

CRC MISSION

We, the members of the Canadian Religious Conference and leaders of the Catholic Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life in Canada, are called to collaborate among ourselves and to be a prophetic sign, in the world and in the Church, of life lived radically according to the Gospel. Therefore, the “love of Christ urges us” (2Cor 5:14) to be in solidarity with the poor, to denounce injustice, to foster a concern for the environment, to work for peace and for the coming of the Reign of God. In 2004, the CRC gave itself this guiding principle: “*Together for a reconciled world*”.

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CRC

Hope in Vulnerability?

In September 2009, when we chose the theme to develop for this issue, a unanimous consensus was quickly reached around the notions of hope and vulnerability. In that respect, we could not have been more in tune with the 2008 CRC Declaration which stated that we desired “again and always” to respond to our call with **hope**, courage and clarity. This same declaration attested that our vows, through the freedom they bring, allow us to live in **vulnerability**, truth and simplicity.

One Theme, Multiple Perspectives

Reflecting on the role of religious life in the challenges of new evangelization, Rick sees not the vulnerabilities that we experience as obstacles to hope, but rather as an opportunity to deepen it.

Carmelle, who lives and studies the possibilities of intergenerationality, believes that hope can only be strengthened in a context where each generation must recognize the vulnerabilities that characterize it.

Diane asked the Esau and Jacob of the Bible (Gen 25-34) to open to us ways of constant conversion in our relationships. Again, we see shared hope and vulnerabilities meeting.

A lover of English literature, Anne has carefully gathered a collection of thoughts about hope appearing in the midst of vulnerability.

Joan asked the Bible, but singularly to Paul, to reveal to her his understanding of hope. The amazingly strong bond between suffering and hope she noted in the Apostle to the Nations supports our inclination to link vulnerability and hope.

Ulysse was also inspired by Paul to present us with highly relevant elements of our call in times of vulnerability; the care given to the mystical aspect of our call would help us experience, with Paul, hope in the midst of vulnerability.

Our hope, Donna seems to be telling us with Teilhardian echoes, bears the name of Jesus-Christ. The Incarnation represents his final appropriation of the universe. Of course, our world is fragile but to God, nothing is impossible.

With a glance resolutely turned towards our experiences of loss, of mourning, Michel reminds us that God never promised us a rose garden, but rather his presence with us along the way.

What a time of turmoil this is! Hope needs to be nourished through surprises from the Spirit. I wanted to bear witness to the beauty of wonder in these pages.

This issue of the Bulletin has been conceived and produced by us, the members of the CRC's Theological Commission, with great enthusiasm. Again, please know that we would like this project to be interactive. To assist you in your resolution to react to its content, we have included the e-mail address of each one of us at the end of our articles. Enjoy reading this issue, and do RSVP

Lorraine Caza, CND

Have We Recognized the Surprises of the Spirit in These Times of Turmoil?

That we live at a historical time of turmoil is universally agreed on. But are we sufficiently attuned to the ways of the Spirit to stay on the lookout for its surprises? In other words, what skill do we need to develop to discern God's impenetrable ways of meeting with us? How does God meet the community to which we belong?

What lovely paths of contemplation are available to us if we open ourselves to the action of the Spirit in the midst of our own encounters and of those shared by brothers and sisters. Let us look at the testimony of Christian de Chergé and Etty Hillesum.

How the Spirit Surprised Christian de Chergé



A Trappist monk, prior of the monastery of Tibhirine in the Algerian Atlas, Christian de Chergé was kidnapped and sequestered with six of confreres in 1996, before the seven were tragically executed, two months later.

In 1994, he had written for his family a testament to be read only upon his death, the text of which was circulated around the world and which began: *"If it should happen one day – and it could be today – that I become a victim of the terrorism that now seems to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country..."*

Many people have heard of the martyrdom of the seven monks, of Christian's testament, but few people know of the single experience that was most decisive to the life and mission of the prior of Tibhirine.¹

From July 1959 to January 1961, after two years as a student at the Seminar of the Carmelite friars, in Paris, Christian, like so many Frenchmen, served as an officer in the SAS (Special Administrative Sections). There, he met Mohammed, a father of 10 and a deeply devout Moslem. They became friends. In a fight, Mohammed came to his friend's defence, stating that he was a friend to Algeria and Moslems. He saved Christian's life. Christian warned Mohammed he was now in danger for having protected him.

Christian undertakes to pray for Mohammed, who says to him: *"But Christians don't know how to pray..."* The next day, Mohammed's body is found at the edge of his well. Christian will write: *"In the blood of this friend, I knew that my call to follow Christ would have to be lived earlier or later in the very country where the pledge of the highest love had been given to me."* It thus seems that the Spirit went through the Moslem Mohammed to enlighten Christian unequivocally about the Paschal mystery, so vital to the Christian faith, and of the seriousness of the life of prayer.

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How the Spirit Took a Surprising Path to Etty Hillesum



Much has been made lately of Etty Hillesum, a young non-practicing Jewish woman from Amsterdam who died at Auschwitz in November 1943, at the age of 29. Etty had obtained a Master's of Law degree at the age of 25 and was also studying Russian. She was a woman who breathed passion for life, "free, full of ardour and curiosity, immersed in readings and love affairs."

In February 1941, she met Julius Spier, whose activities included singing and palmistry (the study of personality from reading hands). Her therapist quickly became her lover. He had a "rather Christian sensitivity" and he played a very special part in Etty's religious development. Thanks to his influence, she reread the Bible (both testaments) and discovered St. Augustine. Also thanks to Spier, Etty kept a diary.

Alexandra Pleshoyano, through an in-depth study of Etty's diary and correspondence,² allow us to glimpse into her spiritual growth. We see her going from an inability to utter the word God to an intimate dialogue with God who has become the center of her life: "I will help you, my God, not to extinguish yourself in me... It is all that it is possible for us to save in this time and it is also the only thing that counts: a little of you in ourselves, my God."³

Alexandra Pleshoyano shows us an Etty moving from a reluctance to kneel to this admission on July 23rd, 1942: "While crossing these crammed corridors today, I was seized by a sudden impulse: I felt like kneeling on the tile among all these people. The only gesture of human dignity left to us in these terrible times: kneeling before God."⁴ The diary also makes it possible to grasp the transition from a life centered on oneself to a life given for others: The Spirit at work in the life of Etty Hillesum, with the help of Julius Spier, in historical times of violence and terror...

What about Us, in These Times of Turmoil?

On the roads of our lives, we may not have met our own Christian de Chergé or Etty Hillesum, but if we dig a little... haven't we observed astonishing lives, radical reorientations? Will we have sufficiently let these paths amaze us so that our way of thinking and living our commitment to the Gospel was broadened as a result?

Turmoil... Surprises of the Spirit for this time of turmoil... Clarissa Pinkola Estès said: "It is time to stand up and bare our soul." Let us add: it is time to testify to these surprises of the Spirit.

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¹ With regards to the single defining experience, I am indebted to Christian Salenson, Christian de Chergé. *Une théologie de l'Espérance*. Bayard, Paris, 2009, chap. 3.

² Alexandra Pleshoyano, *J'avais encore mille choses à demander. L'univers intérieur d'Etty Hillesum*. Novalis, Montréal, 2009.

³ Etty Hillesum, *Une vie bouleversée*, followed by *Lettres de Westerbork* (translated by Philippe Noble), Seuil, Paris, 1995, p. 175.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

THE TWO FACES OF HOPE

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope!” (Rom 15:13).

Hope is a core biblical value that we might profitably compare to a coin. On one side of the coin we find what some might call cheap hope, hope that is focused on things such as riches,¹ fortified cities,² horses and chariots,³ armor,⁴ even family and friends.⁵ Biblical authors are quick to point out that pursuit of such things soon leads to disappointment and emptiness. In the end, only God is worthy of our hope.⁶ Only God-centered hope, which can be found on the other side of the coin, imbues our lives with meaning.

In the Bible, God-centered hope is characterized by trust,⁷ sure confidence,⁸ and patient endurance as we wait for the revelation of God’s love.⁹ Moreover, while abiding trust, steadfast

allegiance, and unshaken hope in God seem to outside observers to be mistaken or misplaced, this is not the case. Some of those standing near the cross mock Jesus, “*He trusts in God; let God deliver him now*” (Matt 27:43). At that moment, mockery of Jesus seemed appropriate, but the resurrection would be his vindication. Our suffering, too, is cause for hope, hope that is rooted in who God is and what God will do.

Saint Paul agrees that hope is well worth having when our choice to maintain hope is rooted in our experience of the reliability of God. Paul writes, “*The one who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again*” (2 Cor 1:10). Such a sense of security allows us to act with great boldness,¹⁰ without fear of being shamed.¹¹

Abraham: A Model of Hope

But for Paul, hope is not devoid of pain. In fact, the two are so closely connected that one can talk about suffering hope in the letters of Paul. In his letter to the Romans, one example of suffering hope centers on Abraham.

God’s promises of land, descendants, and blessings were not fulfilled during Abraham’s lifetime. Nevertheless, he continued to believe and was deemed righteous because of his faith in God’s promise (Rom 4:3). Moreover, in faith Abraham hoped against hope (4:18), thereby serving as a poignant example for those who believe in Christ (4:23-25). The story of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 17:1-27) teaches us that faith and hope are inseparable. In fact, hope without faith is not hope at all.

In his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul ponders how faith, hope, and suffering impact the lives of Christ-believers. According to Paul, just



Stock Photo: Engraving by Gustave Dore (1832 – 1883).
Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac upon God’s command.



as testing strengthened Abraham's faith (Rom 4:20-22), so too will testing strengthen Christ's disciples. *"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us"* (5:3-5).

For Paul, suffering is precisely the point at which hope is encountered and it is hope that develops character and endurance. We must be clear, however, that none of this happens without God's intervention. The certainty of God's love is the guarantee of our hope and the gift of the Holy Spirit is the medium of the outpouring of God's love (Rom 8:15-17; Gal 4:6).

All of Creation Hopes

Paul also assures Christ-believers that their future glory will far surpass their present sufferings (Rom 8:18-39). He does so by directing them to resonate with the eager hope that is present in creation, a hope that looks forward to the same future that believers await (8:19). In his vision of the soon-to-be revealed glorification of believers, Paul includes all of God's creation, made subject to sin because of humans. All of creation includes celestial and terrestrial entities, since for first-century Mediterranean people, the human environment included entities in the sky as well as on the land.

The ancients believed that the celestial and terrestrial spheres were both created by God and the two spheres impacted each other.¹² Paul sees all of creation, including humanity, groaning as a woman in labor (8:22-23). Such hope is a painful striving for God, a kind of hopeful suffering. Indeed, for Paul, hope that can be seen is not hope at all (8:24-25).

Christian hope, then, does not look forward to what is visible but to the future and invisible realm of God over which we have no power. While this is so, hope is not an abstract topic because it relates not only to our future but also to our experience right now. Hope, in many ways, is about abandonment to God that is lived in God as Mystery.

Today, many of us view hope in a positive way even though hope implies a sense of threat in the present time and some anxiety and unease about the future. We do not need to look far to find things about which we feel anxious. Signs of decline are all around us. In the face of these challenges, how are we sustained by hope in the God who loves us? How will our lives continue to bear witness to the gospel of hope and to the God of hope?

"Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer!" (Rom 12:12).

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Stock Photo: Engraving by Gustave Dore (1832 - 1883).
Abraham journeying into the land Canaan.

¹ (Prov 11:28; Ps 62:10; Luke 18:18-25).

² (Jer 5:17; Deut 28:52).

³ (Isa 31:1).

⁴ (Luke 11:21-22).

⁵ (Jer 9:4-6; Job 8:14; 18:14; Mic 7:5; Ps 41:9).

⁶ (Rm 15:13; Eph 2:12).

⁷ (1 Thess 4:13).

⁸ (1 Cor 15:19; 2 Cor 1:10; 3:12; Phil 1:20).

⁹ (1 Cor 13:7).

¹⁰ (2 Cor 3:12; Heb 3:6).

¹¹ (Phil 1:20).

¹² While ancient cosmology differed from contemporary cosmology, it envisioned a kind interconnectedness among all of creation that is attested in many contemporary approaches to creation spirituality

Elements of Our Call in Fragile Times

Introduction

There are many elements in our call to religious life. Most basic, of course, is a quest for God, or to put it more correctly: a desire to respond to the magnetism of God's love. That response can be motivated in different ways. For some, it is the attractive agenda of the Kingdom of God which inspires the religious to be involved in the charism of a particular congregation; education; health care, service of the poor in various forms. For others, without ignoring the call to justice and mercy, the prime attraction is found in an ordered, structured spiritual life experienced with others who support, encourage and celebrate together. A daily rhythm of prayer and especially the Eucharist gives meaning to vowed life.

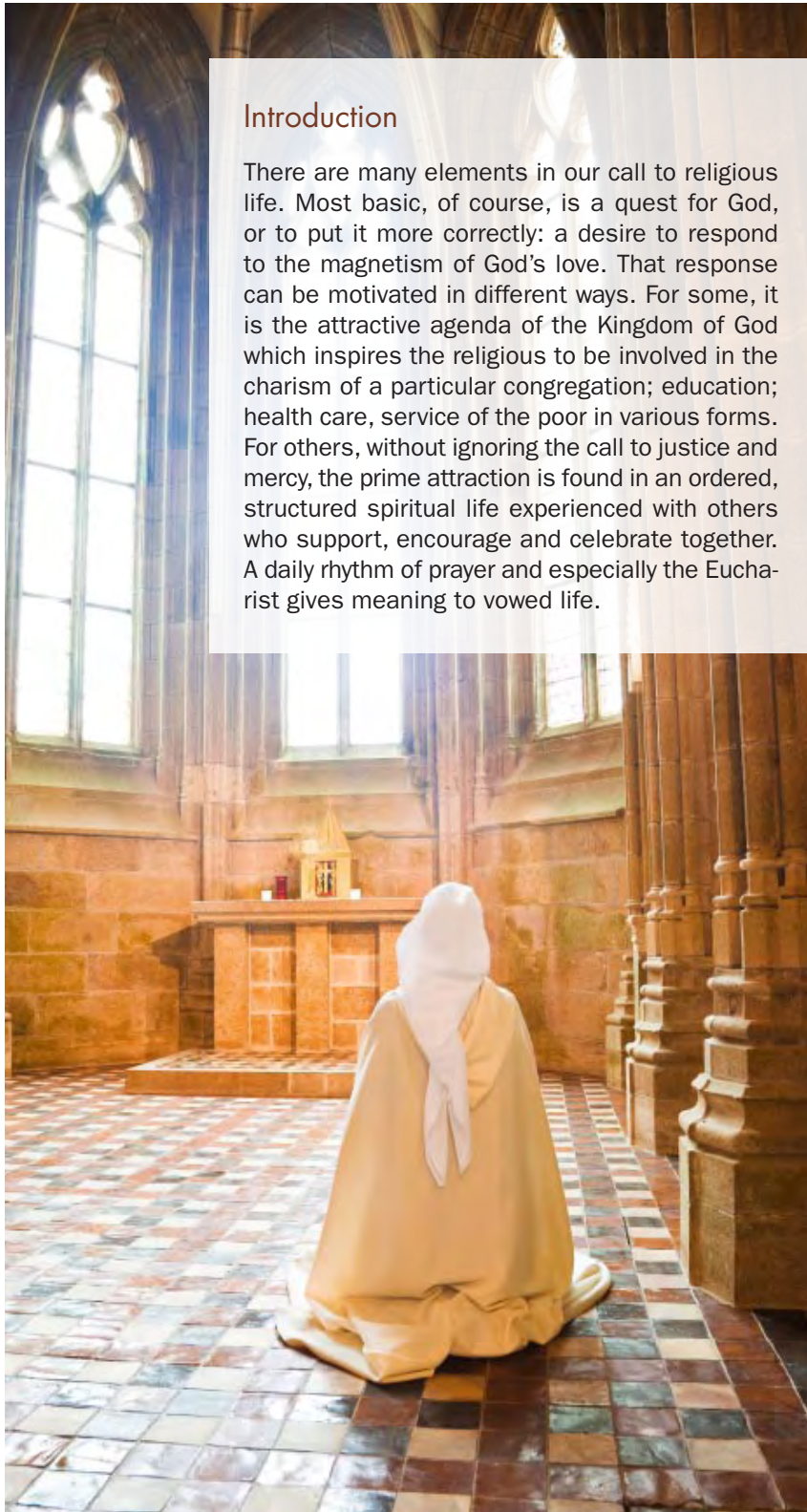
At least that is the classical standard expression of the appeal of religious life: the opportunity to make a difference, to work to incarnate the values of the Kingdom in a context of communal call to holiness and service. Typically the religious congregation was responsible for institutions which allowed it to exercise its charism. A candidate was given the necessary education and formation to contribute to the community's outreach. That was then. Now, it's different.

A Radically Changed Context

Today, young and old are invited to re-examine the elements of our call in a radically changed context. The congregations continue to be committed to Kingdom values and spiritual growth, but more often the onus for living these rests with the individual or small groups. While it is still reasonable and important to stress justice and community, we are being drawn powerfully to emphasize the mystical element of our call. Without a deep sense of our rootedness in the mystery of Christ, we will flounder in uncertainty and discouragement.

The new context often invites us to discover and respond to the needs of those around us in untested ways. Often this means visiting the sick and elderly in their homes, facilitating community life and prayer in hospitals and homes for the elderly, becoming involved in issues of social justice such as abuse of migrant workers, of women or children. This requires creativity, imagination and courage. A brief look at the experience of St. Paul may illustrate some aspects of this spirituality in fragile circumstances.

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Paul's Youthful Experience

Paul's early years are reflected in Acts 8:1 where he is depicted as approving of the stoning of Stephen. Instructed in the teachings of his day, he describes himself as: *"advanced in Judaism beyond many of my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors"* (Gal 1:14). This corresponds to a period of youthful zeal and even fanaticism alluded to in 1Tim 1:13, where he is referred to as *"a blasphemer, persecutor and a man of violence"*.

Transforming Vision

Paul's life was radically changed when he was visited by the Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). The content of that revelation was dramatic: Jesus lives, and he lives in his disciples! It seems to take a few years for Paul to assimilate these insights. His early preaching is not met with success. He is sent back to Tarsus. His ability to rise above initial failure can serve as an inspiration to us as we experiment and improvise.

Refocus: When Paul re-emerges from obscurity at Antioch at Barnabas' invitation, he appears more mature and more able to adapt his message to changed circumstances. We see him responding to the conditions of both Jews and Gentiles in the various cities of Asia Minor and Europe. His letters testify to his wisdom and courage. He even confronts Peter at Antioch over fellowship at table with Gentiles (Gal 1:11). He is able to do so because he has grasped the radical newness of being incorporated in Christ. This is the mystical dimension of his faith.

A mystic is one who lives with the deep, invisible reality of being seized by God. This is available to every Christian and is especially crucial for religious today. The basis for this vision is that we are adopted children of God and therefore *"God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying Abba Father"* (Gal 4:5-6; cf. Rom 8:15-16). This is a totally new reality. *"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal 3:28).

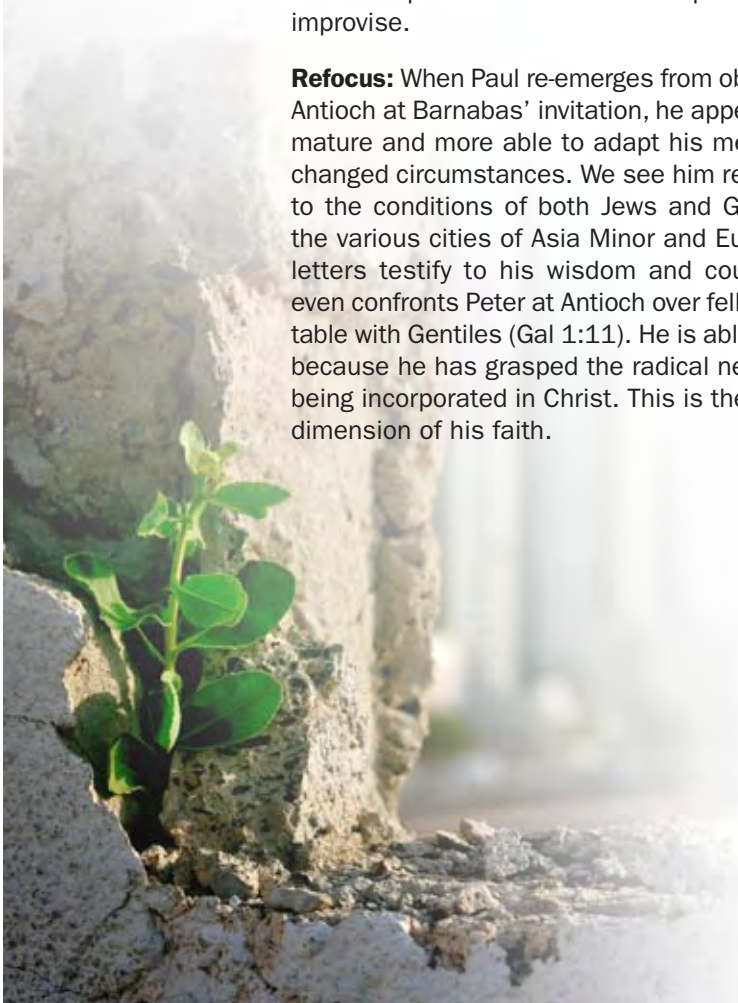
The Mystical and Sacramental

This spirituality is the fruit of baptism. In baptism we have died and risen to new life in Christ (Rom 6:3-4). Moreover, this new reality is celebrated in the Eucharist (1 Cor 11) which recalls the past, is celebrated in the present and calls forth the future: a trans-temporal and trans-spatial sacrament, that roots and ground a life of mysticism.

Suffering: This rootedness in Christ is the source of the enormous courage and confidence that St. Paul endured. He could write: *"For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain"* (Phil 1:21) and again: *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"* (Phil 4:13). Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of this spirituality is found in the mystical experience of 2 Cor 12 where Paul is swept up into the third heaven. The wonderful vision is within the context of frailty: *"whenever I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Cor 12:11).

Conclusion: In times of crumbling structures and uncertain future, our emphasis should surely be on the mystical element of our call. With St. Paul we can live victorious lives (Rom 8:31ff.) and experience the hope and joy that he felt (Phil 2:14-15) in the midst of frailty.

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Who Is Your God?

In the process of writing a three-volume work on Religious Life in a New Millennium, Sandra Schneiders, IHM, defines its basic charism as an “exclusive, lifelong God-quest centered in a particular kind of love of Jesus.”¹ Thus, the religious is a person who has been claimed by God, whose life has been taken over by God to the exclusion of any other commitment. But, who is this God who so claims and takes over the life of the religious? In this brief article, I would like to explore some implications of the way we religious as Christians name our God.

Moses Asks God for a Name

Names are important to us. Have you ever noticed, amid the buzz of voices in a crowded room, the sound of your own name invariably catches your attention. After meeting someone a few times, we expect them to know our names and we tend to be a little annoyed when our names are mispronounced. Naming can also be a means of control. Thinking back to your classroom days, whose name did you get to know first? The sharing of names expresses a readiness to begin a relationship. Remembering the name of another signals a recognition of that person's importance to us. Naming makes a claim on a person, establishes a personal relationship.

So, Moses in his initial encounter with God at the burning bush asks for a name. God's response to Moses in the enigmatic phrase, “I AM”, has been interpreted by some commentators as a refusal to give a name. God is not an individual God alongside other similar gods, so doesn't need a name.

The “I AM” both conceals and reveals the mystery of this God who cannot be grasped. At the same time, this name given by God offers an assurance of identity which empowers Moses to lead the people of Israel to freedom. Thus, some suggest the name may better be translated as “I am there” or “I am for you”, an expression of endurance and presence. In this naming, God becomes personal; not the god of a place but of human beings, a God who is present and powerful wherever people are.

The Naming of Jesus

This understanding of God's name provides the context for Isaiah's prophetic naming of Emmanuel, God-with-us. And, when the Isaiah text is quoted at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is identified as the promised child who is “God-with-us”. In Jesus, the God who promises to be always present now becomes a person. In Jesus, the Word of God becomes flesh to dwell among us, sharing in the fullness of our humanity. Here we encounter both the wonder and the scandalous particularity of the incarnation.

Unlike other traditions which are ready to affirm that God may **appear** in human form as an avatar or a bodhisattva, Christians claim that, in Jesus, God **becomes** human. It is a bold statement which has incredible implications. In fact, we Christians cannot but question any form of faith predicated on a chasm between physical and spiritual values. As Christians, we continuously assert that it is in and through the physical world of space and time that God is encountered.

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Love of God and love of neighbour cannot be separated. Even more specifically, the radical teaching of Jesus maintains that God cannot be loved without love of neighbour and, further, that it is God who is loved in loving one's neighbour. The second commandment is as important as the first, and love of God is embodied in active service to our neighbour. Believing in the incarnation, we are challenged to rethink the kinds of actions we choose to describe as "only human". In Jesus, we see what it means to be truly human.

While the historical particularity of the incarnation has always been something of a scandal or stumbling-block to belief, our current awareness of the evolving universe with its enormous space-time dimensions presents an even greater challenge. In this context, several Christians have reflected on the cosmic presence of the incarnate Christ.²

One approach is that of Teilhard de Chardin. For him, the world in evolution becomes a kind of "Christogenesis" in which the mysteries of creation, incarnation and redemption are logically as well as historically related.³ Through the incarnation, God is immersed in the universe in the form of a historical person able to stimulate and sustain loving human relationships. A particular event which may also be seen as having cosmic dimensions, the incarnation signifies Christ's "definitive hold" on the universe.

When Christ is "so engrained in the visible world" that he cannot be extracted from it without "rocking the foundations of the universe,"⁴ humanity becomes capable of experiencing, discovering, and loving God in the whole length, breadth and depth of the world in movement. This, Teilhard says, is a prayer that can only be made in space-time.⁵

The God of the Bible is not an abstract entity but a God who is ever faithful and always present, a God who can be called on by name and with whom "nothing is impossible". The power to name God and Jesus is given to us at the centre of their lives, making everything possible to those who believe. This naming empowers us to live and proclaim the world-reversing values of God's reign in anticipation of its full realization at the end of time.

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¹ Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), pp. 285-286, 364.

² Cosmic christology has its origins in the Pauline epistles (Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians), and in the work of early Christian theologians such as Irenaeus of Lyons who highlighted cosmic redemption in response to the Gnostics' negative attitude toward material reality.

³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Christianity and Evolution: Suggestions for a New Theology," "Introduction to the Christian Life," in René Hague, trans., *Christianity and Evolution* (London: Collins, 1971), pp. 182-183, 155.

⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "My Universe", in René Hague, trans., *Science and Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 61.

⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans, Bernard Wall (London: Collins, 1965), p.325.

WITNESSES TO HOPE

In his Encyclical *Spe Salvi* “Saved by hope”, Pope Benedict XVI likens life to a sea voyage illuminated by the light of people who have lived good lives. They are “lights of hope.”¹ Christ is the true light, he confirms, but people who shine with his light guide us as the greater and lesser hopes.

There are many ways in which we encounter these lights of hope, especially when challenges, difficulties and confusion confront us. These are often seen in places that we least expect, sometimes in ways we neither planned nor wanted. Yet we know from Scripture, from our own story, from seeing it in others, from reading and listening that hope’s “colours and contours”² are ever present, yet manifestly different, inspiring and amazing.

Stories of Hope

One Scripture story of hope is the oft-repeated account of Sarah and Abraham. God had promised them offspring as countless as the stars of heaven (Gen 22:17). Aged and barren, no child had been given to them, yet they continued to believe and hope in God’s promise. Paul describes Abraham as a man who “*against hope believed in hope*” (Rom 4:18). In the eventual birth of Isaac, God’s promise was brought to fruition. In Psalm 92 we read of those “*still bearing fruit in old age, still remaining fresh and green.*” A lovely image as we contemplate our wrinkles, arthritic bones and dimming eyes and realize anew that by opening ourselves to the promises of God, we become, like Sarah and Abraham, bearers of that promise.

Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses” depicts an old man who “*dreams dreams and sees visions*” (Acts 2:17) even in old age. As a man of action, facing a future of inactivity does not befit his character or previous life. Though weighed down by weariness and despair, he will continue to pursue life. “*How dull it is to pause, to make an end; to rust unburnish’d not to shine in use.*”

*Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are,
we are, –
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*³

One of my favourite examples of hope and determination is expressed in Langston Hughes’ “Mother to Son.” An older woman exhorts her discouraged son; he must not let problems dishearten him to the point of ceasing to struggle. He must continue to hope. “*So don’t you set down on the steps, ‘cause you finds it’s kinda hard. Don’t you fall now—I’m still goin’ honey. I’m still climin’. And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.*”⁴

Manifestations of Hope

Many manifestations of hope are given to us in our daily lives if we but have eyes to see. We are reminded in *Spe Salvi* that we are a culture that expects and wants success along with its visible manifestation. We are not good at recognizing God’s presence in the ordinary, as well as the difficult, the ambiguous, or the complex.⁵

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Yet each of us has stories of manifested hope. I know a Sister who obtained a degree in her mid seventies. Others silently and serenely accept the sufferings of a debilitating disease, yet minister to those around through gentle presence and deep prayer. Some delight in helping in the community when they can no longer venture forth. Have we not met someone who genuinely never said an unkind word, a peacemaker full of compassion who sees only the good in others? In each of these examples we find Christ's presence and promise manifested anew.



Hope may come in the eureka moments, usually unexpected. Countless events in life provide examples: the smile of a child, a beautiful sunset, snow-capped mountains, the exuberance of youth, a supportive hand, parents enjoying their children, a family building anew after tragedy, reconciliation and forgiveness in a relationship long severed.

Kathleen Fischer in *Winter Grace* tells us that we cannot achieve hope alone. Rather it is an act of communion whereby we create hope in one another.⁶ She further remarks that it is often laughter and humour that assist us. We have heard the expressions of many seniors: "I'm still on this side of the grass," or "Still hanging by a thread," or "Preparing for my final examination and graduation exercises." I have an aunt who at age 91 declared: "I don't think I'll paint the house this year. It can wait awhile." The humor of the elderly is a grace that reminds us that age or sickness do not diminish our capacity for courage and hope.

*Hope abides; therefore I abide.
Countless frustrations have cowed me.
I am still alive, vibrant with life!*⁷

Hope' Endurance

There is hope for those no longer in full time ministry to know that they have completed various tasks that will benefit future generations. With satisfaction they may say: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race" (2 Tim. 4:7). Further, hope tells us that it is never too late to touch the heart of another for it may be in the last hours of life that hope's greatest message is given.

Jesus based his hope on the unfailing conviction that God's power was at work in the world and that the reign of God would appear in its fullness. As Christians we are called to do no less. And in the end we have the confidence of knowing that though the greater and lesser hopes help us to keep going "the great hope can only be God... who has loved us to the end."⁸

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¹ Pope Benedict XVI. Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), #49.

² Ibid #31.

³ Alfred Lord Tennyson. "Ulysses" *Major British Writers*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1959), p. 356.

⁴ Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son" *Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994), p. 42.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, #9.

⁶ Kathleen Fischer. *Winter Grace: Spirituality for the Later Years* (New York, Paulist Press, 1985), p. 110.

⁷ Sri Chinmoy. "Hope" *Collected Poems* Internet Link: Sri Chinmoy Poetry, Copyright 2007.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, #31.

From One Generation to the Next

A Weakened Hope

Will we be the last ones to commit to religious life? Who will be the ones to survive us in this radical way to carry on the charism of the Institute and express it in the form of good works? What are the determinants of success for the vocations of the future? These often overused questions have a knack of affecting us like an irritating allergy, or even leaving us in complete indifference except, on occasion, to pray that God hears the cry of distress of His people (Ex. 2:23). In addition, this kind of question reveals a breakdown at the very core of our hope.

Our hope is riddled with internal doubt likely to extend to the point of thinking that potential candidates will not be up to the task of tending the garden we have planted and watered with such care. Yes, our hope is weakened, it is falling apart. It needs to be cured of its doubts; otherwise the mission of evangelization that befalls us is no longer possible. This healing, or taking the Holy Spirit seriously, is the first step to make so that **from one generation to the next**, new bridges are built whose crossing is, without any doubt, Paschal.

Newcomers, to put it simply, will not replace us, but they will succeed us with their own vital strength, the enthusiasm of a fresh start and the call to devote oneself completely to following in Jesus' footsteps, just like us. And these newcomers, who for the most part come from different eras and backgrounds, are faced with intergenerational realities, at a time when they embark together on a journey that prepares them to live out their commitment.

The Intergenerational Dimension: A Place for Growth

To take the Holy Spirit seriously means entering into the unexpected with God that conveys a future expectant with hope. How do you react to the following remarks? *"Do you still have hope for the vocations of the future?"* asked a woman religious to her colleagues recently. Seeing the hesitation of her audience, she hastened to add: *"For myself, in any case, if I were a superior and I had candidates, I would give them all the formation I can and I would tell them: 'Now, go and be sisters of 2010 following Jesus, in a given community, with what you are and what you have received.'"*

These remarks were shared with a candidate in formation, who replied: *"But we cannot be left alone by ourselves... we need the experience of our predecessors."* This answer opens up room for the intergenerational dimension.

The intergenerational dimension is the ideal place for growth and for becoming, as long as one does not lose sight of the fact that such becoming is ever challenging. Change inevitably brings along crises. That of the Apostles and Disciples of Christ was no exception and the same goes for us. To walk some of the way together, the generations that are brought together have an obligation of mutual companionship.

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In God's unexpected dimension, where there is uncertainty or dead ends, what is powerful enough to encourage us to continue our walk together? Along the way, the new generations are raising questions: "Why do you do this like that? Why have you kept up this tradition and not that one?" Our answers are vital, but even more so are our meaningful ways of living and transmitting traditions that carry life and hope.

We are invited with the new generations to celebrate Easter together every day. And the experience of "bodily tackling the Word" (Jacob's struggle) needs to be lived with a clear head in order to drop our false resistances so that from our differences may arise a creative Word that makes it possible to create meeting spaces from **one generation to another** in daily life itself. The following section titled "**The backpack and the suitcase**" provides a telling example.

The Backpack and the Suitcase: An Intergenerational Journey

Intergenerational relations are similar to a journey¹ undertaken by a young adult and a senior, along with others. Tenderness, the young adult, travels with an overstuffed backpack, while Wisdom, the elder, carries a single light suitcase. Tenderness can not understand this and is dumbstruck by that fact. However, Wisdom and Tenderness will walk along the same road and reach the same destination.



At the beginning, everything seems so similar in this shared journey. What could be more normal than to bring along usual items for daily necessities in a backpack or suitcase? For some time, Tenderness reveals nothing of her/his feelings about the light weight of Wisdom's luggage. Finally, still astonished, Tenderness exclaims: "I can't wait to travel light, like Wisdom does, satisfied with so little". A dialogue begins where Wisdom reveals to Tenderness the meaning of "traveling light."

Soon enough, Tenderness discovers that life, with its crises and its hopes, has had a cleansing effect on Wisdom, and what was before a necessity has become rather secondary. And Wisdom, for her/his part, by listening to Tenderness, is filled with wonder at the symbolism of the backpack in relation to the pilgrimages that fascinate so many young people today.

An Invitation

Thus goes intergenerational reality. A cursory glance at external realities is likely to miss the real treasures. May the backpack and the suitcase vanish "to the eyes of flesh", and may the hearts of intelligence be open to what the Spirit has written in each generation's heart:

*Backpack and suitcase will meet
Wisdom and Tenderness will kiss each other!*²

Let us stay awake in renewed hope and write other parables³ so that life may be transmitted **from one generation to the next** in daily reality.

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¹ This mini-parable is based in part on a true story.

² Cf. PS 85, 11: Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

³ Please forward your parables to us at: carmellebisson@yahoo.ca.

Religious Life and the Challenges of the “New Evangelization”

From time immemorial, and through its various forms, religious life has been part and parcel of the evangelizing mission of the Church. This mission has one constant: proclaiming the name of Christ and incarnating the Gospel in the very heart of the world. In addition, the ways of carrying out this mission change with the times and emerging needs of the Church and the world. What about today?

Three Types of Poverty

Historically, religious life has answered three types of needs or poverty.

- (1) *Material poverty* or indigence. In the 20th Century, especially, religious communities were an integral part, and often pioneers, of building a more just human society.
- (2) *Physical, psychological and intellectual poverty*. This includes the many charitable, nursing and teaching communities.
- (3) *Spiritual poverty*. Monasteries often acted as guiding lights to uphold and further Christianity, as well as communities specifically dedicated to evangelization through the ministry of the Word (preaching orders, missionary congregations, etc.).

Basis and Balance of Evangelization

The answer to spiritual poverty includes, in fact, the answers to the two preceding poverties. It even forms their basis. *“The needs addressed by religious orders, wrote Patricia Wittberg, have usually been spiritual, rather than societal, ones. In no other faith tradition except Roman Catholicism have religious orders ever been founded primarily to teach secular subjects, to nurse the sick, or to do social work. [...] Only gradually, and primarily after 1500, were religious orders and congregations specifically founded to teach, nurse, or engage in other socially useful work.”*¹ In other words, women and men religious’ underlying motivation to act is in announcing Christ’s Gospel and the coming of His Reign. All action is an opportunity to evangelize.

These three levels of apostolate are inseparable one from another; and a complete vision of evangelization must seek to achieve balance between them. Religious communities, according to their respective charisms, will place greater emphasis on one or another type of poverty.

New Needs, New Communities

To describe the situation and mission of the Church in the Western world, John-Paul II used and popularized the expression “new evangelization.” In contrast with the mostly Christian societies that existed until the mid-twentieth century, the Church currently finds itself in a secular environment. Catholics often find themselves, at the level of practices and actual memberships, in a minority situation.

What role do religious communities play in this new environment? Many apostolic congregations – especially those founded in the 19th and 20th centuries – were harshly affected by contemporary socio-ecclesial developments, in particular the State’s appropriation of charitable works. Is the *raison d’être* of these communities a thing of the past? According to Patricia Wittberg *“there is still a place for apostolic orders who advocate active participation – and there is certainly room for those directly involved in working with the least fortunate.”*² In the same breath, we should add, however, that the current context forces the emergence of new needs where spiritual poverty is particularly urgent.

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Looking at the evolution of religious life in Canada, we find an indicator of these new needs in the blossoming of new communities founded after the Second Vatican Council³. New needs bring about new communities, who emphasize four particular aspects.

- (1) *Prayer as a meeting place with Christ*. Many new foundations are of a monastic or semi-monastic type, combining apostolate with prayer.
- (2) *The explicit proclamation of faith*. An audible word and a visible religious life are often recommended. Though not exclusive, the image of the light that should not be put under the bushel seems to want to take precedence over that of the leaven in the dough.
- (3) *A strong community life*. The fact of being more vulnerable as Catholics forces us to weave stronger bonds between members of the Church and the communities. At the apostolic level, new communities favour collective over individual action.
- (4) *Faith education*. There are new generations, born in Canada, who now have little contact with Christian faith. Schools, such as in the Quebec public system, do not ensure the transmission of religious values anymore, which now rests solely with parents and Churches. Catechesis, for all ages, has become a priority. The new communities are committed on this front.

A New Reflection

These observations are far from complete. Nevertheless, they lead to actions launching our traditional communities in a new reflection. In closing, we submit to you three questions which you may want to adapt to your own community.

- (1) *Creative fidelity to the founding charism*. An old apple tree does not bear old apples! In other words, traditional communities can reconnect with the vital sap that once gave birth to them, according to their current needs. What, then, are the similarities between the environment that saw the birth of my community's charism and the current environment?
- (2) *Urgent need to respond to spiritual poverty*. According to the charism of my community and the means available to us today, where do I stand vis-à-vis the requirements of new evangelization?
- (3) *Reassessing financial policies regarding donations*. A significant percentage of the financial aid from Canadian religious communities goes to social works in the service of justice, peace, ecology, etc. This is an important dimension that reflects the history and charism of a great number of communities. However, in view of the context that we have just described, how are our financial policies regarding donations articulated with the new circumstances of our Church, our society, and the priorities listed herein?

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¹ Patricia Wittberg, *Religious Apostolates, Past and Future: Lessons from the Present Refounding Cycle*, National Association for Treasurers of Religious Institutes, Miami, 2007. Internet reference: <http://www.natri.org/programs/2007%20Handouts/Patricia%20Wittberg%20Keynote.pdf>, pp. 2-3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

³ See the dossier on "new communities" published in the *CRC Bulletin*, vol. 6, No. 3, Fall 2009.

ESAU AND JACOB: A Fragile Brotherhood!

“Surely, the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it!” (Gen 28, 16)

A recent meeting between “traditional communities” and “new communities” made it possible for both to take a step towards communion in the mutual recognition of their respective vulnerability. This kind of dialogue is an innovation in the landscape of consecrated life.

The last issue of the CRC Bulletin suggested ideas for reflection and action aimed at creating fruitful dialogues between religious communities, as well as with Church and social networks. In light of the great spiritual thirst of our fractured world, an intuition gnaws at me, like a call to us, the “traditional communities”, **to create ways of community interiority by:**

- developing a **collective life together**, becoming a single heart, a single soul (Ac 2);
- making decisions about our destiny, through community understanding experienced in sharing God’s life and His Word;
- drawing from the same charism a unique way of loving and making a commitment by making choices that reflect this gift!

This requires a constant conversion in our relationships.

Today, the question that arises for me is: how to further develop **this community interiority** through interpersonal relations that are, at times, very challenging? The uneasy brotherhood of Esau and Jacob led them to discover together the unifying presence of God, in the very midst of their human vulnerability.

Main Vulnerabilities in the Brotherhood of Esau and Jacob (Gen 25-34)

Competition in Their Parental Relationships: Gen 25, 22-28

Jacob is the second son in the family hierarchy, and he is under the tutelage of the elder brother. Jacob is beardless, almost feminine, and is protected by his mother unlike Esau, the virile hunter, a very hairy strapping man beloved by

his father for whom he prepares favourite venison dishes. In fact, each son is favoured by one parent. A situation that sets the stage for toxic comparisons! *Does this not still occur very often in our community relations, vis-a-vis authority?*

Sibling Rivalry: Gen 25, 29-34; Gen 27, 1-40

Esau, returning exhausted from the hunt, asks Jacob to serve him some comforting red lentil soup he has just prepared. Jacob seizes this opportunity to extort his brother’s birthright. Later on, Jacob conspires with his mother to steal from Esau the solemn blessing which made the eldest son the head of the household and the clan, overseeing the estate. Esau then wants to kill Jacob to avenge himself. Alerted by his mother, Jacob must find refuge with his Uncle Laban. Does this not remind us of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain? Here, the conflict will end in Jacob’s exile. *What better way to avoid a conflictual relationship, than changing environments?*

Competitions within the Clan and Exploitation of Jacob by His Uncle: Gen 29, 1-30

In the very midst of this immense emotional fracture in his life, Jacob meets love in exile, but a love exploited by his uncle. Indeed, working 7 years to obtain Rachel as his wife, he is misled by a subterfuge of Laban’s, who gives him instead his oldest daughter, Leah. Jacob’s confidence is put to the test: he will work 7 more years for Rachel’s hand. In the middle of relationships based on lies, Jacob learns how to fight for his own choices, and not to be satisfied with the choices others have made for him. He works very hard and becomes increasingly wealthy.

His Uncle Laban then enters in competition with him. Jacob gives up wanting to get it all through pretense as he had done with his brother Esau; he yields to his uncle’s demands. His life becomes so difficult that he finds himself having to leave. God comforts him and commands him to return to his native land. Jacob leaves with his two wives, his children and his herds.

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Stock Photo: Engraving by Gustave Dore (1832 – 1883)
Jacob and Esau meet again.

Passage at the Yaboq Ford: Gen 32, 23-25

After having crossed with all his family and possessions, Jacob remains alone, stripped of everything and of his sense of belonging, as he no longer feels at home anywhere, a victim of the competition, rivalry and exclusion that he has always known in family and sibling relationships.

In this immense loneliness, Jacob will discover the face of God in his struggle and reconciliation with his brother Esau. Jacob discovers that *God is calling to him, as well as his brother, to let himself be found in the fraternal roots between them.* **It is the basis of community interiority.** Gen 32, 26-31 – *Where are the roots of our fraternal relationships within ourselves?*

The fight with the Angel is the spiritual struggle of the meeting between love and truth. Jacob showed himself “STRONG AGAINST GOD” because he owned up to his tricks to usurp his

brother's place. He then overcame his fear of returning home and facing his brother's anger and violence. For his part, Esau went through the same internal struggle, since he mysteriously opened up to welcome and bless his brother. The outcome? Esau assists his brother with his return home. *A heart that opens up creates, simultaneously, the same gracious opening in the heart of the enemy, even if it takes years!* (Gen 33, 1-11).

Jacob and Esau can no longer remain competitors; rather, they are vulnerable brothers who open up to reciprocity. Jacob, for his part, will change his way of walking and his gait, as he is now lame: from now on he will progress as slowly as the children and the smaller live-stock, i.e., what is fragile and vulnerable.

The victory of the fraternity between Esau and Jacob **restores the reciprocity between brothers** and allows the continuity of God's people. It is the reverse of the fratricidal fight between Cain and Abel. We see God face to face.

Concrete Applications

This passage challenges us on the level of the deep change in the relationship between the two brothers. Like them, our search for power sometimes takes the guise of competition, revenge, mistrust and life interests shifted outside of the community. This can only lead to the death of community life.

To enter into combat with the Angel, a fight with the deepest truth of being, leads to a new way of walking, in time with our fragile steps on the path to reconciliation, life and the blessing of our brothers and sisters.

Interiority together requires, first, personal awakenings, then sincere and courageous dialogues on our rivalries, our fears of the other, our verbal or silent violence. Our prayers will arise more increasingly from our children's hearts!

*Indeed, “surely, the Lord is in this place”,
in our shared vulnerability
and we did not know it (Gen 28, 16).*

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God Never Promised a Rose Garden!

Disturbing Losses

Any loss is painful. Not long ago I left my agenda book on top of a public telephone in a Conference center in Cornwall. This book held my life: it reminded me where to be, what to do, and had information on my business contacts and friends. When I couldn't find it later that day far away in Ottawa, I immediately panicked. I felt totally bereft and naked! Where, when did I use the book last? I turned to God: "You've got to help me!"

The next day the Security people at the center informed me that they had found my precious treasure. Loss... is so painful, disturbing, shattering. Yet, important as it was, the book was only a thing. Even if I lost an arm or a leg, it is never total. For in spite of any loss, I STILL AM!

Individuals might face these traumas, but so do religious communities. It has become commonplace to state that two-thirds of the religious communities that existed in the Middle Ages are now extinct. One wonders how they must have felt about their earthly demise, their existential loss.

Losses Challenge our Presumptions

When we joined the community of which we are now part, what were our expectations? Was it all for the Reign of God? Did we set any conditions for ourselves or for God? Did we promise unconditionally to "do God's will" whatever that turned out to be?

We had our dreams, but life is anything but predictable. Maybe we've been hit and hit hard. We might have faced the loss of our identity as given to us by our works or our places of living. If so, real trauma has set in: we feel disorientated, nothing is working for us anymore, we've lost our points of reference. All becomes chaos, disorder, turmoil with nothing left to grab onto. Emotions are on edge, grief sets in. The habitual belonging, the counted-upon relationships and the meaning given to everyday activities are gone. Even time is experienced differently. This loss may even be perceived as a loss of self: I AM NO MORE...

And yet I AM STILL HERE! ... How is it that I can still survive without my past "associations" (persons, places, tasks)? If I am still alive, it may be that those points of reference that I felt **essential** to my being are not that essential after all. Maybe I am more than all that the institutional shell offered me. Maybe I'm called to re-examine in a different light the charisma and the spirituality that the founder/foundress bequeathed to the community. Even if my emotions are raw, this does not prevent me or those around me to think new thoughts, to break through the "preferred past" that is shackling me or us.

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It is possible to ground myself/ourselves into the presence of historical memory which offers a new identity by updating the past without drowning in it. Only in this way will I break through my crippling grief and turn it into a redefining moment, one that allows myself or my group to build up meaning through persons, places and events. I/we learn to say a healthy good-bye [through creative rituals] to that which is lost and to enter into the present with all its possibilities. It will mean starting with little steps humbly all over again. It will mean looking for God in new places. It will mean opening up together to new areas of ministry that take into account our age and enhance the charism and the mission of our congregation. Many of our family members have had to face these traumas: what makes us think that we're so different and should be spared? We remember that God is still with us...

How Long Are We Supposed to Hang Around?

God surprises us. When I entered the Order, the crisis age was 45-55. Many brothers died at that age and if you got past that, you might make it to 80. Over the centuries, life expectancy has changed enormously. At the beginning of the Roman Empire [300 BC] it was 18, at the end of the Empire [700 years later] it was 25. In Medieval times it was around 30 for a working woman, and 40 for a noble one. In 1850, in Sweden it was 45 and today in North America and Europe it is 79 years for men and 84 for women. It is said that a girl two years old today might live in our country to be 130!

Why does God allow us to live so long? Heaven knows we lose the stamina of our adult life to pour into the mission. Is God "uselessly" extending our lives in some kind of impossible quest? Or have we replaced our founding life-styles values with those of society? Have we simply aligned ourselves with the triumphant Christ-King over the Suffering Servant model? We need to remember that God's promise to us through Jesus was quite simple: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (Luke 17:10).

A New Mission?

Maybe God wants us to hang around. Maybe we still have a mission to accomplish. Maybe it's something new and unheard of, something that we might even have to learn: how to be a model for the aging world around us. We are not the only ones growing old. The western world is growing old too. Maybe we are called to be leaven in the dough once more, to leave the security of our monastic villages and the enclosure of our apostolic works and move on into the fray. Some communities are already facing this reality: living with laity or other communities in a place that is "not ours anymore."

No, God never promised us a rose garden... only to be constantly at our side!

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