

THE IDENTITY OF APOSTOLIC WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD

Introduction

When I was invited to participate in this Congregational Encounter on Formation, I was asked to focus in general on the theme **The Identity of Apostolic Women Religious in the Church and in the World**. The starting points for the stages of Initial e On-going Formation for each Province and for the Congregation will be considered later.

Therefore the method I will follow is as follows:

- My starting point will be Vatican II and the call to all within Consecrated Religious Life “to return to their roots or origins.”
- After a brief review of where we’ve been, I ask what really happened to Apostolic Religious Life in these fifty years since Vatican II: the lights and shadows, the identity crisis which still continues today, how we have advanced, where we are, what we can say about Apostolic Religious Life today.
- To situate and review where we’ve been I chose the theme **Prophecy** which has always been considered a fundamental dimension of Consecrated Life in the Church, and which, since the Council was broadened, to include all Christians, considering different nuances for the various states of life. The major part of our work lies here.
- I recall the evolution of the Prophetic dimension in the Theology of Consecrated Religious Life, the difficulties and questions, and the search to recuperate the founding experience. My reading is “situated” but not “closed or limited.” At times my starting point is the reality of Latin America or the Caribbean, seeking to maintain and preserve an open and universal horizon.
- In this way I consider the need to rediscover and strengthen the three fundamental elements of Apostolic Religious Life considering the traditional fields and new areas for the Mission in these changing times.
- Also we must be open to the newness which God offers, through others, and our companions who journey with us, within and outside of the Church, in the new prophetic areas.
- This is how I arrive at the direction which seems to me to be fundamental for Apostolic Religious Life today: the return to the prophetic dimension in the Church of Nazareth, in the light of Jesus of Nazareth, animated by a new perspective and a new mystique. We can no longer be so “settled” but we must try to respond to the new pleas coming from the Church and the world today, always open to the Spirit who speaks through everyone and everything.
- Only in this way can we continue to journey as Apostolic Women Religious, following the praxis of Jesus, constantly reviewing and animated by the strength and tenderness of the Trinity.

1. Remembering

There is a beautiful song from Argentina dedicated to **Jesus Christ the Liberator**, which begins like this: "How beautiful those who have memory, certainly they also have hope!" The starting point is Vatican II, which unleashed a true "*kairos*" in the life of the Church during the last 50 years. Today I remember all that was experienced, lived, suffered and built during these years!

How well I remember January 25, 1959. I had just arrived in Rome to study Theology. I was present for the coronation of John XXIII. Shortly thereafter, on the morning of **January 25 in the Basilica o St. Paul Outside the Walls**, he announced to the world that the Church would celebrate a new Council. (1)

I also remember the repercussions of the announcement in ecclesial circles: Some asked, "Is this an act of courage or of madness? The Church is not prepared for a Council! An elder, a "transitional Pope", will risk placing the Church in a position of review? Still others said maybe the convocation of a Council is not just a challenge, but also a search for responses to the needs of the Church and of the world. It was commented that Pius XII desired to call a Council but didn't dare to do it. Would his successor be able to do so? In announcing the Vatican Council II John XXIII said that, "***the idea sprang from his heart and touched his lips as a grace from God, as a light from on high, with gentleness in his heart and in his eyes, with great fervor.***" His words filled many with hope. And he was faithful. Nevertheless, it became always more clear that it would be very difficult to accomplish, that the preparation would have to be very carefully done, and that Pope Roncalli really had had great courage and daring in allowing himself to be led by the Holy Spirit.

John XXIII only presided at the first session of Vatican II. His successor, Paul VI, gave continuity. He led the Council forward for the three later sessions until its closure, December 8, 1965. The documents were carefully studied, discussed, amended, and re-elaborated. At times it seemed that the Council Fathers would never arrive at consensus. They reached the voting during the third and fourth sessions, with some exceptions. The documents were amply approved, almost unanimously. At the closing of the third session (11/19/1964) ***Lumen Gentium*** was voted on. This Dogmatic Constitution brought forth a truly change of direction regarding the concept of the Church: it opened the way to move from a pyramidal Church model to the Church as the *People of God*, and as an evangelizing and ministerial community, with a diversity of services. (chapt.II) there is one common starting point: **Baptism** which **makes** us all daughters and sons of God, equal in dignity and called to sanctity in Christ. (chapt. V). ***Lumen Gentium***, as well as other documents, was fundamental, after its approval, to situate, understand, and deepen Consecrated Life. The decree ***Perfectae Caritatis*** was voted on almost at the end of the fourth session (10/11/1965). In chapter VI of ***Lumen Gentium*** and in all of ***Perfectae Caritatis***, the invitation of the Church to Religious Life for "*aggiornamento*", a return to the source of Christian Life, enriched by almost 20 centuries of History, was very clear.

2. Fifty Years Later

We have been celebrating the 50 years of Vatican II since 2012. In 2015 we'll celebrate the 50 years of the approval of *Perfectae Caritatis*. In spite of the conviction that Consecrated Life was born of the Gospel, of adhesion to the person of Jesus and his way of life; in spite of various changes lived in various fields in post conciliar times, they were often accidental. Some of us are witnesses to the time lost in discussions around themes such as the religious habit, changes in customs and traditional prayers etc. in the General Chapters of renewal held shortly after the Council. During these 50 years we have not succeeded in a profound renewal, a return to the sources of Christian life as requested by Vatican II. The historical form of Religious Life prevailed; often the juridical perspective prevailed over the theological perspective. Thus began or deepened a crisis which was already latent. Many, above all in the religious life of women, still desired a minute codification of the personal and communitarian spiritual practices; the continuity of what existed and was a **“model more monastic than apostolic “ , the privilege to be considered members of a state of perfection as well as others....** We also suffered the loss of a certain societal visibility, either because of the ambiguity of the Institutions, influence of the State, Neoliberalism, and other pragmatic achievements, which frequently transformed the mission and reduced it to a mere task rather than an evangelical service.

In the modern and postmodern world, the criteria which excelled and continue to excel are effectiveness, pragmatism and the logic of the Market, among others. The encounter with a postmodern individual, who is fragmented and individualistic, profoundly questions our identity. Hence the crisis, the rupture, increasingly stronger each time, between being and doing and the resulting **disarticulation of the Mission.**

3. A Crisis of Identity

At the time of the Council, the Religious Life that we lived and which various congregations continued to live during the following years was characterized, as I have already stated, by a *transposition* of the monastic model to other forms of Religious Life. Often the emphasis was placed on fleeing the world, on regularity, on stability, praying the Divine Office throughout the day..., and not on the three elements which should characterize Apostolic Religious Life: *the experience of God, Communal life and the Mission.*

Carlos Palacio writes that, “Even today, we still live *an evangelical anemia*”. In spite of a partial abandonment of the traditional model in the Post Conciliar times, the efforts at dialogue with the modern world, the acceptance of values which seemed strange, changes in the exercise of obedience and authority, etc...what prevailed in the background was an out dated model of Religious Life. We continue to live today what he calls a crisis of *“personal and institutional identity”*. In this crisis, in spite of the many external and internal changes, *often we don't have clarity about the reason to be in and remain in Religious Life today*, especially with regard to Apostolic Religious Life. The *monastic transposition* suffered, affected our own identity in undoing the original newness of the proposal for Apostolic Religious Life: *the synthesis between the experience of God, community life and mission.* We separated the **“being** from the **doing”** as if the first were only of the spiritual order, internal and the second of the temporal order, external. We lived a crisis of disarticulation of the mission which then was no longer an

expression of who we were, but rather the personal completion of a number of apostolic tasks. We became more vulnerable to values foreign to the Gospel and allowed ourselves to be dominated by the criteria of effectiveness and measurable results, which kill the Mission, have a negative influence on fraternal relationships and make it very difficult to truly perceive the experience of God. This *disintegration of unity* is one of the reasons for the dissatisfaction and the disenchantment we see in so many religious today in Apostolic Religious Life. We have forgotten the call to continue to live the way of life of Jesus. We run the risk of reducing Religious Life to a therapeutic space for self-realization, because of the emphasis given to the subjectivity of post modernity, though we are not referring to forgetting or rejecting personal realization. However, in the following of Jesus, Religious Life must move through a **“decentralization of the personal “I”** in confrontation with the One on whom we should always fix our eyes. (c.f. Heb.12.2) If all Consecrated Life and therefore Apostolic Religious Life should be redefined from the starting point of the *“the universal call and vocation of all those baptized “and no longer identified as a “state of perfection”* it is necessary to always do this from the point of the three fundamental elements properly understood. **(2)**

4. Apostolic Women Religious Life, what do you say about yourself?

4.1. The prophetic vocation of Consecrated Life.

One of the most valued and specified elements of Consecrated Life over time has been the Prophetic aspect. At times one had the impression that, in the Church, we were its holders. Today, the challenges/difficulties of the journey, the deconstruction of the traditional model and the search to recuperate and revitalize the three fundamental elements of Apostolic Religious Life leads us to ask about this *“prophetic dimension”*, so as to *“re situate”* it. This dimension is fundamental for all of Consecrated Life, considering it under the prism of the *universal vocation, the call to sanctity*, suggested by the Council to all the baptized ones.

Every prophetic vocation is grounded by a profound experience of God which reaches and burns within, and compels many women and men, communicating itself in a passion for the Lord and his Project in favor of his people.

- The experience of prophetism is closely connected to the History of the People of God. It continues to be present, above all, in moments of crisis (exodus, exile...) and customarily provokes ruptures, conflicts, persecutions and martyrdom.
- Prophecy develops through words and symbols which sometimes transform the life of the prophet causing her to be a prophetic sign.
- The prophet contemplates the world with the eyes and heart of God. As a watchman, who looks out on the horizon from his watch tower denounces the sinful situations of idolatry, false gods, injustice inhuman relationships and announces hope in the promise of God for a future of peace and abundance for the people; the Utopia of the Reign.

Therefore the call, always directed to us by the prophets is, to ***conversion and personal, communitarian and social change.***

4.2. The Mission of Apostolic Religious Life over time

If we apply these and other indications of the prophetic vocation to Consecrated Life over time in history, we will see that it is born from a deep experience of God- **a foundational experience**- and is closely related to critical moments in the History of the Church and society (remember the rise of Monasticism, and the Mendicant Orders, the Apostolic Orders, the modern Religious Institutes, etc...). At such moments it was especially necessary to denounce the idolatries and injustices of each epoch and proclaim and announce the Reign of God and the call to conversion. Denouncement often provokes rejection and persecution. For this reason, propheticism requires personal and group renunciation and the commitment to transform a sinful reality to one of grace.

In Apostolic Religious Life propheticism expresses itself in words and actions such as: the symbolic witness of our own lives expressed through our vows, community life and a specific apostolic mission, be these in normal situations or be these in extraordinary situations such as those lived in some regions of the planet.

Prophecy was always considered an indispensable element in the theology of Consecrated Life. In *Lumen Gentium* 44 Consecrated Life is considered a **“sign”** which belongs not to the hierarchical structure **“but as an unquestionable form for its life and holiness.”**

In the document of Medellin¹², 2 we read that it is a gift of the Spirit to the Church which has of itself a **“prophetic mission”**.

Later the Synod on Consecrated Life and the Apostolic Exhortation *“Vita Consecrata”* (1996) reinforced this. The Apostolic exhortation dedicates Part II of Chapter III to the **“prophetic witness of Consecrated life as it faces the challenges of today’s world.”** In no. 84, &1 we read that the **prophetic character of Consecrated Life** constitutes **“a special form of participation in the prophetic function of Christ, communicated by the Holy Spirit to all the People of God”**. In the conclusion of the same number we read **“prophetic witness requires a constant and passionate searching for the will of God, a generous and indispensable ecclesial communion, the exercise of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It also manifests itself in all that contradicts the will of God and the search for new ways of living the Gospel in the building of the Reign of God” (# 84 & 2)**

In Latin America and the Caribbean we always remember the prophetic vision of our martyrs together with that of our Founders and Foundresses especially during difficult times. Many of us are familiar with the names of **Cleusa, Ezequiel, Dorothy, Maura, Ita, Silvia Arriola, the Jesuits of El Salvador, and more recently Dorothy Stang**. The list is immense. There are many others of our brothers and sisters who have given their lives, often at a very young age, for the liberation of the poor and the oppressed beyond our continent, in other parts of the world. Today they are more numerous in Asia and Africa. All are examples of the prophetic aspect of Apostolic Religious Life lived to the ultimate consequences.

4.3. Questions and Difficulties

The affirmation of the prophetic aspect of all of Consecrated Life and, therefore of Apostolic Religious life, is traditional in the Church. But, as I have already recalled, after Vatican II the prophetic role of all the baptized became very clear. (cf. Lumen Gentium, 31). Later, the role of the laity became highlighted. And so the need to raise questions about *what is most important in the prophecy of Apostolic Religious Life in the Church.*

In addition, in today's world, the prophetic voices are not only relegated to the Church: there are new voices, new historical subjects, new spaces of transformation, often on the margins of the institutional Church (e.g. Women, Ecology, Human Rights, JPIC and non violence, etc.)

It is in this light, that questions such as the following are raised in the History of Religious Life and Religious Sociology.

- One thing is to affirm that our Founders and Foundresses were prophetic, but it is quite another, very different, to say that our Congregations and Communities are prophetic in today's world.-Does saying that Apostolic Religious Life is prophetic make its educational, pastoral and social institutions prophetic? Does an institutionalized, hereditary prophecy exist? - What about gender issues? We use the words prophets and prophetesses, but, often we continue to follow masculine patterns in our Religious Life as women....
- Another question is this: The post modern world flees, at times, from big words, gestures and stories. How can we be prophetesses in this context, when our mental concepts, our institutions, etc..., are still tied into an idea of a prophecy expressed in grand works and achievements, a protagonism totally based on visibility, appearance and power?
- We customarily say we are prophets of the Reign and of eschatological values but, what does our present reality demonstrate? **Is there not a certain hyper - inflation of prophecy in our mediocre and routine life?** What really gives meaning and focus to our mission and makes it prophetic? Can we say as Jesus said in the Synagogue at Nazareth, "**Today** is fulfilled in us prophecy?" (Cf. Lk 4,21)

These and other questions and difficulties concern us at this time. They make us more aware of the importance of recovering our *foundational experience*; to educate ourselves that what is most important is not proclaiming to the four winds our prophecy, but rather our personal, communitarian and institutional practices translated into gestures which are concrete, transparent and significant and often very small and dull.

5. Recovering the Foundational Experience

5.1. Returning to the Roots

We are not speaking of a renunciation of prophecy, but a probing of its roots, returning to the experience of the sources of Consecrated Life, enriched by the trials and errors of the journey through countless decades and even centuries of history, as the Council asked of us.

This requires of us, as you will see, a *“vital shift”*: a move from the **line of doing to that of being an effective presence**: to move from a Consecrated Life considered more as a function and office, to one of convictions and gestures, filled with evangelical meaning. We must be in a stance, both personal and as a group, of great openness to the Spirit who speaks in us, through us and in spite of us...

It presumes living *in a state of watchfulness and conversion*: moving constantly from the quest for social and ecclesial prestige to the place which is *“more simple and normal”*; the peripheries, the new frontiers, the spaces in transformation together with others, even if these are not “ours”. It implies living without exceptions or privileges, in an ecumenical style and in group efforts with other organizations which work for the good of humanity, always moving from the alleged “superiority” held over the laity and seeking reciprocity, participation and collaboration.

This will help us to move from an “abstract ecclesial universalism” to a greater openness, not only to catholicity and to a true insertion in the local churches, but also to a more fraternal journey together with the People of God. Thus we will learn to assume a “broad ecclesial realism”, acknowledging the reality of sin and grace in a Church which is holy and sinful, as Pope Francis reminds us. We have all been called and continue to be called to holiness, in spite of our sinfulness, and we are committed to not only manifest the eschatological dimension of Consecrated Life, but also, and above all, to make present the Reign of God and the God of the Reign, in history, from this moment on, here and now.

In this way we will move from a Church which is “a uterine-community” to a Church which is a community of communion”: in the diversity of the mission and in the discernment of the signs of the times, sharing the mission and also the congregational charism with many others, always widening the space of our tent, so that the people of God are able to take part. (Cf. Is 54, 2-3) All this could be a means to ensure that the charisms of the Congregations become more universal, enriching and all embracing: It facilitates the possibility to “grow” in another way as a religious family: a way to help a “new form of Apostolic Religious Life” take birth, to extend ourselves and make fruitful the foundational charism in other ways and in other realities.

In this way we will be led not only to a dislocation geographically, socially and spiritually, but to a true “passover”: the death of one style, concept and paradigm of Apostolic Religious Life, to allow that which is born –to be enriched by the long history of lights and shadows – the beauty of our origins, enlightened by the novelty of the God of surprises who makes new all things, including our prophetic vocation in the Church and the World.

In all of this it is very important to acknowledge that God is the principal agent in prophecy. It is God who calls, sends, accompanies, remains faithful, reveals his project of salvation and shows himself to us from the core of his mercy. *No one can appropriate prophecy as something personal or sectional. God is always greater than any prophecy or all of prophecy.* God continues his presence today in the midst of his people, even though his words are diverse and spoken differently than in earlier times. Only those who experience this mysterious manner of God's action, very often disconcerting, can be God's witnesses.

I believe that in this "consists the dynamic fidelity to the proper Mission, adapting its forms as necessary, to the new situations and diverse needs, in full docility to divine inspiration and ecclesial discernment", asked for in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* 37, returning to the invitation of Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* and in *Perfectae Caritatis* – to a renewed faithfulness to the original inspiration of every Institute in the present context.

5.2. Pathways of Prophetism of the Apostolic Religious Life

What I will now share is, above all, the fruit of more than forty years of my experience in Latin America and the Caribbean, not to mention other international experiences.

I believe that in the efforts to return to the source, there are paths which should continue to be trodden, such as the insertion of our communities with the popular classes, the option for the poor, enculturation and the commitment to new frontiers of mission, etc..... We also need to preserve some traditional institutions and works which have been properly renewed. We must continue to live Apostolic Religious Life in the deserts, peripheries, and frontiers of our world. However, the way to do this must always be revisited and, we must change direction when necessary. We must be better learners able to pass from "exodus to exile", and thereby arrive at new exoduses. One of these passages is from a prophecy which at times is very masculine, to another more feminine: move from a style of denouncing to another which also includes consolation and hope; which moves us to search for a life style which is more existential and wise, without so much worry about seeing results and distinguishing what we do from what others do. It is a prophecy such as one from the Servant of Yahweh who announces justice without a lot of yelling, without breaking the reed or the wick that still smolders: he suffers and is humiliated, but doesn't break down: so his surrender is converted to true life for posterity. (Cf. Is 41, 8-9; 42, 1-2; 52,13-53).

At the same time it's necessary to **know how to make use of the new opportunities**: discover new spaces in transformation, be creating an alternative style of ARL more human, more in solidarity, in dialogue with society so as to create civil and public ethics which, little by little, are reflected in new social and political structures and genuine action of citizenship.

I also believe, as Victor Codina wrote some years ago, this is not the moment for grand prophecies or reports, but of small prophetic, liberating actions which happen in a daily life. It is a time of discernment and contemplation, of struggle and resistance to go against the current of the neoliberal empire, to learn to be *counter cultural*. It is time of patience (patire) a time to be salt and leaven, of silence and of planting, of waiting for better days, knowing that HE is present and walks with his people. The woman in Apocalypse 12 fights the dragon, not

head on but birthing a new creature; more fragile, but in reality, stronger and able to conquer him. Perhaps the *new exodus which we must live* should be like that (3).

It is in this context that we are called to live a new spirituality, a new experience of the Spirit more contemplative, more acculturated and symbolic from our Vocation/Mission, attentive to the signs from God and the Reign which is coming; trusting the Lord who remains with his people, even though at time we discover we are longing for the glories of the past....Without a doubt we have, *a journey and a story which invites us to continue the march with renewed ardor and enthusiasm.*

5.3. Some Consequences and Requirements

From what was said about Prophetism, we can deduce some consequences and requirements for our journey:

- The hope of the People of Israel was born during their failure while in exile. Returning from this, freed by a pagan King, amid various types of responses, they felt the call to a new exodus, to a new prophecy...Our situation is similar to theirs.
- Today we are not talking about fleeing from prophecy as Jonas did, but to exercise it in another way: above all searching for ways to be humble and merciful servants in the midst of the People of God, following our charismatic and spiritual traditions.
- We aren't able to open the heavens as Elias, to make rain, but we can console the people as he consoled the widow of Sarepta. Who knows, maybe our youth will receive the prophetic heritage as happened to Eliseu?
- Perhaps it would be better to speak less of *prophetism and make ourselves servants of the Reign and followers of Jesus*, within the Church, People of God, all prophetic and anointed by the Spirit as was Jesus.(Cf. Lk 4, 18-20)
- Therefore the urgency to welcome and join with some new prophetic figures which arise in the Church and in society, at the margins of the official history, in a neoliberal world. We can remember the strength of resistance of the little ones and their capabilities in struggles; the sense of celebration, the solidarity and hope of our people, above all those who suffer the most. To the poor and the little ones are revealed the secrets of the Reign! (Cf. Mt11, 25-27 e Lk 10, 21-22)They will help us rediscover prophecy in Apostolic Religious Life.
- As an example recall one of the prophetic actions which occurred in civil society: **The World Social Forum**. Starting with the year 2000, initially in Porto Alegre, Brazil and later on in other countries of the Third World, we lived the experience of the Forum and often repeated the slogan: "*A different world is possible*". Afterwards, we applied it to many other situations, including within the Church and Consecrated Life. "*A different Church is possible*", "*A different form of Consecrated Life is possible*". The Forum began at the beginning of the third millennium, when neoliberalism seemed more secure and triumphant and met each year in Davos with its most representative directors. Its counterparts met in Porto Alegre, Brazil at the World Forum, initially 16,000 persons. The number increases each year and in 2004, 150 thousand met in Mumbai. With the Forum began a "revolution" similar to the Student movement. Some of the postulates of post modernity such as, the following: there exists only one

thought, or the death of utopias, or that there are no alternatives outside of the market and capital and others entered into crisis.

And so we can state that the Exodus is not out of style; that the cry of the poor is stronger; the Spirit is present and acts in the world. It seems as if we are moving from the Exile to a “new Exodus”: **hope resurfaces in the midst of weakness and depression**. And as in Israel, liberated by a pagan King, it is often not the churches, but civil society and the popular movements which proclaim an end to captivity and world exclusion **(4)**. The Spirit blows where she wills, within and without of the Church. We must be attentive to discern the signs, so that truly, *a different Church and a different Apostolic Religious Life be possible. Everything depends on our dynamic fidelity today.*

6. New Spaces of Theology in Apostolic Religious Life

In a world of change, we encounter changes on all sides in the personal space of individuals, in life production, in communication, power, interculturality, ecology, religions, and many other spheres. **(5)**

In Europe and sometimes in Latin America I've heard it said that our Theology has died or lost its force. For me, neither of these affirmations seems to be true. Moreover, Latin American Theology is not identified only by its approach to the theme of poverty or of injustice on the continent. We have an original form of understanding and doing theology, however its scope is universal. It has had and has influence in other realities human and ecclesial, as well as on other Continents. Prof. Vincent Cubells writes the following about the theology of Gustavo Gutierrez:

“...There is a **Golden Rule** in the works of Gustavo Gutierrez: liberation theology casts its lot with the concrete relationship of the poor with the Biblical God. Therefore, applying the rule, as long as we have the poor, we will have liberation theology...the profiles of the poor will change because the reality of the poor becomes more complex. We will have to use new methods of analysis to understand it but liberation theology will continue to exist. The vocational proximity of the Church of the poor and the spiritual experience raised by the God of Jesus in contemplation of this reality, continues to gestate a language about God, a form of understanding his singular theological ministry, in which” **the question of liberation and life will always be protagonists.**” And he concludes by saying that this theology will continue to be current, because it is a theology which, as Gutierrez himself intuited his introduction of the 1988 edition, **“It is necessary to look far, always farther” (6).**

“The question of life and of liberation”: starting here we can underline new perspectives and new challenges for Apostolic Religious Life in the entire world. But not for a Consecrated Life which depends on “Movements” and not for the so called “new institutes” which in reality are “old “but for those which continue to be committed to the eradication of poverty and the defense of life!

Even though at times we are aware of a certain confusion, fatigue and discouragement in the face of our aging and lack of leaders in our Apostolic Religious Life....even though we sometimes ask ourselves “*will we die before the Red Sea, between Egypt and the Promised Land*”, we know we will not die! Yahweh was always with us and continues walking with us. He tells us as he told Moses: “Tell the sons and daughters of Israel to begin to march!” (Cf. Ex 14, 15). He walks with Apostolic Religious Life day and night: in the column of fire (guide, strength of the ideal, communication, passion), and in the cloud column (presence, protection, impulse, animation) ...He calls us to live another type of presence and fertility, to tread other paths, in the peripheries, frontiers and deserts of the planet: “the new and the old poverties”, the emerging situations pleading for urgency and commitment. And, within this same Apostolic Religious Life He invites us to bring into being other types of communities: intercongregational and ecumenical, with laity who share our charism; itinerate teams for evangelization, new ways of welcoming immigrants, refugees, street people, victims of human trafficking, drugs, loneliness, lack of communication...

It is necessary to enter into the new areas with discernment, clarity, a critical spirit, humility and courage; with a willingness to get wet, sweaty, bloody, and salty in crossing the Red Sea; with passion and compassion, two forces of the Spirit who gives new energies to the charism, nourishes the spirituality, animates the mission, gives an evangelical quality to community life and strengthens the experience of the God of Jesus, present in all, especially the most forgotten. It is about entering into a dynamic fidelity (Vita Consecrata # 37) in a reality of many and varied spaces: material and immaterial, individual and collective, relational, affective, virtual...

Apostolic Religious Life finds itself today - as does our Church, under the guidance of Pope Francis - in a moment of profound re-elaboration, re-looking at Vatican Council II. Today, to be faithful to the Lord, we must continuously open ourselves to the new scenarios, in light of the Gospel of Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospel.

For this reason, it will be increasingly important to have before us in **seeing, judging, acting, evaluating and celebrating** many important issues among which I highlight: *humanization*, so closely related to the care of life; *subjectivity* so important in the world of relationships and communication; *life of the planet* which today requires an “**ecothology**” which raises up questions less anthropocentric and more life centered; some other topics which our globalized world presents and which hold serious questions are in the field of sexuality, the family, religious offerings, ethics, gender diversity, pluralism,...and also the topics of Mysticism and Spirituality, of which we can no longer consider ourselves as experts but rather humble learners and seekers of the God of Jesus. We must always be in communion affective and/or effective with the other religious traditions, in a world where Science helps us discover new scenarios in which it is necessary to seek and encourage a new and authentic experience of God.

We should live all of this from the instance of a Prophetism which does not only rely on denouncing and announcing, but as has already been indicated, make these life

giving, we must be nourished by the renunciation and the commitment and with a transformation from a *Culture of Death to a Culture of Life*.

Much has been said regarding the quest for a *new paradigm* for Consecrated Life. However, perhaps the insistence should not be for a *new model* but rather a *return to the roots* with passion and fidelity, to the *essence*: to that which responded to the deepest desires of our Founders and Foundresses; to that which responds to the cries of the reality and to the desires of Religious who are willing to run the risk of trying to live- fraternally- the adventure of following Jesus, in a radical encounter with Him and with his Gospel. Only in this way can we continue the mission in Him and with Him of guaranteeing life in its fullness for all persons. Perhaps then we would help in the birth and nourishment of a "*new paradigm*"...

7. Apostolic Religious Life in the Style of Jesus

I believe this to be the Apostolic Religious Life we are called to build and live today in any country, or continent, in following the Prophet of Nazareth **(7)**.

For this we must look to the Lord and allow Him to look at us; touch Him and be touched by Him, so as to know how to touch and alleviate - with compassion and tenderness - the wounds and the hopes of our world; allow ourselves to be enchanted/fascinated by Jesus, by simplicity, by littleness, without luster, without a leading role, so that our presence can be healing and transformative in the reality of contrasts, of so many scenes of luxury and brilliance of the market kingdom: a reality of coexistence of the opposites of sin and grace. In this way we learn from Jesus to live with Him and like Him with some of the ministries needed today, with compassion, weeping, consolation and the descending to so many existential infernos. We will learn from Him the "Easter game": leave to find, go down to come up, lose to win, die to live, and thus to help the many persons who today are crucified to descend from their crosses and be raised for a life of hope, joy and communion.

With his way of being and living the mission, Pope Francis is teaching us that "*the house of Jesus is the people/the persons*"; we should not judge anyone because God always watches over us and judges us with love. Our pastoral works must change their objectives, often formal and precise, but distant and without "soul/heart", because they look for measurable and tangible results, which are not the fruit of a true interior change. Some pastoral ministries are so far removed that they are incapable of a true encounter with Jesus Christ and with brothers and sisters. As Apostolic Religious Life we are especially called to live the Mission from the position of *a theology of encounter - interior and exterior*.

I believe that Victor Codina intuited this and presented it very well when, already in 2010, gathering many dreams of a Church of encounter, closeness, simple and without protagonism, he helped us to pray about this and guide it through the characteristics of a **Nazarene church**, stemming from Jesus and Mary of Nazareth. **(8)** This was how

the itinerant prophet of Nazareth lived, in all the Galilees, and Samarias of his time. This is how we should live Apostolic Religious Life of today: with great surrender and pastoral care- in the Galilees, Jerusalems and Samarias of our times!

8. A New Mysticism

From all that we have seen, we can arrive at what J.B. Metz said about the need to live today” a *mysticism of eyes wide open, concerned about the pain of the people*” (9). It is about a call to conversion for Apostolic Religious Life to the Gospel of Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospel. It is about learning to “See or Perish”, as Benjamin González Buelta writes: to move forward from blindness to a new vision of reality, starting from a “**new look**”. It is to feel that we are being contemplated by Him so that we can see with a new sensitivity coming from Him. It is about a “**conversion of our senses**” to learn to live a contemplative process in reality, which moves us to become deeply involved in it. All of this with a true spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood. The commitment will teach us to go down with Jesus to all the human infernos, “because there are no people or situations where God does not exist and where God cannot be contemplated. Many people have drawn up itineraries in the direction of the infernos of this world and encountered God there, with a flavor they had not experimented before in the midst of the fine outcomes, conveniences and security of the future.” It is about moving from a distant God to a God who is close to all, above all to the “last”: from a God of strength to a God of fragility; from a God who chastises to a God who is chastised; from an immovable God to a resurrected God. Benjamin ends his chapter 11 of his book with the following:

“The mystic with eyes wide open in the following of the poor and humble Jesus of the Gospel, assumes the pain of the world and is penetrated by it to the core, without elusion and without falling apart. This is the miracle of love which is stronger than death and which is able to move forward from the darkness, sensing in their gut the dawn, with absolute certainty. With all who experiment and anticipate this flavor of the resurrection, one can compose a new song (Cf. Apoc 14, 3), feeling that the Lord is making all things new even in the tombs of death, among the stones which close off the lives of people like sealed sepulchers with the stamp of the powerful of this world. (Cf. Mt 27, 66)” (10)

Ending...without ending

Without ending, because the path continues open, in a world in transformation, with new scenes and individuals emerging; with new appeals and new ways which require new searches and new responses: humble, partial and almost never definitive. It is necessary to continue searching always...

We cannot stop the clock neither can we go back, taking refuge in the old schematics and the solid structures of the past. We must cast out to the future, to discover new roadways, at times very difficult and insecure, strengthened for the new mysticism and looking for “**a new model of Apostolic Religious Life for the XXI century**”.

We will not die! Yahweh, who accompanied us in the past, continues walking with us in the present and impels us in the building of the future. He summons us to prophecy and to open the path to other ways in the new scenarios:

- Detached from past conquests, physical patrimony, titles, fame, privileges, and honorariums.
- Trying to live being an “evangelical minority”, the authentic return to the source, the enriched memory of our origins as Vatican II asked of us...Always return to Jesus and Mary of Nazareth...live a Nazarene Apostolic Religious Life ...
- Run toward the goal “**with eyes fixed on Jesus**” (Cf. Heb12, 2- 4 and 12-14), encouraged by” **the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us**” (Cf. Heb 11); our sisters, our communities our provinces and congregations...
- With other companions of Consecrated Life: in the Conferences of Religious at a National and International level, the intercongregational alliances, searching for new styles of communities...
- Continuing to broaden the size of our tent in the Mission (Cf. Is 54, 2-3): move from mere toleration of the help of the laity to greater acceptance of their collaboration as necessary and just **co-responsibility and reciprocity**. They participate in the charism and enrich us as they live it out, as is the case with Spirituality and Mission.
- Willing to fall and to get up again, with the help of others, joining hands as we cross the deserts and the Red Sea...
- With humility and daring: accepting our real fragility, constantly reviewing our praxis, ready to change and begin again, whenever necessary, driven by the power of God who reveals and manifests himself in History.
- In an attitude of true discernment; personal, communitarian, and apostolic with lucidity and a critical spirit so as to be “**counter cultural**” today.
- With passion and compassion, energies of the Spirit, who gives new strength and opens horizons for **Mission**, animates **Community Life** and strengthens **the experience of God**.

For all of this it is necessary, as Joan Chittister writes, returning to a text of the Desert Fathers, “**transform us into fire**” in spite of our fragility and littleness. I want to end with what she writes in her book: “**The Fire in These Ashes**”.

“Once , history tells us, Abba(Father) Lot went to meet Abba Joseph and said:” Abba, as far as I am able I observe the smallest rules, all the fasts prescribed, some prayer and meditation, keep silence, whenever possible maintain my thoughts pure. What more should I do? Then the old monk stood and as he extended his hands toward heaven, his fingers were transformed into ten burning torches. Then he proclaimed: “**Why do you not transform yourself completely into fire?**”

She concludes by saying: “Perhaps what Religious Life needs at this moment is exactly to transform itself into fire...then the tensions wouldn’t bother us and we would be transformed into what we should have been since the beginning: **torches of fire**” (11)

May the strength and mercy of God who is Father and Mother, the passion and compassion of the Son, companion on the way, the light and tenderness of the *Divine Ruah*, continue to

animate us in our searches and on the journey as Apostolic Women Religious in following and continuing to follow Jesus of Nazareth, today.

Belo Horizonte, July 2014.
Vilma Moreira, F.I.

References:

- (1) Para o relativo aos itens 1 e 2, Cf. MOREIRA, V., **Renovação da Vida Religiosa. Relação entre a Vida Religiosa e o laicato pós Concílio em Utopias do Vaticano II. Que sociedade queremos? – Diálogos**. São Paulo, coedição Paulinas e UMBRASIL 2013, pp. 181-183; 187-189.
- (2) Cf. PALACIO, C., SJ, **Luzes e sombras da Vida Religiosa Consagrada nos dias de hoje em Convergência**, Brasília, setembro 2011, pp. 416-428.
- (3) Cf. para todo o nº 5: CODINA, V., SJ, **Questões acerca do profetismo da VR em Convergência**, julho 1996, e “**Un nuevo éxodo?** em **Revista CLAR**, 2, abril-junio 2006 (preparação à Conferencia de Aparecida.)
- (4) Cf. CODINA, V., y CARRERO, A.D., **Nuevos areópagos...nuevos retos para la VR de AL y el Caribe**. San Juan, Conferencia de Religiosos de Puerto Rico, 1997 y MORALES, V., **Mística y Profecía en la VR**. Bogotá, Paulinas, 2005.
- (5) Cf. Nos itens 7 e 8: MOREIRA, V., **El aporte de la teología latinoamericana a la elaboración de un nuevo paradigma de la vida consagrada** em **Testimonio** 254. Santiago de Chile, noviembre-diciembre 2012, especialmente as pp.40-44.
- (6) Cf. CUBELLS, V., **La obra literaria de Gustavo Gutiérrez**, retirada de algumas páginas da internet sobre o tema. Os sublinhados são meus.
- (7) Cf. neste item MOREIRA, V., **Una Iglesia fraterna, sororal, cercana**, em **Testimonio**, 262, Santiago de Chile, marzo-abril 2014, pp 28-30. O número monográfico tem por título: “**Repara mi Iglesia**”.
- (8) Cf. **Una Iglesia Nazarena. Teología desde los insignificantes**. Santander 2010, Colección Presencia Teológica 177, 215 pp.
- (9) Cf. METZ, J.B., cit. por Víctor Codina em **Una Iglesia Nazarena. Teología desde los insignificantes**, p.36.
- (10) Cf. **Ver o perecer. Mística de ojos abiertos**. Santander, Sal Terrae, 2006, 2ª ed., p.139-148; a citação entre aspas do capítulo 11 está na página 148.
- (11) Cf. CHITTISTER, J. OSB, **Fogo sob cinzas. Uma espiritualidade da vida religiosa contemporânea**. São Paulo, Ed. Paulinas, 1998, p.44.