LIVING RELIGIOUS LIFE IN A CLIMATE OF CHANGE—EXAMINING THE FAULT LINES

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Introduction

We live in “the best of times”. This is God’s time for us. It is the space where all that has gone before us culminates, and all that is in front of us starts showing its promise. Through our faith we also intimately know that it is the time of God’s incarnate Word still with us, the Spirit breathing in and through us. It is a time to make real our dreams. Our Pope has described his dream in Evangelii Gaudium: “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that they Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (EG 27)

1. How can we define our time?

How would we specify our time? Where are the paradoxes? We as part of our society are living the progress and the regression, the abundance and the scarcity of our times. We are surrounded by wealth and masses go hungry; we are trying at all costs to prolong life, and destroying life in many ways; we advance in human dignity and freedom and enormous numbers are victims of modern slavery caused by unjust systems such as human trafficking; we know medical advancements and are faced with new or old diseases, more resistant to known drugs; we are in an era of much social communication and of a lot of biased information. We are in an interconnected world, yet often do not notice those near us; we are in an age of interculturality, and at the same time there is an emergence of ultra-nationalistic ideologies. We are in an age of great hope and a lot of despair; where we talk of love and practice indifference. We acknowledge that we are stewards on our planet and yet act as owners. We know many beautiful families, yet the values of long-term fidelity and commitment, the very basics of relationship in human life, are put into question. We are at a point of expanding consciousness on our universe—its origin, its way of functioning and we try to understand what this means for us, for our story, for our faith. We are in an era of continual movement of peoples, bringing with it a mixture of culture and religions, yet we often fear each other for our real knowledge of each other is often superficial.

I won’t continue the list but I ask you to look at the signs of the times for you, here—these paradoxes which make us aware that a great part of our contemporaries are crying out to God whoever they deem God to be. God is always on the side of the oppressed, of the ones feeling lost or discarded,
of those who are abandoned and disregarded. God always answers their cry by sending someone. This is the whole Bible story and it is our story still today. This is where we enter. We are each called, because God has heard the cry of the people and God moved our hearts. We are members of our religious families because we want to listen to God’s own desire in the now and make it our own. It is God’s mission that we are called to take up on the fault lines.

What about our Institutes? All that I have just described runs through our own Institutes. It is not about we and them, it is about us. In an age of medical advancement, our members, and we, of course, live longer. We know members who are very rich in years. In my small congregation we have 5 sisters who are over 100 years old. Besides, fewer members are joining our institutes. So the effect of aging is even greater. This is true of the Americas, Europe, Australia, while the number of vocations is increasing in parts of Africa and of Asia. Our communities are becoming more intercultural with the challenge this brings. Within our communities we can find different currents of thinking in theology, in ways of praying, in the understanding of the vows and of community life.

We have had to face our own poverty, due to all that has come out through the clerical sexual abuse on children. This is of course a terrible crime and we sincerely regret it. We know it has done much damage to children and vulnerable adults. It has brought us shame and dishonor and it is no longer very glorious to belong to our race. At the same time, it has taught us that what is happening outside, is also happening inside our walls, whether we like to admit it or not. And this includes exclusion of all types, jealousy, competition, certain inertia, a preoccupation with our own selves and you name it. This however does not summarize us. It is far from saying all about us. It does say something important, that is, that we are not saviors but saved, that we are as poor and in need as those we serve. Welcome to humanity, we come back on planet Earth. Our vision of ourselves, of others, of our God and of our mission changes. And this can be very good. Of course, in our midst are also many dedicated courageous and faithful men and women who in many ways continue to bring light and hope to our world. In us co-exist the best and the worst.

2. What could be God's desire for our world and how can we try to make it come true?

We can only try to guess what God’s desire is, having studied the life of Jesus of Nazareth and of his disciples, of the Church throughout the centuries and the flame we inherited from our founders. It is the call made to us when we pronounce our vows and publicly proclaim that we want to live right relationships in celibacy, on-going discernment in community, the gift of all we are and have to contribute to make God’s dream come true for our world. I make therefore a few observations that you will continue.

a) To Include Everyone

Pope Francis in EG 23 writes: "The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded."

I want now to introduce you to someone who has been significant in my life as a religious missionary sister in North Africa where I spent 28 years of my life. The first time I heard someone describing our missionary presence as living on the fault lines, was in Algeria, in the late 1980s. The one talking in this way was the late Mgr. Pierre Claverie, Bishop of Oran, Dominican friar. Pierre was born in
Algeria in 1938 and had lived there as a child, son of a French family that had been in Algeria for four generations. When he was twenty he realized that he had lived his life enclosed in what he called a "colonial bubble", not realizing, in fact ignoring and denying that all around him were Algerian people, Muslims, in whose country he was living. When he realized this, he felt compelled to adjust to the other and this conversion was at the origin of his religious vocation. In his youth, in Church, he had heard homilies about the love of one's neighbor. However, he had never heard (even if it had been said) that the Algerians, the Arabs, were his neighbors. He needed to welcome this discovery, to allow himself to live with the other, to allow himself to be fashioned by the other. He needed to break down the walls so that there would be no more mutual exclusion or rejection. He had to change his mentality, what he had learnt as a child, so as to make room in his thinking, in his imagination and in his way of living for the other, the one who is so near and yet so different.

I guess we who have chosen to follow Christ in religious life, are continually challenged, to some extent, to do this. To open our eyes, to look around, to identify those who are hidden from our eyes, because of the world view we have inherited, because of the fears and prejudices this has instilled in us. This demands the courage of transformation of our ways of seeing, of doing and of being: As time goes on, I realize that there are always people that I do not notice, that are nearly invisible in our societies and sometimes in our own congregations, even in Rome. We can ask ourselves: Who do we choose not to see because of their different religions or philosophies or origin or culture or social standing or age or way of dressing or sexual orientation or character or theology or whatever. We could ask ourselves, who is invisible in our societies, in our churches and maybe in our Institutes? What is keeping us from turning our faces towards them? Let us remember how Jesus allowed the Syro-phoenician woman to challenge him in the prejudices he had inherited and to expand his vision.

b) To Be Midwives

The life of Jesus teaches us not only to minister to others in their needs, going out to those we would normally avoid or not see, but also to listen to their stories, listen to what is happening for them. We need to have the ears of a midwife as she or he listens to the heart of an unborn child and listen attentively to the aspirations of the people among whom they live. What are the profound desires of this person and of this people, even if they are expressing them in an aggressive way? What is aching to live here? What is the Spirit of God bringing to birth? This calls our communities to discern in a prayerful atmosphere what they see, hear and touch, so as to respond and act in a way that "does not break the crushed reed or snuff the faltering wick" (Is. 42,4). Beyond our work in schools, libraries, health centres, we are often called to accompany women who had been sexually abused, others who are aching for freedom to buy their own clothes or to choose their husband, instead of giving in to an all-powerful father. It takes years of walking together, of listening to each other's hearts. In this way we witness the Spirit of God groaning actively for new life. For me, this process has helped me recognize God's spirit actively present in these our brothers and sisters who reach God through the intermediary of Islam and I have had to pass through a conversion process so that I now see Islam as being part of God's infinite loving plan for humanity.
You are in other contexts, but I am sure that you also hear the call to be midwives, accompanying all that is aching to live, wanting to break forth. I like the image of the midwife, for she or he is there at the moment of birth, a moment full of pain and of hope, of dying to a way of relating to being born to new life. For us too, our call to follow Jesus and to know God's Spirit alive in the heart of each person we encounter can be an agonizing time because it often means being where some form of pain and sometimes of violence is also present. As midwives we have no control of who the child will be, of the circumstances of his or her conception, of the way that life will evolve. This is also the generosity and the detachment that is asked of us in our ministry and in our leadership.

c) To Accompany the Living of the Beatitudes

We live at a time where the trust towards political or religious leaders is put to the test. A gorge has opened. Whole peoples realize that they have been born with dignity and that this cannot be stolen from them. I have witnessed the uprising of the Tunisian youth on the 14th January 2011. I understood that you cannot oppress a people forever, that dictators can take away everything from a people, their freedom, their riches, their rights, but not their dignity. And when not just individually, but collectively, they become aware that this is jeopardized, uprising is the only way out. I saw the crowds of young and old, calling out that it is enough, that Ben Ali had to go. I was amazed to see a people who are so habitually pacific, ready to die for their freedom, their dignity, so that their children can inherit a different society. I understood: "Blessed are the afflicted (the gentle, but see note in Jerusalem Bible) they shall inherit the land." And once the first democratically elected government started becoming in its turn a dictator, this time on the religious side, they went out again on the streets. And once this government wanted to restrict the freedom of women, they went out on the streets, until now they have a Constitution of which they can be proud, even if there is still room for improvement. It also reminded me of the Magnificat: "God puts down the might from their thrones and raises the lowly."

What is God's mission in this context of a search to live with full human dignity? To live the beatitudes? I hardly need to mention the scourge of human trafficking, present everywhere. The refugees and migrants running from unjust and impossible situations. How are we God's presence in these situations? How can we cry out in anger at their plight? What can we do to improve their living and working conditions in their countries of origin? How can we, together, put pressure on national and multinational enterprises so that they treat the people they employ with dignity and justice? How can we join together to make sure our money is invested in a socially responsible way, not only excluding certain products and unjust labor conditions, but also ensuring that our investments have a positive social impact?

d) To Place Ourselves with Jesus on the Cross

To live on the fault line, is to allow oneself to be with the people, in the midst of contradiction, strife, difficulties, in an unsure and uncertain place and not to run away. It is exactly here, where it seems most chaotic, that God is with us. As we read in EG 268 "Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of his love which
exalts and sustains us; but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus' gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all his people." This entails a lot of patience and a deep loving look even beyond the actual happenings, but at the real, at the very essence of being of each person and each people. It demands of us to be contemplatives, to let the contemplation of Christ transform our hearts, and lead us to action. It also means that we don't reject any part of humanity.

As followers of Jesus, we are sent out to be servants of the Good News of reconciliation between God and humanity. We are mediators, totally given to God and to others, We are placed with Jesus where history and the Kingdom of God meet.

This is where Jesus died, on the Cross, between heaven and earth, his arms open to gather all God's children, dispersed because of sin that separates them, that isolates them and puts them one against the other and against God. As we read in Ephesians 2,13-18 "His purpose in this was, by restoring peace, to create a single new humanity, out of the two of them, and through the cross, to reconcile them both to God in one Body; in his own person, he killed the hostility."

Jesus on the Cross, does not choose sides, he does not reject a part of humanity. He tries to keep both sides together. "Father forgive them". Reconciliation is at this high price. It is somehow easier to take sides, to condemn, than to remain open to all sides. It goes beyond generosity and charity. Pierre Claverie kept telling us that the church is not only a multinational organization doing charitable works. The cross needs to remain central to our life. And so, we need to be ready to give our lives, even to the supreme witness of love. We can remember here Pope Francis' gesture, inviting the two presidents, of Palestine and of Israel, to his house in the Vatican, for prayers for peace, a meeting that took place on Pentecost Sunday. Reconciliation is a courageous act. I know of one father whose son was coming out of prison and who came especially to pray at the Basilica of Our Lady of Africa to have the strength and the wisdom necessary to welcome him back.

Sometimes we also need to be agents of reconciliation within our Christian communities. In some ways, we found it more difficult to approach and to be reconciled with evangelical Christians, who had a different concept of mission and different ways of approaching the people, than to work with Moslems. What light does the Paschal mystery throw on such situations?

This poses the question to us : What is the meaning of our lives? We are all called to give ourselves to the other, through an attentiveness, a service, a smile, which shows that we share the life that is in us. It is a life that becomes Eucharist, a life given to the end. It is Jesus who accomplishes in us today the meaning of his life and makes us be ready to give one's life for the other, not only the one we love ... On August 1st 1996, Pierre's life was taken together with the life of his young Algerian friend who had driven him from the airport, Mohammed.

What is the call that we hear ? What is breaking apart in our society and in our Congregations ? What is the shock that is being experienced? Where are we being called to be agents of reconciliation? How are we called to give our lives here and now?
d) To Care for Creation

As we develop a contemplative attitude towards creation, we know that whatever we do in one part of the planet has lasting effects on all of us. Whether we like it or not we are interconnected. Some of us have for too long profited from the riches of the planet without consideration for the effect this might have on the climate, or on the health of individuals, or on economic, political and social stability for the people from whom we take the riches. We know today that we have to do something about this or we leave a very impoverished inheritance to the future generations. We are called to be stewards, not owners of creation. In many countries of Africa, mining, for example, profits the rich countries, and a few wealthy individuals and there is no respect of the environment. I know that there is a discussion here on a new coal mine in Queensland which will have disastrous effects on the environment and also cuts through cattle properties. Creation is also our responsibility. I know that many groups of religious put a lot of time and effort in raising awareness and proposing actions. The UISG has various working groups: Justice and Peace Integrity of Creation, Justice and Peace against human trafficking, Justice and Peace promoters.

All that I have said so far applies as much within our own communities as much as outside. I will now dwell on some more specific situations in our congregations.

3. What could be God's desire for our own communities today?

Ours is a humble God, who has created us to be in his image and likeness. Yet we don't like that very much. Unconsciously we prefer the image of a strong, robust God who allows us to lord it over others. But this is just a false image we make up. How is God trying to make His humility active in us?

I have already said a word about how I see the sexual abuse scandal inviting us to a more humble place. We have lost our halos, and God is not asking us to find them again. Besides being just and compassionate with the victims, I think, God is asking us to stand at the foot of the Cross, with those who suffer and sometimes with those who are badly thought of, suspected, isolated, misunderstood, put aside. As this place was good enough for Jesus, it has to be good enough for us. We need to choose to be with Christ in this place, with the great numbers of women, men and children who are there already.

a) Our Institutions

When we can no longer manage the Institutions we cherished or they are taken away from us, or we have to decide to give them away, we enter a different space. We come into a new place and we need to define ourselves in new ways. It is a hard but grace-filled time, as we, religious, had been, at least in some places, too much identified with the services we can render, the institutions we run so well. We had somehow lost our being at the margins of the Church, remaining her prophetic voice.

This dispossession has been such a grace for the Church and religious communities in North Africa in the 70s when the schools and the hospitals were nationalized, when a huge number of religious
and priests left Algeria and Tunisia because there were hardly any Christians anymore in those countries. Only a small remnant remained. Their motivation for staying on had to be radically different from the one that had brought them there in the first place. It was no longer necessary to be there to teach or to care for the sick, to catechize or to preach. The purpose for staying had to be redefined. The communities that were left knew themselves to be there as a witness that the God of Jesus Christ does not abandon a people. They became as small as a pinch of leaven in the big mass of Muslim local people. And I can assure you that it is not insignificant, to be just two Christians in a government school where all the staff and pupils are Muslims. I feel that in Europe, the Americas, and probably here, we are today being called to a radical choice. We need to look at the significant changes within our communities and in society, so as to make new choices, to creatively continue to answer God’s ever renewed call.

Some religious congregations have set up associations of lay persons who want to continue their schools, health centers or other works in the spirit of their charism. Others choose to go into inter-congregational ventures. I know of congregations who have been very inventive to convert their institutions so as to answer new needs, always in link with the laity.

b) An Aging Population Within Our Congregations

The organization of our Institutes to care for our aging members has led us to make some difficult choices. Some of us have decided to leave our younger members on the field, and our older members have been asked to go to retirement homes, where lay personnel look after them and in many cases where they live with other older people from all walks of life. They have done this, sometimes grudgingly, most often with a lot of generosity, happy that the Congregation can continue the mission entrusted to it both through its new members, and through them, for they remain missionary wherever they are, in their attitudes, actions and prayer. For this to happen, ongoing formation sessions for our older groups are necessary, for those in the 60s and for those in their 70s. We need to encourage and form our sisters to remain alive to the end.

Here I give the example of some of my sisters in retirement homes. (Isabelle) Also because of our change in numbers and physical strength, we need to remember that we are servants not masters, and that we are not called to do everything, nor to go beyond our strength. We are sometimes placing unbearable burdens on some of our middle aged or older members, in order to keep structures which might no longer be so necessary. We need to adapt our ministry and our structures not only to the outside world but also to who we have become. This is where the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life can help us by agreeing to new structures where our leadership can also include lay people. God is in the real, in the NOW.

I love to remember this text of Oscar Romero (1917-1980)

A Future Not Our Own

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us ... This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

c) Our New Members

In most of our congregations our new members are not very numerous. They are as different from each other as the older members are, but there are some more or less common characteristics. They are coming from a digital world and are often used to being interconnected. They are often looking for a community experience, where they feel at ease. They desire to be part of a corporate mission. They would like to show their identity, through some form of external sign. This brings with it an important dilemma. Our older members (I'm talking of my congregation) had gone through the giving up of the religious habit, the strict time-table, the monastic form of living and praying, the institutions such as schools and health centres belonging to us. They were happy to become part of the crowd, not really immediately visible. And here comes a group of younger sisters who would somehow like to restart institutions and be outwardly recognizable. The question comes as to our values, whether it is more important for us to be known or to keep our apostolic mobility which we lose if we have institutions to take care of. The debate is open. What I find interesting is to try to formulate the motivations for our choices, so that they are not imposed from the outside but grow from the purpose of the Institute.

Younger members bring in their freshness, their desires, their questions, their enthusiasm and their ways of doing and of being. As they are fewer in number, we can fall into the temptation of seeing them as perpetually young, which in truth means incapable of taking big responsibilities in the congregation. Thus we deprive ourselves of their knowhow, of their youthful creativity. It is also
important that they have space where they can meet with other young religious, to encourage one another, and also with older members of their institute so that they can learn from each other.

Our younger members are not necessarily coming from the countries from where the majority originates. This brings with it a sense of loss for the older dominant group, even though they may be happy to know that younger members are joining.

d) Our Inter-cultural Reality

Many of our communities have become intercultural, just as our countries. Interculturality, especially when lived in countries with minorities who are oppressed, is a strong witness in itself. It is also a big challenge. When I lived in Mauritania, this was very true as the negroafrican ethnic groups are looked down on by the arab-speaking group and within some of the groups there are also social classes. Seeing us live together from Europe, America and Africa, as one family, was a witness in itself. The fact of opening our doors to whoever wished to come to us, was another.

I love this picture of Sieger Koder which reminds me that our communities are a constant miracle. In the background is the parable of the All Merciful Father Lk 15, 1-3, 11-32. In front the community made up of very different characters, just as the local and global communities that we form. The group is very diverse: a wounded prisoner, a veiled high class lady, a man wearing glasses, a clown who looks sad, a bent over lady who does not dare look at Jesus, a prostitute, a rabbi ... They are seven, a number that signifies totality, fullness. In fact, you could say that they have not much in common, except that two open hands bearing the mark of the nails and holding bread, unites them at the same table. In our intercultural community, like in this picture, we are all poor needing healing and wholeness. When I know myself as one of the blessed since as Jesus proclaimed, “blessed are the poor,” then maybe it will be easier to accept the poverty of my sister or brother in community – the slow one who seems to keep the community back, the one who is always making us change our time-table because of the people he or she brings home and so on. We often have differences turning around power, relations with the family, trust, hospitality, cultural identity, money ... To talk about these issues, to try to understand each other, to come to know the world view each one is thinking and acting from, brings us closer to each other, and enables us to resolve our conflicts through negotiation. In my congregation, we often boast of our differences, as we have always been an intercultural group. However, for our differences to become a gift, able to enrich us all and to enrich others, we need to work hard and to work constantly. It is not obvious that I see the fact that my sister takes so long to explain something to me, as a privilege, nor will she think it is a gift that I give just some hints and expect her to understand what my point of view is. This is a very demanding exercise, which entails that we can deal with conflict constructively.

4. Leadership in a climate of change.

a) Called to be Ex-centric Leaders
As leaders we need to put the center of our reoccupations not so much on selfpreservation as on an exodus of self. In May 2013, in his meeting with the UISG general assembly, Pope Francis told us:

"It is Christ who called you to follow him in the consecrated life and this means continuously making an "exodus" from yourselves in order to center your life on Christ and on his Gospel, on the will of God, laying aside your own plans, in order to say with St Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).
This "exodus" from ourselves means setting out on a path of adoration and service. The exodus leads us on a journey of adoring the Lord and of serving him in our brothers and sisters. To adore and to serve: two attitudes that cannot be separated, but must always go hand in hand. To adore the Lord and to serve others, keeping nothing for oneself: this is the "selfemptying" of whoever exercises authority. May you live and always remember the centrality of Christ, the evangelical identity of the consecrated life. Help your communities to live the "exodus" from the self on a journey of adoration and service, above all through the three pillars of your life."

As leaders of groups who have not themselves as the center, one of our strengths is prayer and discernment. We are called to be servant leaders, known for our ability to listen and "to see God in all things and all things in God". Contemplation takes us out of ourselves so as to recognize the face of God and God's calls hidden in reality, that we would not be able to detect if we don't take enough quite time with God. Another characteristic for us is "the sending" as missionary disciples. As leaders we need to give this sending to all our members as this gives them the courage to continue being alive and outgoing towards God and others, whatever their age. The terrible thing would be to die while one has still so many years to live. I am amazed sometimes at my sisters' missionary zeal while they are already in homes. Formalizing the sending, even to infirmaries, has proved a great strength. The sister knows she is there in the name of the Congregation, to continue living our common mission. Many have understood that even from a wheelchair one can go out towards others.

We need to ask : how is God working through our Congregation to make a difference in the contexts where we are? What influence do we have on the International context of the world? How are we going out to others to sustain them in their own ministry? And our most active Justice and Peace group is in Canada where the average age is 83.

b) Leaders with a Roadmap

Some time ago a young couple, obviously tourists, stopped me in Rome to ask the way. I could more or less give them the directions they were seeking, but seeing a map in their hands, I said : let's look at the map. They replied that they did not want to look at the map. They wanted to ask people for the way. This is full of risk, for I've rarely met anyone who tells you I don't know and can send you off in the opposite direction. As leaders we do have a road map: the Gospels, our charism, the writings of our founders, the actual purpose of our institutes, the orientations of the chapters, church documents ... In many of our institutes we have replaced hierarchical structures with more collaborative and circular ones. We aim at team work, we have networks. These new structures aim at a maximum participation
from all the sisters. However structures only work if they serve the purpose of our institutes. As leaders, we need to point out to our road map, so that our community discernment, prayerful reflection and contemplative moments stem from these foundations. We also need not only the road map but also the passersby, those people who have walked with us, who have seen us acting and being and who can help us discern the way forward.

c) LEADERS WHO LOVE STORY-TELLING

One of the ways to bring our members together is to invite them to tell each other the story of their vocation, whether they have lived in the Institute for two years or sixty years. It is an exercise that shows us where our real unity lies. Telling each other how we are living the Institute’s charism in today’s contexts reveals that age does not really separate us and that what makes our hearts beat is very similar.

Working from the individual stories to discern a common purpose, in inter-generational groups, helps us understand each other. Our purpose is not so much what we do as who we are, within the Church and society today. It is about our vision, our values, our beliefs, our desires. When we communicate at this level, we are in touch with a lot of energy and joy and hope. It brings us the strength we need for the day. Like the disciples of Emmaus, who recognized the stranger at the breaking of the bread, we too are able to recognize his trace in our lives and to rejoice, even if He seems to disappear from our sight at present. In this way, we can go forward with trust. Indeed story-telling fills us with courage and prepares us for change, for daring new ventures that ensure a creative fidelity to our charism.

d. LEADERS WITH EYES THAT SEE ABUNDANCE

In a situation of crisis, we all tend to see what is not there. As we think of the need for members to take up leadership roles, we lament that they are not there. When an opportunity for some type of ministry comes we also are desolate not to be able to respond. And this is truly our lot, but sometimes we see so much the scarcity that we fail to see the abundance. Last year, our two institutes (Missionaries of Africa, men and women) wanted to celebrate the 125th anniversary of our founder’s anti-slavery campaign. We asked the leadership in all the countries to try to organize something, fathers, brothers and sisters together. One country decided they were too old to do anything. Then, one of our sisters, living in a home, received the visit of a friend, who happens to be a journalist. She was talking to her about this. This lady became so enthusiastic, she started phoning associations that fight against modern day slavery. They put up one of the best manifestations ever.

We are used to be self-sufficient, and often fail to see the abundance that is around us: generous and committed lay people, other congregations also wishing to respond to new apostolic calls. The project of South Sudan is one such venture. A number of religious Institutes are working with each other. Others have joined together for more practical purposes such as to care for their sick and elderly members or to share one generalate. The fusion of institutes also happens and though this is not easy or painless, it is a good option for congregations that have similar charisms or origins. It needs to be well
prepared and followed. Networking is another powerful means in order to break open our limits and join forces with others for ministerial purposes. There is always more than what meets the eye. When we dare see abundance, we become more contemplative and more grateful. We come across with a good amount of energy that helps our members to gain confidence and courage.

**e) Leaders with a Flexible Backbone**

The leader in today's circumstances needs to be flexible, to know how to adjust, to make connections, to change.

This makes me think of the poem by Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) He or she who becomes the slave of habit, who follows the same routes every day, who never changes pace, who does not risk and change the color of his clothes, who does not speak and does not experience, dies slowly ... He or she who abandons a project before starting it, who fails to ask questions on subjects he or she doesn't know, he or she who doesn't reply when they are asked something they do know, dies slowly. Let's try and avoid death in small doses, reminding oneself that being alive requires an effort far greater than the simple fact of breathing. Only a burning patience will lead to the attainment of a splendid happiness."

We are at the crossroads between the old that is fast disappearing and the new that is not very clear yet. It is this uncertainty that our contemporaries also face very often about their employment, their economic stability, the climate change, the effect of violence. Our faith tells us that God is in this place, though we have difficulty knowing it.

As leaders, we need an open mind to see the world with renewed eyes and not to cling to old ways of thinking. We need an open heart so as to see the situation through the eyes of those who suffer and be able to show empathy. We need an open will to be able to let go of what is no longer necessary or appropriate and to let the new come, to welcome new possibilities. We need to be able to listen not only so that we are confirmed in what we know already, or to get information but also to sense what is wanting to emerge.

Leaders with a flexible backbone choose discernment as their way of life. They are able to draw their members onto this road. They are open to the newness that the Spirit is always bringing about. And they are passionate about it.

This is not a very comfortable place to be in, for we prefer to know, to be sure, to have our answers ready, rather than to pray and reflect and walk an uncertain path. At some point we can also get tired of change and hope we have gone through it all already. This is clearly not the message a constantly evolving universe sends us.

**f) Leaders with a Child-like Confidence**

We are like nomads passing through a desert seeking for an oasis. We need all our commitment, our faith and trust to listen and wait patiently for the new Word God is speaking in our times. We also need each other's hope and courage to strengthen our faith. A young girl who wanted me to play a trick
on an older sister once told me: "Become a child!" I often think of this in my position. We need to become as confident as a child, able to take the step our Institute needs today after reflection, dialogue, prayer and discernment. We need to let go of the need to be perfect, or the need to find long term solutions. Today's idea of time and of space do not allow for long term any more.

We need to be leaders who keep our members' passion alive, and who lead them to contemplate and discern what the Spirit is saying to us. We need to be people who not only work and act but also find joy in being about God's work today. We need to lead our members to reflect about their experience in the light of the Gospel message and to be filled with joy in their being missionary disciples. to be alive with a child-like curiosity, able to ask questions and to be disturbed by new realities to be able to let go of what is, of the comfort of the familiar to open out to the new possibilities that are emerging.

5. To continue the reflection.

Our passion for God and for others, including our members, lead us to engage with our heart, mind and will in searching and doing God's desire here and now. The cries of the marginalized, of the exploited, the suffering touch us and make us inventive in our leadership. Our own poverty challenges us forward. We can lead others from the margins and to the margins, to take up the cry of the oppressed, whether it be persons, peoples or the planet, because we know that what we live today will have an effect on future generations. As we open our tents to doing this not only among ourselves but with many others, people of good will of any ethnic group, religion or social milieu, we have the firm hope that what we sow today will flower tomorrow.

I feel very much in tune with the poem of Jose Calderon SALAZAR from Guatemala who wrote:

"I am threatened with death. There is a profound mistake in this warning; neither I nor anyone else is threatened with death. We are threatened with life, threatened with hope, threatened with love. We are mistaken, Christians, we are not threatened with death. We are threatened with resurrection."