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“Creating Space for the Future”

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“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that weighs us down and the sins that so easily distract us, and with perseverance run the race that lies ahead of us, with our eyes fixed on Jesus.” (Heb. 12, 1-4).

We have a cloud of witnesses over us... consecrated women who have come before us, who have sown the seeds, who have given life. Women who have blazed the trail with creativity, daring, prophecy and above all, moved by a passionate love of Jesus and his Kingdom.

The works, the institutions that arose in centuries past not only speak of “glory” but, above all, of vision. Women of vision, for they prepared the future, created spaces so that what God and they longed for could happen, because they were committed to the present. These women allowed themselves to be transformed by that passion for God and for Humanity and that is why they transformed people, environments, societies, culture.

But they also had a frail beginning; they also felt their smallness, their poverty. But, they did not allow this to dishearten them, for they had placed their trust in God and in his call. They set themselves to discern and to listen to what God and history demanded of them at that time. In a letter written to the consecrated life in 2014, Pope Francis tells us: “I hope that every form of consecrated life asks what God and today’s humanity expect of them.” (n.5) Consecrated women of that time did precisely that. Now, it’s our turn to act, not the same, but similarly. Under the “Shekinah”-shadow of that cloud of witnesses, I come to this simple reflection with you. . .

When we live in times such as those we experience today, times of trials, we feel a call to turn our eyes back to what makes sense in our lives, to what is essential, to Jesus and his Gospel.

And I refer not only to the time of the pandemic, which over the last two years has tested all of humanity, but rather to the situations that have accompanied us for some time, like religious life worldwide. We are in a time of growth, of *crisis*, a time in which we need to *opt* to *discern*. A time of crisis that reflects not only the crisis of the Church, but also that of the entire world. Our planet itself, the whole of creation, is in crisis and is groaning, crying out. (Cf *Rm* 8,22)

In the history of each of our Institutions we undoubtedly find Paschal processes. Women who sowed seeds and who sowed themselves like the grains of wheat of which Jesus spoke. One fruit of this planting is the religious life of the United States, which is still alive despite the crises it has had and continues to undergo. Now, it’s our turn to “with perseverance run that race that lies ahead of us”. Perseverance in this race comes from our focus, gazing fixedly upon Jesus, “the author and consumer of our faith”, who has called us to follow him, who has stolen our hearts.

The past is not lost, no matter how distant it may seem. Through memories, we recover the passionate lives that today illuminate and inspire us. The weaknesses of the past, the misfortunes and sins, also question, purify and teach us today. We create future spaces as we link them to the

experience of the past and the calling of the present. When asked about time, St. Augustine mentioned three words that I think are significant: remember the past, pay attention to the present, anticipate the future. For him, time is closely related to the soul, that is to say, in my soul the past no longer exists, it becomes present when I remember it; the future, which also does not exist yet, happens when I ardently wish it... And God's mercy and faithfulness flow like a river, linking these three times. There is a close connection between what we have been, what we are and what we will be.¹ He, God himself, his mercy and faithfulness, is the link; the God who is, who was and who shall be...

The signs of the future are already in the calling of the present. The future is in the Hands of God, that is true. However, we sometimes tremble before him when we look at him with human eyes and allow ourselves to be led by reason, calculation, predictions, when we see ourselves as ever more irrelevant. There are people who doubt the need for a religious life at these times, even people within the Church. Like Thomas Merton, we can say to these "prophets of misfortune": "I am doubted, therefore I exist."

We can only look to the future with hope when we interpret the signs of death, of precariousness from an evangelical point of view, as a guaranty that "something new is being born; haven't you noticed?" (Isaiah 43:19) (Frankly, sometimes one answers the Lord, "well, honestly, I haven't noticed...but I trust in You"). The thing is, when a seed falls on the ground and dies, it goes through a process of darkness and stripping that takes time while it accumulates the life force that then bursts out toward the light and bears fruit.

How can we look to the future with hope, how can we embrace it with hope as we are invited to do by Pope Francis? The Gospel, the life of Jesus, gives us this hope. Human eyes anchor us to the past and perhaps make us live just "making the most" of the present, but they make us lose heart about the future. We have not chosen to allow ourselves to die, we have opted to live, we have chosen life but in the Paschal sense. And if we must die, it is in that perspective, in the light of the passion-death-resurrection of the Son of God who loved us and has given his life for us. We need to go through this Paschal process to allow ourselves to transform, so a new Religious Life may emerge. In 1968, then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: "Also at this time, from the crisis of today, tomorrow will emerge a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. ...It will be a self-contained Church, ...it will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek ... But when the trial of this shifting is past, a great power will flow..."

In recent years, congregations, communities and attendance have disappeared, but the life that was sown continues to beat strongly. Nothing has been in vain. "If I can stop one heart from breaking, / I shall not live in vain; / If I can ease one life the aching, / Or cool one pain, / Or help one fainting robin unto his nest again, / I shall not live in vain. [VI, Life] (Emily Dickinson).

We are at the time of a new beginning, from the meekness and frailty that focuses us on the essential. But we are not starting from scratch; let's not forget we have a great cloud of witnesses. The first sisters of our congregations blazed the trail. At first, there were few of them. Pope Francis

¹ Cf. Cencini, Amedeo, *Abrazar el futuro con esperanza* [Embrace the future with hope], Ed. Sal terrae, Madrid, 2018, p. 20.

tells us we should not “give in to the temptation of numbers and efficiency, even less of relying exclusively on your own efforts.”

In that same letter, he tells us some essential things; he tells us we need to wake up the world, that that is our prophecy. And therefore “look to the past with gratitude” in order to “keep your own identity alive, without closing your eyes to the inconsistencies that are the fruit of human weakness, and perhaps also to the oblivion of some essential aspects of charisma”, and he invites us to “live the present with passion” and “the Gospel in fullness and with the spirit of communion.” Lastly, to “embrace the future with hope, without becoming discouraged by so many difficulties that you find in a consecrated life arising from a vocation crisis.”

I would like to share an encounter I had several years ago with a Canadian nun who was over 80 years old. I don't remember her name, but I do remember the fire in her heart. While we were having breakfast, she practiced Spanish with me and, suddenly, she got up from the table to go to her on-line Spanish class. She told me: “Every afternoon, I go to accompany a group of Hispanics who came to Canada. I only join them, without saying anything. But I want to learn Spanish to be able to listen to them.” A nun over 80 years old who lives in the present with a fiery passion in her heart.

That's how I see nuns in the United States...a Religious Life that is passionate about today's realities, concerned and paying attention to humanity's and creation's most urgent cries. Women who walk like trees loaded with fruit, bent over with fruitfulness, and who “go three times” in blessing around more than one young woman. Women who don't live for themselves but rather for others. They are there, on the frontiers that not everyone wants to touch...they dare to say the things that not everyone wants to hear...they loudly state that not everyone has abundance... they also make mistakes with confidence...as is normal with those who passionately seek the truth... They have journeyed on the road of humbleness that discerns, that pays attention to the voice of the Spirit. I once participated in one of these Assemblies and one of the things that impressed and taught me the most was the fact that the entire Assembly was held in an atmosphere of contemplation, with liturgies filled with beauty, prolonged silences for listening, in an environment of constant dialogue that fostered participation and engagement of all. My impression was of having shared with those women a profound, mystic experience, expressed and experienced with simplicity and commitment.

What spaces need to be created to help us to bear this time, this Paschal process? What or who can help us to bear this?

Create spaces suggests attitudes, like willingness, discernment, and seeing for what or for whom you want to make space. Space is always occupied, with something or with emptiness; it is inhabited or uninhabited. Space and time are intimately related. In space, time happens like Chronos or like grace... and time is superior to space...

What spaces do we want to create for the future? In Consecrated Life, we speak of *new wineskins* and we begin to understand these as new spaces where charisma is expressed today, the charisma that surpasses spaces and always recreates them. We speak of recreating charisma, but isn't it actually charisma recreating us? ... And that we need to find spaces to allow ourselves to recreate that charisma?

Because charisma is grace; it is given to us, it comes from God. It is a Gift of the Spirit. And all grace is God's action; it is the source of new life and the dynamism of the Spirit. Religious Life only has a future as far as the present lets itself be recreated by that charisma, lets charisma recreate its spaces, its times... lets this charisma gift it with the eyes needed today to see the needs of the world, to contemplate Jesus. Charisma in itself has a such transforming power that if we would allow ourselves to be illuminated by it, we would always fly in the law of freedom of which Jesus and the Word of God speak.

It's no wonder Vatican Council II told us that we needed to go back to the sources... because from there, we recreate ourselves. We are not the center, our works are not the center, our institutions are not the center; the center is the gift of grace that we have received. It is God, it is the mission entrusted to us, the charisma gifted to us. The source is in God the Trinity, and in the charisma that, through our founders—women and men—he has given to us as a perennial source of life...

How do we create spaces so charisma can continue to grow, and not worry so much about our survival? It's true that charisma and institution are deeply interconnected. Our charisma is evident in each and every one of us that are bound to it, in what we do, think, say, undertake... there is no charisma in the air. One generation can't exhaust it, but rather it gives it space for it to flow as a perennial source of life and meaning.

But then, what is essential, the thing that can sustain us at this time? I can safely suggest the following, knowing that right now we are giving ourselves the space to think, to contemplate together, to see together... and that the true sense of that reflection is what is being awakened in us and that later we will gradually enrich. I propose we contemplate the following:

1. *Be women of the Spirit, moved by a law of freedom.*

God wants us free. In the book "*A vino nuevo odres nuevos*" [For new wine, new wineskins] we are told: "The style Jesus uses to announce the Kingdom of God is based on the law of freedom (cf. *Jm.* 2, 12) that gives us a new way of relating to others and to concrete situations. This style has all the color and flavor of new wine that, however, can rend old wineskins. The image clearly reveals that institutional, religious and symbolic forms always need to gain elasticity. Without the necessary elasticity, no institutional form, no matter how revered, can withstand the stress of life, nor answer the call of history." (CICLSAL, *A vino nuevo odres nuevos*, n. 1).

In order to create space for the future, to experience a transformational process, we need *freedom*, that freedom given by the Spirit. We know there are people who obsessively accumulate things, because they think all of them are essential and necessary items... How can we get to that place of holy abandonment, to be willing to leave everything that is non-essential and be available for the *transformation* God wants and that we want to happen in Religious Life?

The poet Rilke wrote:

You have to know that from the beginning
God blows through you,
and if your breast burns and for no reason,

then God is working in you.

To be free, we need to *give Spirit space*, allow it to blow through us today. Or rather, it's allowing Him to create these spaces for the future, for He is the "in" of God, the loving space where Love, which is the origin and constant Gift, circulates. It is the "in" where our creativity recreates itself, where our following of Jesus is refreshed. Pope Francis says: "The Holy Spirit is the animator of religious life. The more space we give Him, the more He gives life to our relationships and our mission in the Church and in the world." (Pope Francis, *To the Participants in the General Chapter of the Order of Friars Minor*, May 26, 2015.)

How can we allow the Spirit to create this space in us? How can we allow Him to make us women of the Spirit, because we live guided by Him? St. Teresa narrates that one day, Friar Pedro de Alcántara recommended she tenderly sing the *Veni Creator* to the Holy Spirit... and she did. Wouldn't it be a good idea to follow that advice and invoke the Spirit, the Divine Ruach, more frequently?

2. *Give new meaning to our communal life.*

Give new meaning to the communal life that is typical of religious life. It is significant that in the book "New generations of Catholic sisters. The challenge of diversity", most young sisters entering congregations in the United States say that one of the main attractions was communal life, and that they prefer to live in communities of four or more sisters. It is true that communal life is the greatest challenge, but also its greatest joy and opportunity to grow, a true work of love: "At times, living with so many women can be a little difficult." They say that religious life cannot be experienced without community, "and it is precisely there, where I can find Christ in my sisters and serve Him."

These same young women say that the community that receives them is not always willing to welcome new members. We no longer emphasize community life, communal living, the common good, common prayer, because individualism steps in: "One of the challenges is individualism and the loss of community between sisters. An exaggerated emphasis on personal freedom, ... We have too many sisters who live alone and who don't participate in any way other than the basics in provincial life..." (Response of millennials in 2009).

Pope Francis tells us that the Church grows through community witness: "Knowing how to transmit the joy and happiness of faith experienced in the community makes the Church grow by the power of attraction." The simple fact of communal living is a testimony in a society that is increasingly individualistic.

Religious Life has become more and more disaggregated. Our communities have been reduced to their minimum expression. It is true that our pastoral activities have led to this. But, wouldn't it be the right time to reconsider these spaces? How to create community spaces for the future, where although we don't encompass what we encompassed before and although we have differentiated ministries, we share life, we pray together, we eat at the same table, we laugh together, cry together, take care of each other and "put up with" each other, we hold back each other's battles and nights?

Creating spaces in our community to... discern, share, celebrate, pray, laugh and cry, rest... one generation listening to and understanding the other. The creativity of the Spirit can make new

styles of structured communities emerge anew, where there is at least the minimum structure promoting congregation, closeness, discernment of one's life and mission. "Behold, how they love one another..." would be the greatest vocation testimony. Won't we seem too alone, doing wonderful things but by ourselves? Let us believe in the strength of community testimony, that makes individualistic society—where personal importance prevails and sharing is not an option—sit up and notice.

3. *Create spaces to transform the mission, creativity and collaboration.*

Hand in hand with community is the sense of mission and mission is experienced from the community and in order to create community, the people of God, communion. The Holy Father says: "A Church that must be forged by prophets, and as such, capable of recounting the history in which it lives and interpreting events, denouncing the evil of sin and injustices."

The mission sustains us, because it takes our focus off ourselves and focuses us on the Kingdom. Where there is no movement, there is no future. That is why the Pope expects consecrated people to know how to create "other places" where one lives the "evangelical logic of the gift, of fraternity, of diversity, of mutual love". And he invites us to "a strict collaboration between the different communities" in "welcoming refugees, in proximity to the poor, in the preaching the Gospel, and in the initiation of a life of prayer." The Pope also recognizes the strength of laypeople who, together with consecrated persons "share ideals, spirit and mission."

Do you think that perhaps Religious Life should create spaces for communion in diversity? And communion does not necessarily mean union, but rather spaces to share focus, concerns, possible answers that need to be given. Sharing ministries, from the inter-congregational point of view, without fear of diluting the identity of each charisma but rather enriching it. This is not the time to put our efforts into what makes us different: whether we wear a habit or not, if our community structure is better than another, if our ministries are more evangelical or more disincarnate... It is time to put our strength behind what unites us, which is following Jesus in this beautiful way of life that involves the experience of evangelical counsel in community... Each institute, from the originality of the charisma the Spirit has given to it, from its ways, its expressions, its signs.

Sometimes we confuse work with mission. And when we can no longer "work" we feel that our life no longer makes sense. For the new generations "the type of work is less important than the opportunity to do apostolic work together." It is the mission that unites us, not necessarily work... What do we need to transform in our ministries to respond to what the Spirit and history demands of us?

4. *Create spaces for hope.*

Religious life, especially in countries where it has a longer history, is at the darkest point of its night. And it has seemed long to us... Tagore says that "if you cry at night because the sun has gone out of your life, your tears will prevent you from seeing the stars." It's true that we have cried these nights, for these crises, but we have also had that certainty that in this time of religious life, there is much life and a dynamism that is only explained by the action of the Holy Spirit who, from our precariousness, our lowliness, continues to do new things...as He usually does.

Creating spaces for hope involves discovering the seeds for the future that are present here and now. Rilke, in one of his letters, wrote: "Nothing strange should befall us, but only that which has long belonged to us!" Creating spaces for the future does not mean something strange will befall us, but rather what belongs to us will blossom and bear fruit; what we have already taken ownership of throughout our religious life. What we anticipate for the future, at heart, is what makes us passionate today, are the convictions that accompany us today.

However, God also surprises us. He intervenes in the future and prepares surprises that are not necessarily the fruit of our efforts, but rather simply grace. St. Paul tells the Corinthians: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searched all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us." (1 Cor. 2, 9ss).

In the introduction to this Assembly you wrote: "The Divine Mystery is alive and continuously alluring us to considerer new possibilities. Opportunity so we all together can analyze the realities of this historic moment and listen to the Spirit who calls us to do something more."

Hope is the thing with feathers / that perches in the soul, / and sings the tune without the words, / and never stops at all, // and sweetest in the gale is heard; [XXXII, Life] (Emily Dickinson).

Hope gives us wings, connects us with the past and the future. We need to remember: God has always been with us, has accompanied and guided us; He is the Faithful God. He continues to be and act today and tomorrow. We want to live in faithful and loving hope. Hope against all expectation. Hope in the things we cannot see but know are already there, like a gift prepared for Religious life by God.

5. *Need to revisit the signs...*

In one of his poems, Thomas Merton says: "Geography comes to an end / Compass has lost all earthly north / Horizons have no meaning, / Nor roads an explanation."

Religious Life can withstand much from a humanity that is lost and senseless, if it is faithful to its prophetic and symbolic nature. Volume 25 of *Vita Consecrata* speaks of the habit and of an "appropriate symbol, so her consecration is recognizable... a dress... that because of its dignity and simplicity responds to the nature of her vocation." What makes our consecration recognizable? With or without the habit, how do we recover that symbolic nature both personally and as a community?

Perhaps revisiting the signs involves purifying the activism that obscures us, or our wishes to "save the world", believing that we have to do everything, be everything, be pioneers in everything. On the other hand, Pope Francis tell us that: "An authentic faith—which is never comfortable and individualistic—always involves a profound wish to change the world" (EG 183), but not from activism but rather from testimony. Revisiting the signs might mean collaborating, adding our efforts to initiatives that promote life, being there and joining in, going

out and making a fuss, like Pope Francis says, as far as we can and our age allows... Being signs of a love that has called us, that through our small, poor, limited lives wants to tell humanity that God loves it more than it can imagine.

Giving new meaning to personal and community prayer, dressed in the habit of witness, not so much of formulas. Revisiting a Christian prayer, founded on the Word, that values Liturgy, that beautifies it, that at the same time introduces life, creation, joy and humanity's pain into that liturgy.

Giving new meaning to our communities, that they become habited communities, where we are there with each other, for each other... where there are spaces to enjoy in communion, to grieve together, to fortify ourselves in hope, to tell stories... and to give witness... to those to whom we want to leave this charismatic legacy...

Giving new meaning to evangelical counsel: in a world where there seems to be no space for love experienced in gratitude, there are spaces intended for learning to truly love, to relate to each other with respect, with affection, with freedom, where we develop more than friendship amongst ourselves and, at the same time, where we know how to work our human and emotional maturity, telling it like it is; spaces where we share, where we live temperately, far from comfort and all ostentation, where the poor are welcomed into our hearts; simple, happy, non-demanding communities... ; spaces of freedom based on mutual trust, where service of authority is truly service for each to give the best of herself, for harmony, a synodal space where, as the Pope says, we all row together, recognizing the service that each performs...

Giving new meaning to our ministries, dressed in the habits of passion, of a fiery heart, of Gospel, or *Laudato Si'*. Where we create spaces for everyone, male and female. Spaces for intercultural exchange, for collaboration. Where our own importance is reduced and where the gifts of everyone who shares in this mission—women and men—are increasingly promoted. Where we can be poets: "The Poets light but lamps – Themselves – go out – The Wicks they stimulate / If vital Light / Inhere as of the Suns –"(1864, 1945) (Emily Dickinson).

Less institutionalized ministries, that promote closeness... where we seem less professional and more mystical and as bearing witness.

Conclusion

Does the future attract us or frighten us?

What will you do, God, when I die?
I am your jar (if cracked, I lie?)
Your well spring (if the well go dry?)
I am your craft, your vesture I –
You lose you purport, losing me.

When I go, your cold house will be
Empty of words that made it sweet.
I am the sandals your bare feet
Will seek and long for, wearily.

Your cloak will fall from aching bones.
Your glance, that my warm cheeks have cheered
As with a cushion long endured,
Will wonder at a loss so weird;
And, when the sun has disappeared,
Lie in the lap of alien stones.

What will you do, God? I am feared.

Rilke (1898-1899)

What today sustains us and helps us to withstand the night that we have long been experiencing, will not be the longing for the past, but rather a hopeful, faithful and loving focus on the future. Revitalizing the motivating force that has sustained our life to date: Passion for God and for Humanity. We ask ourselves: Why are we here? For whom are we here? Why do we do what we do? We would love for that motivating force that for years has sustained us in our vocation to continue to attract more young people, that the strength of our charisma would continue to be a source of enthusiasm and life energy. The challenge then will be, together, to forge a new religious life that unmask this motivating force that in itself is attractive, that in itself is a powerful force ... Perhaps it won't come to knock on our doors *en mass*, but it could attract more than one young woman who is pondering the meaning of her life, wondering what God wants of her ...and of how she can commit to the transformation of the world in accordance with God's loving Project.

We need to give an unconditional, confident "Yes" to this transformation, in loving God, like the one Mary gave... With her Yes, She created the space for the future, and made it possible for what God and She herself wanted to happen. She does not get caught up in her smallness, but rather in the light of the Love that inhabits her space, she lets the reverie of the Spirit who opens us to the future flow:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee, / One clover, and a bee / And revery. /
The revery alone will do, / If bees are few. (1896. Emily Dickinson).

The Ruah, God's Reverie, does not want to do it alone. He counts on us to create those spaces for the future, although we bees are few. Let us go back to the beginning of our reflection: We have a great cloud of witnesses over us; let us continue resolutely in our professions in these times of trials and of hope, WITH OUR EYES FIXED ON JESUS!