized, cultures or “pagans” had to adapt, conform, and assume the superior or majority culture while abandoning their own. This assimilationist model is what governed most of our Congregations in the “recruitment” of vocations in the so-called “mission countries.” This assimilationist model is framed in an approach that implies integration as a hegemonic affirmation of the host country’s culture. According to this model, it is expected that the immigrant or the trained person, in our case, behaves and assumes the culture of the receiving society or community, putting aside or nullifying his/her culture of origin.

On the contrary, instead of seeking the “assimilation” that denies and wants to erase the differences, the model presented by interculturality seeks to know, value, deepen, and integrate these differences. As a result of the interrelation and encounter between cultures, we are invited to create a new “E” culture, in which we can all give the best of ourselves, share our gifts, and let ourselves be challenged by the encounter and the relationship with the “different,” so that our obscurities may be converted in the light of the Gospel. Humanly speaking, interculturality is a counter-cultural movement in which few people would feel comfortable or for which they would have to be prepared. Our cultures “program” us in such a way that we tend to relate to “ours” to defend ourselves from “the others,” “those who are different,” and their potential threats. On the basis of the faith and the power of grace, however, inclusion in equality is the Project of the Kingdom that Jesus preached and, as such, it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Cultures: The terms just presented, in turn, lead us to briefly deepen our understanding of the term “culture.” This concept of anthropological origin does not have, as such, just one definition; it has been evolving over

time and can be analyzed from hundreds of different perspectives. However, for our purposes, we are going to take the definition that presents “culture” as

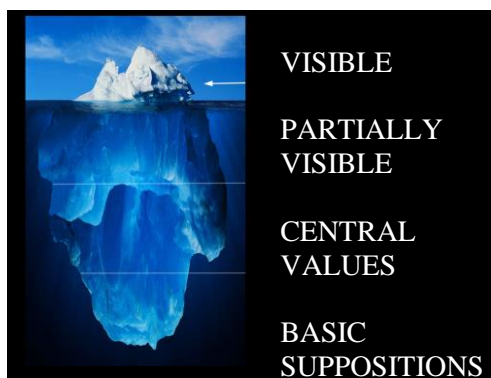
a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Culture, as such, does not exist; but there are people who embody a certain culture or use certain “cultural lenses” that give meaning to their lives and allow them to communicate with each other and to organize themselves. My culture is the best way that “my” people found to survive and develop in the context and place where we live. Therefore, no culture can claim the right to become the universal “norm” of other cultures. Our challenge, in the Church, is that, for centuries, our faith has been confused with the culture that mediated its transmission (both the cultures that mediated the writing of our Sacred Texts and the Western culture that later extended the implantation of the Church).

Let us look at some characteristics of culture: culture is learned and transmitted through socialization in the primary and secondary groups in which we have grown up (the family, the clan, the neighborhood, the school, the city or the countryside, social class, religion, profession, and the different groups of identification and belonging in which we have been formed). Culture is stable and dynamic, it changes very slowly, but it is so much a part of ourselves that we do not know it until we “leave” it.

Only in contact with the “other,” with what is “different” do we begin to know our own culture and that of others... this knowledge is, then, given by comparison with the “others,” those who are “outside” our group. This division between “us” (women, Catholics, religious, professionals, Latin Americans, Argentines, southern, northern, etc.) and “them” (those who are not like “us”) protects us and gives us a sense of identity and belonging, but it also isolates us, challenges us, and fills us with fear in the face of the “unknown.” There are no higher or more developed cultures and less developed or inferior cultures, but different cultures. And each culture believes that it is the best because it is the best form that has allowed its group to adapt to the context in which it developed.

Getting to know a culture is very difficult. To illustrate this difficulty, it is compared to an iceberg of which we can only see the protruding surface, i.e. 10%, while 90% is below water. In the same way, the material elements of each culture (like clothes and typical foods, traditional artifacts, dances, etc.) constitute only the 10% that we can see, feel, hear, smell and name with ease. In the remaining 90%, which corresponds to the immaterial elements, we can distinguish in turn 3 levels: the first, partially visible, level to which we can access when we seek it intentionally (what is behind the language, communication styles, leadership, conflict resolution, etc.); the second level (one of the central values) is much more difficult to reach and examine; and the third level (that of the basic suppositions) is so deep and unconscious that we cannot really get to know it: this is what we take as “normal,” “given.”



From this brief terminological framework, I will strive to make it clear to us that living interculturally is a vocation and a counter-cultural option, and that, as such, it appeals to the faith and to the life of grace. Humanly, we all tend to seek and interact with those with whom we feel identified and, therefore, understood,

included, accepted. Conversely, what is “different” tends to scare us, challenge us, and make us distrustful. This distrust, especially for cultures that suffered the experience of the colonization or the invasion of their nations, is not unjustified or minor; on the contrary, it is a collective wound that lasts for generations and must be healed personally before engaging in a project of intercultural life and mission. Intercultural life is not automatically the result of the mere coexistence of people of different cultures; on the contrary, it must be intentionally constructed and assumed as a process of personal and community conversion. Unlike transnational companies that seek to use interculturality as a tool for improving their sales, we are invited to transform it into a way of life that makes us more faithful in following Jesus and building the Kingdom.

## **2. How to Live in an Intercultural Key?**

Culture, as we have been able to outline it, is something that goes beyond all the areas, aspects, and facets of our life. It is the very medium through which we organize our perception of reality, build a collective sense of the world that surrounds us (material and immaterial), and communicate. Hence, culture is compared to the lenses through which we look. At the same time, it is also compared to an iceberg, because culture permeates our life so intimately that it becomes impossible to know it objectively and to reach the deepest tones that give our lenses their color. Our values, moral codes, preferences, sense of respect, sense of authority, sense of order, our management of time, etc. ... everything is crossed by the culture and the cultures of the groups of belonging in which we have been socialized. For me, this was a fascinating discovery that I was only able to recognize when I found myself in Fiji, in a culture so different from own.

How, then, can we open ourselves to this reality of multiculturalism and start living in the key of interculturality? How can fear or the dangerous mere tolerance of “different” be overcome so that we can begin to go out to meet other men and women? Interculturality, more than a topic, is a process; it is a new paradigm that wants to respond to the reality that surrounds us and imposes itself on us; it is a key from which to re-read our life and mission as consecrated persons in today’s world.

Within the time at our disposal, I would like to highlight at least three elements that, according to my experience, are essential when it comes to finding ways to begin to introduce this new paradigm in our communities:

1. Preparation: since it is a counter-cultural option, intercultural life requires dedicating time and effort to the preparation of the Sisters. This preparation includes:

- Basic knowledge of the traits and salient characteristics of the interacting cultures (nationality, ethnicity, generation, education, socio-economic origin, etc.). Instead of focusing only on what unites us (which is very good, and it is very good to nurture it), interculturality also challenges us to explore, value, and capitalize what differentiates us.
- The creation of a “safe space” of trust and mutual care, where one can express oneself freely without fear of being judged and/or labeled.
- The use of various strategies that help to maintain the motivation that leads to going out to meet and to welcome the “difference” by overcoming the difficulties that will occur in communication.

2. Intentionality: prior motivation is an element that must lead us to sustain, over time, the intentional effort to build on the basis of the differences. Intentionality requires growth in intercultural sensitivity by looking for:

- tools that favor
  - communication (verbal and non-verbal) and
  - the resolution of both expressed and latent conflicts.
- personal and community work that strengthens and develops
  - resilience capacity and
  - detects in time the dangerous conformist attitude that is content with a simple “tolerance” of the difference.

3. Spirituality: intercultural life, as a proposal that emerges from our “Catholic” (i.e., “universal”) faith, is a life-long personal and communitarian process of conversion. Ethnocentrism (taking our culture as the center of the world and the norm for measuring other cultures), cultural stereotypes and their consequent prejudices

are present in the world, in the Church and in each of us. Recognizing this and opening, ourselves personally and as a community, to deconstruct them implies setting out on a path of transformation or conversion. As a spiritual path, intercultural life and mission is not so much a goal but rather a search and a process. There are no recipes, nor are there quick solutions to the conflicts that it entails. Rather, interculturality challenges us to live with the paradoxes and the gray zones of the liminal spaces that open us to transformation and growth. This is precisely why intercultural life has the fragility and power of a “sign.”

### **3. The Fragility and Power to Become a Sign**

Signs give us clues, call our attention and point us to something that goes beyond themselves. They are concrete, they are temporary, and they must be correctly interpreted and decoded. Now, for all these reasons, signs are fragile and limited... but they also have an extraordinary symbolic power that can capture our imagination and connect us with the transcendent, with the unseen values, the meaning of life, utopia, hope, and faith.

In this sense, the contribution that the consecrated life can make to the reflection and praxis of interculturality in today's world is unique and urgently needed. In fact, interculturality, devoid of its symbolic potential and its horizon of a Project that transcends it (the Project of the Kingdom), runs the risk of becoming a new colonialism, a new form of manipulation in the hands of the most powerful of the day. It can be used as an instrument in the service of the logic of an economic and political system that is inherently exclusive and imposes itself without measuring costs or consequences for the most vulnerable, broken, and humiliated cultures of millions of people who are “crying out” to survive.

On the contrary, interculturality, as a spiritual path, can give us and the world a totally different alternative. Today, religious life, immersed as it is in an increasingly globalized world, is called to respond to the signs of the times, by becoming a cross-cultural and intercultural sign of the radically inclusive and egalitarian Project of the Kingdom of God:

<sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26–28)

This was the founding and revolutionary experience of the first communities and of the first disciples of Jesus! The radical and egalitarian inclusiveness of Jesus' proclamation and praxis was the characteristic identity of the first communities that gradually separated them from Judaism. However, this path was and remains a path of progress and setbacks made of key moments of personal and communitarian conversion. Let us remember, as one of the paradigmatic cases, for example, Peter's “conversion” in the text known as the “Conversion of Cornelius” (Acts 10:1–48). In this extraordinary account, preceded by the vision of the cloth in which Peter is “challenged” by God to eat animals that, for him, are culturally and religiously impure, he ends up breaking a whole series of taboos (receiving and lodging pagans, eating and fraternizing with them, entering their home and baptizing people who have not been previously circumcised) to state, to their total amazement and awe, the fact—which he himself had just grasped—that God shows no partiality:

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak to them: I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34–35)

In Jesus himself we can trace his personal “conversion” from ethnocentrism, which he humanly shared with us, in his encounter with the Canaanite or Syro-Phoenician woman where Jesus lets himself be challenged and interpellated by her until he accepts to abandon a first, clearly excluding position. In this account, we see how Jesus lets her teach him that the Good News of God and of the Kingdom that he came to inaugurate was not limited only to the people of Israel (cf Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30).

The good news of the Spirit is that the historical conjuncture in which we find ourselves today invites us to assume the multiculturalism of our communities, societies, and pastoral services as a possibility for conversion and transformation instead of seeing it as a problem to be solved. It is not and will not be easy; it

will not give us the security and stability that we have lost and long for. There are no recipes to ensure success. However, if interculturality, as a radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated, captures our imagination, it will have the extraordinary power to make our communities into the sign that today's divided, fragmented, and conflictual world needs and is calling for.

Let us imagine how our charisms can be re-founded through the encounter with the values of other cultures. Let us perceive the multifaceted wealth that they would acquire. Yet, this Easter will not come without a cross. Giving a real place to the intercultural implies "letting go" of that for which we, as an institution, have perhaps given our life and our passion for many years, in order to make room for the newness that is emerging. The "E" culture is the fruit of a process of synergy, where the result is greater than the simple sum of the parts.

#### **4. The Urgency of an Intentional Choice Based on Prophecy and for Hope**

Like any vocational process of call and conversion, interculturality is not only destined to our personal and/or communitarian growth, which only leads us to seek a more peaceful, comfortable, and tolerant life. Today, intercultural life and mission will become a sign of prophetic hope, if they are constructed as a new alternative lifestyle. The re-foundation of religious life today is impossible without interculturality as a sign of the times of the contemporary world.

Because humanity has become so scandalously divided and conflictual, we (individually and corporately) must make a choice. Either we prefer to continue sinning—through exclusion, separation, and the maintenance of limits—, daily eating and drinking our own trials... or we resolve to accept, today, God's radical option for humanity and, with His help and our firmness, change our lives. There is no third way. Both, the future of humanity and the Church depend on this. (Anthony Gittins)

Intercultural life as an intentional option for religious communities that cross borders and open up to the "different," deconstructing the "pretended" and anti-evangelical superiority of some over others, by becoming a "workshop" where, through life itself, different relationships between cultures are tested: relationships of service characterized by equality and not domination, mutual empowerment without hierarchies that belittle or stifle life, dialogue and not assimilation, encounter and not colonization, inculturation and inter-culturation.

Yet, embracing interculturality based on the Project of the Kingdom is not just an intra-community exercise. The true fruitfulness of this praxis, which is daily at stake in the ad-intra life, is the potential prophetic impact that will turn it into hope for today's world. Interculturality will be a sign of prophetic hope for humanity, if our own experience of living together, valuing and giving a mutually transforming place to "difference," with the doors opening inwards, puts us on the path to go out to meet those who are different, marginalized, invisible, and exploited today.

Only those who have gone through the personal conversion from ethnocentrism to intercultural sensitivity will have eyes to see and care about the suffering of those who are invisible and excluded from the contemporary world. As in the parable of the "Good Samaritan," only the "foreigner," from whom nothing was expected, was the first to be able to see and then help the man lying on the road-side, renewing his hope and denouncing—implicitly and prophetically—the blindness of the Levite and the priest who had passed by... (cf Lk 10, 25-37).

We, too, if we let ourselves be challenged and enriched by the "foreign" and culturally "different" gaze, we will allow the re-foundation of our charisms, broadening the vision of our founders in a way that we cannot even perceive today. This is not an easy path nor will it be free of challenges, but if we respond to the signs of the times, confident that the Spirit is at work, then we can announce the good news of interculturality and denounce everything that denies it, with the strength and the richness of the radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated.



## Sowers of prophetic hope: The call to interreligious dialogue

### Prof. Donna Orsuto

Originally from Ohio, Donna Orsuto is the Co-founder and Director of the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas ([www.laycentre.org](http://www.laycentre.org)). She is also a Professor at the Institute of Spirituality of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy, and a Adjunct Professor of the Faculty of Theology at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum). She lectures extensively and gives retreats in various parts of the world. She is involved in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, having served as a consultant for the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and as a member of the Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue of the Diocese of Rome. On 7 October 2011, Pope Benedict XVI named her a Dame of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of Saint Gregory the Great.

“Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.”  
Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*

“Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.”  
Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 251

“When we choose the hope of Jesus we find that the successful way of life is that of the seed... to give life, not keep it.”  
Pope Francis, *Wednesday Audience*, 12 April 2017

Thank you for the invitation to reflect with you on the theme “*Sowers of Prophetic Hope: The Call to Interreligious Dialogue*.” I would like to begin with an image that you see projected on the screen. Entitled “Followers of God”, it was painted in 1978 by the French artist Dolores Puthod.<sup>1</sup> It depicts Pope Paul VI standing in St. Peter’s square with his arms raised to welcome various religious leaders. Such a meeting actually never took place in that year<sup>2</sup> and if you read the official Church documents focused on interreligious dialogue in 1978, you would have to say that such a meeting of the Holy Father at the Vatican with leaders of world religions would have seemed almost unthinkable. It is true that *Nostra Aetate* had been

<sup>1</sup> To see a copy of this image, click here:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=followers+of+god+puthod&tbm=isch&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjy16n-krnhAhWFyKOKHS5PDQAOsAR6BAgJEAE&biw=1440&bih=757#imgdii=tLny2VjRZJzCM:&imgsrc=CwqPAAG1G--fUM:>

<sup>2</sup> It was only in 1986 that a Pope encountered leaders of world religions in this way— and the historic meeting between St. John Paul II and religious leaders took place not in Rome, but in Assisi. An interreligious meeting did take place in St. Peter’s Square, but only in 1999 in preparation for the Great Jubilee Year of 2000.

promulgated, and Paul VI had called for dialogue in *Ecclesiam Suam* and was practising it himself on his apostolic journeys, but the time was perhaps not yet ripe for leaders of world religions to be welcomed in the Vatican. Yet, over the years, many people had the prophetic courage to let their imagination envision a future different from the past. Along the way, these women and men quietly, gently, and patiently worked to make that dream a reality. *Today such meetings between the pope and leaders from other religions are seen as quite normal both in the Vatican and on apostolic journeys.* A recent example is Pope Francis' visits to the United Arab Emirates and Morocco.<sup>3</sup> *A hallmark of his pontificate is a dialogue of fraternity with people of other religions.*

The seeds for Francis' approach to dialogue were sown during the Second Vatican Council. They were nurtured during the pontificates of Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Recognizing this progression is important because it encourages us as we embrace our call to engage in interreligious dialogue. We are invited to walk together in communion with our Church leaders. As the African proverb goes, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

The first part of this presentation will highlight some key insights from the Magisterium during these decades of dialogue that help us to understand the context of our call to be prophetic sowers of hope today through our participation in interreligious dialogue. In the second part, I will attempt to answer the questions: why does Pope Francis reach out to people of other religions? Why should we do the same? How can we become sowers of prophetic hope as we embrace this call to be involved in interreligious dialogue?

## **I. From *Nostra Aetate* to Pope Francis**

An anchor for our contemporary call to engage in interreligious dialogue is the Second Vatican Council's Declaration "*Nostra Aetate*".<sup>4</sup> This dynamic (and I would say prophetic and courageous) document of 1965 does not focus on dialogue in an abstract way, but rather reminds us that encounter among peoples is at the heart of dialogue. The purpose of this encounter is to grow in mutual understanding. For example, specifically with respect to Christian-Muslim dialogue, *Nostra Aetate* 3 states,

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding (NA 3).

One of the ways of growing in mutual understanding is through participating in interreligious dialogue.

Paul VI's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, a document that greatly influenced Pope Francis,<sup>5</sup> still has much to say about dialogue in general which can also be applied particularly to interreligious exchange. For Paul VI, *we enter into dialogue because our experience of God's love encourages us to do so. We were created in the image and likeness of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—for communion and dialogue.* Salvation history is the unfolding of that dialogue. The history of salvation narrates exactly this long and changing dialogue. It is a conversation of Christ with humanity. It is above all a dialogue of love, for this is how God is known. We honour and serve God through sharing that love with others. Authentic dialogue cannot exist without love.

In *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI suggests that there are four key characteristics of dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Though underlined more than fifty years ago, they are immensely useful for today and are worth remembering. First of all,

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<sup>3</sup> See the important document, a result of Pope Francis' Apostolic Visit to the United Arab Emirates: *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Working Together*: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview, see Michael L. Fitzgerald, "Nostra Aetate, a Key to Interreligious Dialogue." *Gregorianum* 87, no. 4 (2006): 699-713. <http://www.jstor.org/proxy.library.georgetown.edu/stable/23581614>.

<sup>5</sup> See Pierre de Charentenay, *Alla radice del magistero di Francesco: L'attualità di Ecclesiam Suam ed Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Vatican City: LEV, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> For the description of the four characteristics of dialogue, see *Ecclesiam suam* 81.

dialogue must be marked by *clarity* [*Primum omnium perspicuitate colloquium praestae aequum est. . .*]. Is my language understandable, acceptable, and well chosen when I enter into dialogue with others? One might add that clarity also implies a clear sense of personal identity. For example, over the last twenty-five years, I have had the privilege of living with people from various religious backgrounds: Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu brothers and sisters. In living this dialogue of everyday life, it would be a disservice to them to pretend that living my faith as a Roman Catholic Christian is not central to who I am. Similarly, their religious belief and practices are integral to their lives and deserve to be respected. It is precisely because we are clear about our personal religious identity that we can really enter into dialogue.

The second characteristic suggested by Paul VI is *meekness* (*lenitas*). Meekness is not usually talked about much today, but it is a vital attitude for genuine dialogue. I notice that often in English translations of *Ecclesiam suam*, the word *humility*, is used instead of meekness. The exemplar of both of these attitudes is Christ himself who is “meek (*mitis*) and humble (*humilis*) of heart” (Matt. 11:29). The meek are free from haughtiness and resentment, even when they have experienced injury or reproach. Meekness is incompatible with violent methods of acting (whether physical or psychological). It calls forth a gentleness which would mean that one would never impose or force oneself or one’s way of life on another.<sup>7</sup> When we truly live this beatitude (Matt. 5:4), we also learn not to take ourselves too seriously. We begin to acknowledge that God’s providence is at work in surprising ways in our lives and this consequently flows into our attitude towards dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

The third characteristic is *trust or confidence* (*fiducia*). This implies not only a confidence in one’s own words, but also a recognition of the good will of both parties involved in dialogue. Trust enables us to speak the truth to one another with frankness, but this truth is always spoken in charity (Eph 4:15).

The fourth characteristic is *prudence* (*prudentia*), which encourages us to adapt ourselves to those around us. It means, to learn the sensitivities of his [or her] audience.” It encourages us to truly learning to listen to the other. It is, though, a listening that requires one *to listen at times to the words behind the words*, as one of my friends likes to say. What people are trying to communicate is often veiled. Behind a clumsy word may be hidden a gesture of love. An angry word may mask pain and suffering. A timid word may be a cry for love and acceptance. Until we learn to listen to the words behind the words our dialogue will never reach the level of depth that leads to the transformation of ourselves and of others. This is not easy because often we are trying to formulate our response even as the other person is speaking. I find the first lines of the Rule of St. Benedict helpful in trying to figure out how to learn to listen. In the prologue, St. Benedict says, “Listen carefully . . . to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.”<sup>9</sup> First, there is an invitation to “listen carefully” (*obsculta*) and second there is call to listen to the other with “the ear of your heart” “*inclina aurem cordis tui*”.

John Paul II was deeply influenced by *Ecclesiam Suam* and he put into practice what Paul VI said about dialogue.<sup>10</sup> He fearlessly and prophetically forged a path to greater understanding with people of other religions. Who can forget that historic 1986 meeting in Assisi where he first met with religious leaders from around the world? And in 1999, he hosted a similar meeting, an Interreligious Assembly, in St. Peter’s Square.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. “Meekness” in *Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Xavier Léon-Dufour (Boston: St Paul Multimedia, 1995<sup>3</sup>) which suggests that in the Old Testament, Moses is a model of meekness that was not based on weakness but on submission to God. Moses was docile and trusted in God’s love (Nm 12:13, Si 45:4, 1:27) and consequently was meek towards others, particularly towards the poor (Si 4:8). In the New Testament, Jesus reveals the meekness of God (Mt 12:18).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Simon Tugwell, *Reflections on the Beatitudes* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), esp. Chapter Four (pp. 29-41), which focuses on meekness.

<sup>9</sup> *Rule of Benedict* 1980, Prologue, “*Obsculta, o fili, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui...*” Edited by Timothy Fry et Al. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent overview, see John Borelli, “John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue.” In *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement, Jubilee Volume: The Wojtyla Years*, edited by Polly Vedder, 81-88. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2000. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* (accessed February 2, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> On the Interreligious Assembly, see *Pro Dialogo* 2000, pp.7-16.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II also reminded us that dialogue and proclamation are intrinsically intertwined and mutually support one another.<sup>12</sup> He also distinguishes various types of dialogue. The first sort of dialogue that probably comes to your mind is the so-called *dialogue of experts or of theological exchange*. This official dialogue is conducted globally, through the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and locally, through regional dialogues organized by Bishops' conferences and dioceses. In recent years, the circle of participants, in most cases, at least internationally, has broadened to include women, including women religious, who bring their expertise also to the table and participate fully in both the dialogue and drafting of official texts.<sup>13</sup> There are other forms and expressions of dialogue, including the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action and the dialogue of religious experience.<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis has recently spoken of a dialogue of fraternity, but more on that later! One point is clear: *Interreligious dialogue is not an optional activity in the church*. I would go so far as to say that dialogue is meant to be a way of life for us all.

It has been suggested that if Pope John Paul II planted seeds for promoting dialogue, Pope Benedict XVI pruned the plants<sup>15</sup>, and Pope Francis has harvested them. It would be beyond the scope of this short reflection to focus on the various dimensions of Pope Benedict's approach to dialogue. I would like to mention just one point from his pontificate: namely the important role he gives to cultivating friendship with people of other religions. If you read through his discourses on interreligious dialogue, the theme of friendship consistently emerges.

Friendship is also an important dimension for Pope Francis' approach to people of other religions. His approach is best understood in the context of his invitation to create a culture of encounter. He explains,

For me this word is very important. Encounter with others. Why? Because faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others. We live in a culture of conflict, a culture of fragmentation, a culture . . . of waste. (. . .) [W]e must create a 'culture of encounter', a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith. They all have something in common with us: they are images of God; they are children of God.<sup>16</sup>

This quotation brings out two important points. First of all, encountering others is Jesus' way of being and acting. At the root of our encounter with others is the deep experience we have each had of an encounter with Christ. As Christians, we are invited to be in dialogue with others, but always with a third person, Christ, who is always present. As Aelred of Rievaulx once wrote in his classic book *Spiritual Friendship*, "Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst."<sup>17</sup> Christ is the foundation, the centre, and

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<sup>12</sup> See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 55: "Inter-religious dialogue is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions . . .

In the light of the economy of salvation, the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in interreligious dialogue. Instead, she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *ad gentes*. These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical, as though they were interchangeable."

<sup>13</sup> For example, women have participated, albeit in limited numbers, in the official dialogues organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. A good starting point is to review the various volumes of *Pro Dialogo* that regularly lists various dialogues and sometimes includes the names of the participants.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II mentions these types of dialogue in *Redemptoris Missio* 11.

<sup>15</sup> See the balanced article by Emil Anton. "Mission Impossible? Pope Benedict XVI and Interreligious Dialogue." *Theological Studies* 78.4 (2017): 879–904.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, *Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements*, May 18, 2013.

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130518\\_veglia-pentecoste.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130518_veglia-pentecoste.html)

See also Diego Fares, *The Heart of Pope Francis. How a New Culture of Encounter is Changing the Church and the World* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company/A Herder&Herder Book), 2015), p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), p. 51.

the final end of all dialogue with others. In our dialogue with others, we are invited to seek and to recognize the face of Christ in our midst. Second, Pope Francis reminds us that we all have something in common: we are all created in the image and likeness of God. A consequence of this teaching is that we are all brothers and sisters to one another. We are called to “be there” for one another.<sup>18</sup> We are “beings of encounter”.<sup>19</sup>

In this first section, I have briefly set the context for why dialogue is an integral part of our call as Christians. We have seen that it is not an optional activity for us. As Religious Women called to be Sowers of Prophetic Hope, you are invited to embrace this call. You might ask, especially in the context of the many other challenges you face, *why should we follow the example of Pope Francis and commit ourselves to interreligious dialogue?* How can we prepare ourselves to embrace this call? What are some practical steps that we can take to respond in a prophetic way to this call? This will be my focus in the second part of this reflection.

## **II. Becoming Prophetic witnesses of hope**

Even if we leave official Magisterial documents aside, we need only to browse social media to realize the urgency of engaging others in dialogue. With so much conflict in the world today, we simply do not have the luxury to stand by and pretend that dialogue does not concern us. *All of us are co-responsible for the Church’s mission in the world and all of us are called to be protagonists of interreligious dialogue.* As Pope Francis has said, “Dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities.”<sup>20</sup> Each of us, in our own small way, can make a difference, if only we are courageous and prophetic enough to risk engaging the “other”. *We engage in interreligious dialogue quite simply because we must.*

In this section, I would like to propose five practical ways to engage in interreligious dialogue today.

### ***First, recognize that many of you are already directly involved in interreligious dialogue and strengthen these relationships***

Many of your religious congregations are already sowing seeds of prophetic hope: your schools, hospitals and institutions serve people of other religions and have been doing it for years. Many of you have worked side by side with people of other religions in your apostolates. The impact you have had cannot be underestimated. I heard recently about how, for example, in Palestine, a religious congregation, which takes care of children with disabilities from different religious and cultural backgrounds, created an environment where it became normal for parents and children from different religions to gather for birthday celebrations. This might seem like a small gesture, but such sharing transforms a culture of suspicion into a culture of encounter.

Many Religious women have shown solidarity with people of other religions in harrowing situations of suffering. In war torn countries, many Religious women have chosen to stay. I think for example of the recently beatified 19 Algerian martyrs among whom there were six religious women.

As you recognize and thank God for what you are already doing, you might also ask the question: are there ways to strengthen the bonds that are already present?

### ***Second, reach out to your neighbours***

Pope Francis encourages us to not merely encounter others, but to forge relationships of friendship with them. Concretely, this means that we do not wait for tragedy to strike—a terrorist attack or a natural disaster—to reach out to others. We need to ask the question *now*: who is my neighbour? Who are the

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<sup>18</sup> For an excellent article on this topic, see James Fredericks, “The Dialogue of Fraternity. Pope Francis’ Approach to Religious Engagement”, Commonweal (March 21, 2017) <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dialogue-fraternity> Accessed November 13, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Farres, p. 22, quoting Francis.

<sup>20</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 250.

people from other religions in my neighbourhood, in my city? Though medical experts might not agree today, perhaps we could apply Aristotle's advice that friendship takes time and therefore we need to eat the proverbial peck of salt together. We do not need to take the proverb literally, but everything that table fellowship suggests is necessary for engaging in interreligious dialogue.<sup>21</sup> There is something sacred about hospitality and table fellowship that breaks down barriers and opens up communication. It is no surprise that the Gospels often portray Jesus at table with others and that it is in the context of a meal that Jesus chose to mark the gift of himself to us in the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup> Practically, this can mean knowing when my neighbor's religious feasts are celebrated and reaching out to invite them, to perhaps invite them for a meal or to join them in celebrating. I know of Religious women in countries where they are a minority who regularly join Muslim families for Iftar, the daily feast that breaks the Ramadan fast.

### ***Third, caste out fear through knowledge: learn more about people of other religions and their beliefs***

Religious have a particular responsibility to foster a love that casts out fear. Some scholars say that the phrase "do not be afraid" occurs in one form or another 366 times in the Bible, one for every day of the year including leap year! We see that a culture of encounter and dialogue flourishes when people are not paralyzed by fear. It takes incredible courage to risk reaching out to the other, especially after experiences of extreme violence, but when people have had the the courage to move beyond their fears and risk reaching out to the other, the results have been transformative.

One of the ways of combatting fear is through a deeper knowledge of the other. Knowledge can eradicate the false perceptions we may have of them and their religion. For this reason, Pope Francis highlights the importance of suitable training, especially for promoting dialogue, for example with Muslims. He says,

In order to sustain dialogue with Islam, suitable training is essential for all involved, not only so that they can be solidly and joyfully grounded in their own identity, but so that they can also acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their demands and shed light on shared beliefs. We Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 253)

Though many in your congregations are already involved in a dialogue of life with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and others, one might ask the question: how many Sisters have received formal training in other religions?

Basic knowledge of other religions for all of us is important, but I would go a step further: we need well-trained Religious women sitting at the table when official dialogues are taking place.<sup>23</sup> This will imply investing significant resources in the education and formation of your sisters for interreligious dialogue. There is a growing recognition that a community of ongoing spiritual and professional support is critical in sustaining and nurturing leaders trained in interreligious dialogue not only during their years of education but also throughout their professional lives. Conferences and seminars, formal and informal gatherings, retreats and the use of social media are essential for sharing information, sharpening insights and supporting each other.

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<sup>21</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 4, 25 where Aristotle emphasizes that that friendships take time to develop. People need time to grow accustomed to one another, for, "as the proverb says, they cannot know each other before they have shared the traditional [peck] of salt, and they cannot accept each other or be friends until each appears lovable to the other and gains the other's confidence."

<sup>22</sup> See Eugene Laverdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom, The Origins of the Eucharist According to Luke* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> When organizing interreligious events, it should be normative that women and men work together in the planning, execution and evaluation of the program. In this regard, religious men and women have set an excellent example in establishing the UISG-USG Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. Since 2002, this commission of sixteen women and men meets regularly to "stimulate awareness and develop understanding among Religious Congregations resident in Rome of the importance of the ministry of interreligious dialogue." Another example is the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue where for more than forty years, monks and nuns have been in dialogue with Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.

The assumptions and demands of interreligious dialogue are becoming more rigorous than ever. Effective dialogue requires not just acknowledging all participants to be sincere and of good will but also includes the careful examination of differing positions and the discerning exploration of the assumptions behind them. To do this the whole array of modern scholarship and science must be brought to the dialogue. Making a commitment to prepare more religious women to competently participate along with men in dialogue would both enhance the quality of the dialogue and give more credible witness to the Church's teaching on the equality and complementarity of women and men.<sup>24</sup>

There are numerous educational institutions and opportunities in Rome and in other parts of the world, where scholarships are available to support sisters who could be trained for interreligious dialogue (Just ask Sr. Pat Murray for more information!).

#### ***Fourth, pray; pray for peace between people of different religions***

In his address to the Fraternity Conference in the United Arab Emirates, Pope Francis said,

... [P]rayer is essential: while sincerely intended prayer incarnates the courage of otherness in regard to God, it also purifies the heart from turning in on itself. Prayer of the heart restores fraternity. Consequently, as for the future of interreligious dialogue, the first thing we have to do is pray, and pray for one another: we are brothers and sisters! Without the Lord, nothing is possible; with him, everything becomes so! May our prayer – each one according to his or her own tradition – adhere fully to the will of God, who wants all men and women to recognize they are brothers and sisters and live as such, forming the great human family in the harmony of diversity.

[Pope Francis continues] There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future. Religions, in particular, cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures. The time has come when religions should more actively exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretence, to help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace.<sup>25</sup>

Here Pope Francis is encouraging people of all religions to pray for peace. I would make an appeal to you, Religious Superiors. I know that many of your congregations mission elderly members to pray for certain persons or apostolates. Would it be possible to mission some sisters to pray, for example, for people of other religions in your part of the country and for peace among peoples of different religions in troubled parts of the world?

#### ***Fifth, see the other with the eyes of God: contemplation and dialogue***

My final point focuses on a fundamental attitude of dialogue: namely gazing at the other with the eyes of God. It is no surprise that interreligious dialogue has flourished especially among those who share with one another a dialogue of religious experience. Contemplation as a way of life leads one not only to see God, but also to see others as God sees them. In an account well known to us all, the martyrdom of the seven Trappists in Algeria and the moving testament of Dom Christian de Chergé, there is an insight into what this can mean. His *Testament* has a subtitle *Quand un À-Dieu s'envisage* or "when a farewell is contemplated". Much stronger than the English equivalent, "farewell" adieu, A-Dieu literally means "to God". The word *en-visagé* means envisaged or contemplated, but it can also mean something that has received a *visage* or has

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<sup>24</sup> See Kathleen McGARVEY, OLA "The Church and Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa In service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. *Gender: Where are the Women in Interreligious Dialogue?*", Paper presented at the CAFOD/ Heythrop conference October 28th and 29th 2009, London. [http://www.olaireland.ie/files/9714/1933/2213/The\\_Church\\_and\\_Christian-Muslim\\_Relations\\_in\\_Africa.pdf](http://www.olaireland.ie/files/9714/1933/2213/The_Church_and_Christian-Muslim_Relations_in_Africa.pdf) See also her book, *Muslim and Christian Women in Dialogue: The Case of Northern Nigeria* (Bern: Brill, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_emiratiarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_emiratiarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html)

been given a face (in line with the philosophical thought of Emanuel Levinas). So the subtitle could mean “Contemplating when God has been given a face.”<sup>26</sup>

In this context, we can perhaps understand the depths of Dom Christian’s words:

And also you, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, I also say this *Thank You* and this “*À-Dieu*” to you in whom I see the face of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

In commenting on this passage, Dom Armand Veilleux notes that “this capacity of seeing God’s face, God’s incarnation, in the person who is slitting your throat is certainly the fruit of a profound contemplative life lived in deep relationship with a group of brothers, with a Church and with the whole human family.”<sup>28</sup> If “dialogue is the new name for charity” (VC 74), then what greater expression of charity is there than to lay down your life for others? As I read this moving account, it is a reminder that *the best preparation for dialogue is a life of contemplation*. This is what enables us to see the face of Christ in the other and what will lead us into a dialogue without frontiers.

In conclusion, I would like to cite the words of Sr. Yvonne Gera, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, who worked for twenty-two years in Algeria and who knew personally all of the recently beatified Algerian martyrs. When asked about what to say to religious living in crisis-ridden countries, she replied:

We are missionaries. Whatever happens, we are missionaries. We know that that is our vocation and I say one thing, “you will receive more than you give”. It is sometimes difficult, yes but the Lord has called us. If the people suffer, we suffer with them. It is our vocation and the Lord is always there to help us. Even in suffering or in martyrdom. These 19 martyrs knew that they were targeted but they remained. Don’t be afraid, the Lord is there to help you.<sup>29</sup>

“Don’t be afraid, The Lord is there to help you”: these are encouraging words also for you and for me as we embrace the call to engage in interreligious dialogue. As we courageously sow seeds of prophetic hope in the world today, remember these words: “Don’t be afraid, The Lord is there to help you.”

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<sup>26</sup> Armand Veilleux, “Community, Church and the Contemplative Life,” in *The Gethsemane Encounter. A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, Edited by Donald Mitchell and James Wiseman (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> As quoted in Veilleux, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> Veilleux, p. 133.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, December 7, 2018 <https://zenit.org/articles/franciscan-sister-recalls-algerian-martyrs/>