

# CONVERSATIO 2008



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St. Scholastica's Priory  
Manila

Dear Sisters,

We are entering into the advent season. The season of advent is a time of expectation, of longing, of waiting for time of salvation. We feel this need for salvation more than ever during this time of crisis in our society. We have gone through many unresolved scandals without a satisfactory solution to any of them. Recently, the Jocjoc Bolante lies, the Euro dollar scandal, the Senate coup, the impending cha-cha—all these fill us with foreboding and many with a sense of hopelessness that we cannot do anything against the principalities and powers that seem to be overwhelming us. So we long for redemption from this hopelessness, discouragement and cynicism. We long to see the light at the end of the tunnel. All these should make us take the advent weeks really seriously—praying and fasting for the coming of the LIGHT.

It is the HOLY SPIRIT—the UNPREDICTABLE, UNMANIPULABLE FORCE that gives us hope that amidst the escalating forces that threaten to engulf us, something unplanned, something not reckoned with, something unexpected, will break through our darkness to bring us our longed for salvation. With all our hearts let us cry out: COME LORD JESUS COME!

Lovingly yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

# STATIO CONFERENCE

## THE WORD OF GOD AND *LECTIO DIVINA*

by Sister Pia Lansang, OSB

### IT'S ADVENT AGAIN

My favorite liturgical season -- maybe yours, too? – is here again. Advent, the beautiful season of *joyful* expectation. A season of waiting. Active waiting. Jesus in the womb of Mary. Nurturance. The Birth of Jesus, his first coming. And there's a second coming, another waiting. The looking forward to Jesus' return at the end of time. Such a rich imagery, isn't it? A "womb spirituality". A spirituality of waiting.

Like the season of Advent each year, the practice of *Lectio*, in its most contemplative sense, invites us to meditate on the mystery of waiting. Waiting for the Word to be born in us. Nurturing the Sacred Word carefully in *prayerful reading*, so that it can be born anew as we sit faithfully in daily *Lectio Divina*. Advent is vigilance. Staying awake. Watchfulness. Attention. Focus. All this in joyful hope.

*Lectio* is all of that, too. In reading, listening and prayer we encounter Jesus. In meditation and contemplation we joyfully anticipate meeting the Lord. *Lectio* is a personal encounter with Jesus, the Word made flesh. "*Et verbum caro factum est*" sounded the wake-up call in our Priory House on the early morning of Christmas. "And (he) dwelt among us" was our response. Our *Lectio* is an Advent hymn of "O come, o come Emmanuel..." "Word of God, dwell in me". Word of God, become flesh in me. Word of God, be incarnated in me.

### HIGH PRIORITY

Over and over again at the recent Synod of Bishops in Rome, from October 5-26, 2008, the practice of *Lectio Divina* was emphasized and highly recommended. (Synod Doc 8; Interventions 24; 26). At least 23 times the Bishops congregated and prayed, discussed, deliberated on the theme of the Synod:

"The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church."



In their synodal statements, the Bishops referred to God's Word as the "living force throughout the course of salvation history", and the "Word of God as the *Heart of the Church*." (Synod Doc., "Word of God..." Ch. I, 10B). They underscored "the inspired rediscovery of the Word of God as a living, piercing and active force in the heart of the Church, in her liturgy and prayer, evangelization, personal and communal life", and in so many other aspects of our Christian life. And returning home from the Synod the Bishops have sent out their circulars to their priests and their flocks in order

to echo the message: God's Word is high priority in our lives. The practice of *Lectio Divina* is of vital importance in our spiritual growth. It will bring "a new spiritual spring time." (Benedict XVI).

## **WHAT IS *LECTIO DIVINA*?**

Quoting St. Gregory the Great, the Synod gives a concise definition of *Lectio Divina* as the "practice of the *prayer reading* of Holy Scripture, individual or communitary, to "learn the heart of God through the words of God." (Bishop Silva, Chile at Synod). Understanding the meaning of *Lectio*, however, is not done with a technical definition. The actual practice counts. And learning about it is not done in one sitting. I suppose that like in all profound things, there is no "instant coffee," "3-in-one" formula here. *Lectio* for us is very much a process of new learnings, discovery, personal creativity, sincere efforts to grow in knowledge of the "method." One way I find useful for myself, and also for the groups that I work with is to look at *Lectio* from different perspectives. The method can always be deepened anew, and there are often new connections that arise so that it becomes a fascinating journey of *praying with the Scriptures*.

## **PRAYING WITH GOD'S WORD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Abbot Willibrord van Rompaey, OSB, a man of great love for *Lectio*, gave me a glimpse of an early evidence of praying God's Word in the Scriptures.

1. Book of Nehemiah, Chapter 8  
Already in the OT, the people of Israel *listened* to the Sacred Word in *prayer*. One can find a description of this practice in Chapter 8 of the Book of Nehemiah. Here, Ezra summons the people into the square before the Watergate – at the time of rebuilding Israel; the time of the birth of Judaism. Ezra READ the Law of God and EXPLAINS it to the people. The people, upon HEARING God's Word, were touched, and they wept and RESPONDED "Amen."
2. Such a Simple Three-Step Method simply included  
1) READING                      2) EXPLANATION                      3) PRAYER.

This simple method became the *classical way of Judaic prayer* and which was inherited by Christianity. It was an unwritten method but testified to in many places in the New Testament.

## **NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCE**

One reference is found in Paul's teaching to Timothy where we read

*"But you remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it, and that from infancy you have known Sacred Scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."*

(2 Timothy 3:14-16)

We could presume that the process of obtaining the wisdom of Scriptures included these elements of prayerful reading and reflection.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF LECTIO THROUGH THE AGES

For this Statio Conference, we can only touch on a few historical highlights (not necessarily given in chronological order) on the development of this ancient method of *Lectio Divina*.

### 1. *The Christians Down the Centuries*

Down the centuries, *generations of Christians* have continued to pray in this common manner (reading-explanation-prayer) without yielding to a non-biblical piety which did not recognize the absolute Lordship of the Word in the prayer of the Church.

### 2. *Fathers of the Church*

The Fathers (surely the Desert Mothers too) of the West as well as of the East, practiced this method of *Sacred Reading*, inviting the faithful to practice it even in their homes. They handed on to the faithful those splendid commentaries on Scripture which were themselves the fruit of *Lectio Divina*. Think of all those wonderful homilies and longer readings we read during Office of Readings.

### 3. *The Ancient Monks*

The ancient monks made of Sacred Reading and praying with the Word the *center of their lives* in the desert. The Sacred Word – reading God’s Word – and prayer was their daily food because they were so convinced that “man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”.

### 4. *Further Development: A Word that SANCTIFIES*

At a certain moment the need was felt to put this method of Sacred Reading and Prayer in writing, in order to help beginners to acquire the Word in the Spirit, a Word that not only sanctifies (makes us “holy”) but also divinizes – which gives us a state of God’s holiness, and transforms us into the likeness of the divine.

## LECTIO, “THE GOLDEN WAY OF DIALOGUE”

5. Origen, Cassian, Bernard, Jerome and many others have fixed the terms of *Lectio Divina* stimulating the faithful to run through the method as the “**Golden Way of Dialogue**” which means the “ineffable conversation” with God. Until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, this method has truly fed and nourished spiritually whole generations of Christians.

(One who practices *Lectio* and tastes its fruits can attest that one has hit upon “gold” in using this method of prayer.)

### 6. *A Temporary Eclipse of Lectio*

During the MIDDLE AGES we experience an eclipse of this kind of prayer (*Lectio Divina*) this age opened the door to the “Devotio Moderna” that is more introspective and

“psychological types” of prayer. These modern devotions were not bad or wrong – just different.

### **7. *Preservation of Lectio in Monasteries***

Only *in the monasteries* will *Lectio Divina* be preserved in its integrity, and to “jump” to our times, it reappears again in the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*) of the Second Vatican Council.

8. Now Guigo II, a Carthusian Prior of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, had earlier systematized the method. In a writing on contemplative life addressed to his brother Gervasius (“The Ladder of the Monks”), Guigo divides the experience of *Lectio* into four phases or degrees

*Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, Contemplatio.*

Thus the method as we know it today—with its 4 classic steps of *Lectio*.

## **TODAY’S MARKET SCENE: *LECTIO* MATERIALS**

Visiting our bookstores in Manila, materials specifically on dealing with *Lectio* seem hard to come by. And yet, lately, the topic continues to pick up momentum and interest.

If one is patient, one will find enough articles and portions of books that deal with the topic, for example, in RB commentaries (Kardong, de Waal, Chittister among others). In my still limited exposure, books by such authors as M. Casey, B. Pennington, G. Colombas etc. are relatively a great help. (See List of Books at end of this article).

### **“IN MY BREAD BASKET”**

There is a column in the Philippine Star Magazine with that title which must be a delight to housewives because it gives helpful tips on the where-and-how to shop for groceries, sometimes with corresponding costs indicated.

This brings me to my experience of our local market for “printed materials”. We do have a variety of Bible diaries (“365 Days”, “Bible Diary”, “Word of God in Other Words”, etc.) which are more affordable to our people. (PhP 365.00 or now a little more) compared to the formidable prices of foreign books, including the Bible itself in English. Some of the Bible diaries provide an empty space at the edge of the pages where, on a daily basis, you can write your own creative response. This would be a word or phrase that can be a spiritual “baon” from your *Lectio*. Along with the Bible Diaries, one can find materials like “Pandasal” (obviously coined to mean prayer as nourishment) and other biblical reflections and meditations.

### **WHAT IS IN A NAME? “*Lectio* By Any Other Name.....”**

The Latin term “*Lectio Divina*” has been translated into “Holy Reading”; “Divine Reading”; “Sacred Reading”; “Scripture Prayer”; “Praying God’s Word”. One book on *Lectio Divina* is

entitled “READING GOD” (G. Colombas) -- the way you read an author...and here God is the author of Scriptures. Actually, the name is difficult to translate into English because the Latin term refers to a whole integrated method and connotes a composite whole.

*Which translation do you find most appropriate? Which name (Lectio Divina) speaks to you most personally, based on your experience/practice of Lectio?*

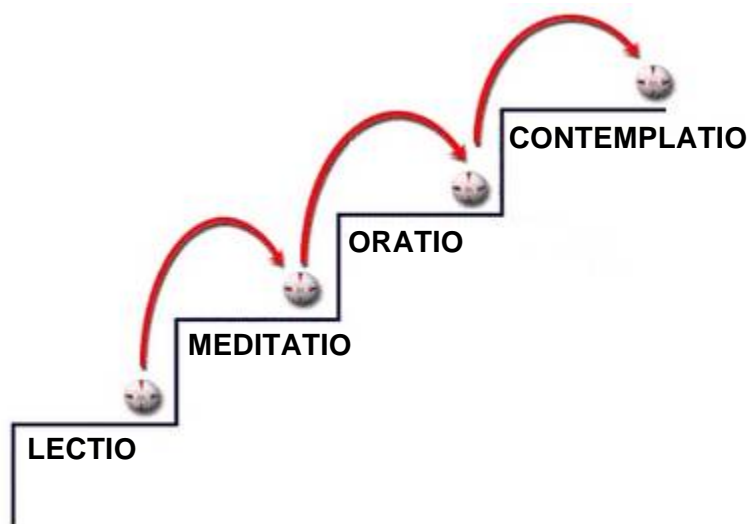
## QUANTITY OF WORDS IS NOT THE GOAL

In *Lectio* a quantity of reading is not the goal. It is not academic speed reading. It is not to cover a greater amount of material or to finish the chapters of a book for purposes of research / study, or cramming for exams. That can be done at another time and place, e.g. sacred study.

*Lectio* is prayer. And so here the “less is more” principle could apply to the amount of reading. What counts is that the Word leads me to union with God in prayer. As soon as I am led by the Spirit into prayer, I pause and pray. A single word, a phrase, a passage can burn within me and so reflect on it and pray. This is praying in the style of *Lectio Divina*.

One of the latest Commentary on the Sundays of the Year (Cycle A,B,C) calls the book precisely that “Commentaries on the Sunday Gospels in the Style of *Lectio Divina*.” So, while keeping the whole Gospel in mind, the book does not give a lengthy and general reflection on the entire Gospel. Instead it highlights only a few, e.g., only 2 verses, taken one at a time, and does a corresponding short reflection followed by prayer on that verse.

## THE 4 CLASSIC STEPS OF LECTIO DIVINA



I think of these steps as 4 elements of a cycle which are intimately linked to one another. Coming up with my own images helps to imprint the prayer-cycle in my mind and heart. One other example: comparing the 4 steps to a intimately linked chambers of a favorite room. Or maybe interconnected compartments of a train? I can move up and down in any combination and yet I find myself within a whole. In doing *Lectio*, I really do not leave the sacred space at any given step.

The Synod of Bishops dealt with *Lectio* also in view of Groups in order to benefit more people in parishes and communities. Perhaps, for a change, we could “listen” to one of the sharings / presentations at the Synod. Read this with a *monastic Benedictine missionary sense* and a desire to share our spiritual wealth with our people. The following steps are taken from the Synod. (Silva, 15<sup>th</sup> Synod Congr.).

\* *Preparation:* prepare the external setting. Be “seated”; “clear your heart”. Invoke the Holy Spirit and read your biblical passage.

1. *Reading:* What does the biblical text say? Understand the Word. Discover what God teaches through the inspired author.
2. *Meditation:* What does the Lord say in His Word? Practice the Word in your life. Learn its meaning. Better our mission (service). Re-inforce Hope!
3. *Prayer:* What do we say to the Lord, (response) motivated by His Word? Pray the word in Dialogue with God. Celebrate our faith in the group (family; community, etc.)
4. *Contemplation:* What conversion is asked by the contemplation of the Lord? Contemplate Jesus, the Word. Live according to the criteria of the Father.

The steps are really interconnected, and one moves from one to the other, back and forth. And there is really no dichotomy between prayer and contemplation. In fact, prayer in its best sense, is contemplation. Neither is there a need, I think, to determine a certain point where prayer exactly begins and ends.

Recently, the colorful décor on the wall of the Mass Communications Department, above the social Hall captured my imagination. There in 4 bold colors (red, green, blue, yellow) squares were “woven” into each other like a chessboard.

Every Mass Comm. student knows that one of their Professors visually designed this to represent the 4 minor tracks of Mass Comm (which, by the way, includes the power of “print” journalism (the power of the word)).




### ***LECTIO: SLOW PRAYERFUL READING***

The reading done in the context of *Lectio* distinguishes itself from academic reading, or reading for the sake of information. It is a deliberately SLOW form of reading to lead us into prayer.

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Is there any personal “image” which helps enriches your practice of the 4 steps of Lectio Divina? Share insights on the topic.</i></p>
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## A SIMPLE VISUAL WAY

Dom C. Marmion had another simple method of Lectio. It goes like this

“Read with the eye of God”; ...   
“until your heart is touched”...   
“and give a leap of flame” (Love!) as a response. 

## PERSONALIZATION of *LECTIO*: FLEXIBILITY AND ORIGINALITY

Which helps do you employ to enrich your *Lectio* (esp. on those days when you have the opportunity at a given private location, the blessing of a conducive spot room (a garden but also your private room), a longer time available (free day; Retreat; a trip/outing to nature, etc.): Music? Images, Poetry? Journaling? Painting and colors? a Word-collage? Sitting? Walking meditation? Centering Prayer? Mantra? Or just breathing in and out in word-less, image-less contemplation? The method can be as individual and original as you like it. It can also be as communitarian as one would wish in order to benefit a group as in faith-sharing, for example.

## “ORAL” AND “INTERNAL” REGISTERS

In the history of the Bible, there developed the so-called “**ORAL REGISTERS**” of the “oral tradition”: (like pulling the different combination of “registers” in a harmonium (flute; strings; etc.) which give a different tonal flavor. *Lectio* and one’s relationship with the Word could be enriched, for example, through 1) MEMORIZATION, 2) RECITATION, 3) RUMINATION, 4) NARRATION.

From the “oral “registers” we can speak of more “**INTERNAL REGISTERS**” like: 1) REFLECTION, 2) ASSIMILATION, 3) CONFRONTATION, 4) INTERNALIZATION -- which arise from a listening, honest and open heart.

The above reminds me somehow of today’s so-called “Interactive Reading” which means that the readers are trained not just to be passive listeners, not just plain “receivers of the word”. No, “Interactive Reading” is putting oneself into it (the book/ the story); you are part of what is being read. “Hey, I am part of this story!”; I take ownership of what is read. It is a very participative and evocative process indeed. To me, *Lectio* is that, too. Intensely interactive. Transformative.

In the dailies (PDI 10/13/08; 10/19/08; 10/30/08, etc.) they designate programs like “Reading Month” or “Read Along”; or C. Yang’s “Bright Minds Read” – all focused on the power of the word. And elsewhere, even in advertising, they use catching slogans: “Read and Lead”; “The Word Beyond Borders” – all geared to promote love for the indispensable value of the word (reading) in formation.

*How about me / us? Do I /we put enough effort to develop a love for sacred reading?  
Which “registers” do I use (add your own) in my Lectio Divina?*

### **THE POWER OF RECITATION / MEMORIZATION, etc.**

Ever thought of this? Our own devotion, the Rosary is a Scriptural prayer, using such “oral registers” as memorization, repetition, recitation etc. The “Hail Mary” is a DIRECT Scriptural quote (Luke 1:28; 1:42, -- Gabriel and Elizabeth’s words to Mary). The “Holy Mary” is like a prayer of RESPONSE. And it repeats itself, Word of God-Response; Word of God-Prayer. And let’s do a bit of arithmetic. The number of Hail Mary’s per rosary: 50 H.M. Joyful + 50 H.M. Sorrowful + 50 for Glorious Mysteries make up a total of 150 Hail Mary’s. They were thought to be a parallel, for the laity, to the 150 psalms of the Bible which we monastics pray in the LOH. This was at a time when the laity did not have much access to the printed word, and people in general have not yet been as literate as today.

The rosary is then a compendium of the life mysteries of the entire life of Christ, our Lord (starting with the Annunciation and ending with the coronation of Jesus’ Mother as Queen of heaven). The rosary, therefore, so loved as a devotion in the Philippines and elsewhere, is actually a Christ-centered “biblical” prayer and can show us the power of *repetition* and *ruminatio*. Repetition is a language of the heart, the language of love. For one who loves, repetition is not really tedious, because we love to hear from the beloved.

(And today, the rosary, has an additional 50 H.M. as the previous Pope John Paul II had added 5 more decades...to add up to 200 Hail Mary’s. These new “Mysteries of Light” are then a further enrichment to understanding the full range of the Life of Christ.)

### **BY WAY OF AN “ASIDE”**

Incidentally, this *Scriptural* devotion (rosary) comes from the word “Rose”. The German word for it is, in fact, “*Rosenkranz*”: “ROSEN” – “rose” “KRANZ”- “a crown”; literally, “a crown of roses”. This meaning is believed to be confirmed by Our Lady herself. Each Hail Mary is a rose to weave into a crown for Mary. As the rose is the queen of the flowers, the rosary came to be known as “the queen of devotions”.

By the way, does the image of the rose conjure images of Juan Diego’s roses as he unfolded his “tamil” (cloak) before the Bishop (who asked for a sign) in the story of the Apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe? And more important, of course, is the image of Mary on the cloak.

*How about it? A crown of Roses for Our Lady?  
And a String of Diamonds for God as we pray a Word of Scripture with each Lectio?*

### **CONTEMPLATION AND OUR RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD**

The response to God’s Word, in prayer, need not at all be an oral response. It could be a wordless response (sitting / walking in contemplation), such as

- silent gratitude;
- a profound bow in adoration; tears – gripped by the Spirit;
- a movement of love; a sigh;
- sorrow; delight;
- a feeling of peace;
- a sense of waiting.

Sitting in contemplation is a most powerful response. As we sit we hear the cries of the poor and the oppressed and hold them to the heart of God in loving solidarity. In contemplation, we are one with people, the world and the whole universe.

*Lectio*, in an age of speed, hurry, multi-tasking, activism and stress, teaches us to be patient and learn how to wait (Advent spirituality!). Like Mary, our Mother, the Woman of the Word, and the prophets, we wait for answers to questions. Human as we are, and unlike Mary, we are not always ready to say *Fiat*. We continue to question, “But how can this be....?!” (Lk 1:34) “Why would this be happening?”-- ...and all of us, sometimes, do need the grace to live with questions without answers.

*Spend a quiet minute in stillness and contemplation. Listen with the heart.  
What invitation do I hear in my LECTIO DIVINA this Advent season?  
What response is the Lord asking of me?*

*A Blessed Advent 2008!*

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Take any of the “boxed” reflection questions in the text (pp. 7, 8, 10a, 10b, 11)

## LIST OF HELPFUL DOCUMENTS, BOOKS, ARTICLES:

### I. DOCUMENTS

Proceedings of the Synod of Bishops, October 2008

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), Documents of Vat. II (ed. Abbott), c. 1996, pp. 111-132.

Our Constitutions on *Lectio*: I,4; III, 3; N 305; 305.1; 305.2.

RB and *Lectio*: RB 48:1; RB 48:14-15; 17-18; 22-23.

Compiled MESSAGES of Our General Chapters on *LECTIO*, 6<sup>th</sup> Gen. Ch. 1976, p. 8; 7<sup>th</sup> Gen. Ch. 1982, p. 22; 9<sup>th</sup> Gen. Ch. 1994, p. 29; 10<sup>th</sup> Gen. Ch. 2000, p. 46; 11<sup>th</sup> Gen. Ch. 2006 p. 72.

Compiled MESSAGES of Our Priory Chapters on *LECTIO*, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1971; 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1975; 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989, p. 133; 12<sup>th</sup>, 1996.p.199; 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007, p. 294

*Conversatio* Issues: (with Articles on *Lectio* or related topics) March/April 1996; Nov. 2001; March 1993; April 1989; July 1986.

## **II. BIBLE DIARIES 2008**

365 Days (Paulines); Bible Diary (Claretians); Bible Diary (Shepherd's Voice Publ.); The Word in Other Words (SVD)

## **III. BOOKS (abbreviated alphabetical listing, according to titles)**

Call to the Center. The Gospel's Invitation to Deepen Prayer, c.1995

Ladder of the Monks by Guigo II 12 Meditations, c. 1979

Lectio Divina by B. Pennington, c.1998

*Lectio Divina* with the Sunday Gospels Yr. A,B,C by M. de Verteuil, c. 2005.

Living in the Question. Meditations in the Style of *Lectio Divina*, c. 1999

Listening. God's word for Today, by B. Pennington, c. 2000

Praying the Bible by. E. Friedmann, c. 2003

Reading God "Lectio Divina" by G. Colombas, c. 1993

Toward God by M. Casey, c. 1995

## **IV. ARTICLES**

The Ancient Practice of *Lectio Divina* by L. Dysinger

## **V. UNPUBLISHED NOTES BY W. VAN ROMPAEY; MY PERSONAL COLLECTION OF NOTES, ALSO FROM ACTUAL EXPERIENCES OF WORKING WITH GROUPS THROUGH RECOLLECTIONS AND RETREATS.**

## **THE WORD OF GOD AND CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

by Most Rev. Pablo S. David  
Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of San Fernando, Pampanga

These are two things—the Word of God and Catholic Education—which you are asking me to put together. Let me begin immediately with Catholic Education and end with the Word of God and how they should go together. That’s what you call “saving the best for last.”

### **CATHOLIC EDUCATION**

Those are two things again—Education and Catholicity. Should they even go together without running the risk of being sectarian in the language of today’s secular thinking? Is education automatically Catholic because it is being offered by a Catholic institution, or owned and administered by the Catholic Church?

I know that you are all in that category because you belong to the association of the schools that belong to the Archdiocese of San Fernando, Pampanga. But I hope you do not feel offended if I say this: I am not of the belief that education is automatically Catholic because it is offered by a Catholic institution. You can get a kind of education that’s solidly Catholic even from a secular or a non-Church school; in the same way that you can be in a so-called Catholic school and not get good education—least of all, even a Catholic education.

Education and Catholic—these two don’t automatically go together even in schools owned and run by the Catholic Church. Let me therefore proceed by focusing first on education. From there I hope to discuss the issue of Catholicity and what it can contribute to education.

### **EDUCATION**

How sure are we that we are providing education anyway? I hope you don’t mind that I pose a snobbish question such as this. I know we provide schooling; but do we really provide education? Let us agree first on vocabulary. Schooling and education—although these are two related realities—are not always one and the same thing. Not all who are schooled are educated.

I remember the late nationalist historian, Renato Constantino, who once wrote an essay entitled, “The Miseducation of the Filipino”. Constantino, in that essay, posits that, perhaps without our even knowing it, we appropriate for ourselves the ideas of our colonial masters. They and their cohorts write our history books for us, and we read these books as Gospel truths not realizing that these contain their own perceptions, their own reading and interpretation of our history. Effectively, they keep us subjugated, because they have already captured our minds. Constantino should remind us, for instance of such early books on Philippine history as “My Little Brown Brother”, written patronizingly by an author who carries the mindset of colonial rulers who consider it their God-given mission to export to us their “civilization”.

If the Spaniards concentrated on religion, the Americans, they say, concentrated on education. They controlled school institutions precisely to shape our collective awareness as a people, to make us think of ourselves as they would want us to. You know that schooling can also be used as an efficient tool for programming minds and reinforcing an uncritical, unquestioning attitude towards our day-to-day lives. The Chinese communist regime is the best example for this. All renegades are made to undergo a reconfiguration of consciousness not just through imprisonment but through what they call a “re-education” process. Perhaps they really mean a “re-schooling”.

Ivan Illich, a Latin-American sociologist once wrote a book entitled, “De-schooling Society”. There he expands the term “schooled” to mean the many conditionings that we get from our existing institutions—including the unquestioned prejudgments and presuppositions that color our perception. Illich goes by the same premise—not all who are schooled are educated. In a parallel sort of way, we might also have to say—not all who are unschooled are uneducated. Think for instance of many parents who probably did not even go through basic or elementary schooling, but who raised such wonderful families, and brought up their children into responsible and productive citizens for our country.

The educational environment is definitely much larger than the school. It includes the family, neighbourhood, surroundings, nature, Church, and society at large. Even as we claim to be educating, our students in school we must not forget that they can get as much education (and miseducation) from their larger environment. There is a whole universe of factors that either facilitate or hinder the formation of individuals into well-rounded and mature human persons. I wonder if that is not the reason why we refer to the larger schools as “universities”. In contrast to colleges, I am told a university is supposed to be promoting a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary ambience that should make the student better equipped for confronting the universe.

What does a student get from our schools? They get skills, but do they get values? They get knowledge; but do they get wisdom? They obtain an expertise; but do they develop a life of virtue? They get information; but do they get what it takes to live a principled life, a life of integrity? It takes a whole village to form a child, Hillary Clinton once wrote in her book, quoting an African saying. Perhaps she could say “It takes a whole universe.”

When our students turn into liabilities instead of assets to society, it could only mean we have failed. I think we are right in starting already from pre-school. They say there is not much you can form anymore in high school and college; their whole mindset is already shaped by then. Education begins from birth; and much of it takes place in our earliest, tenderest years—when we are most impressionable, when we are just beginning to explore the world. Much of it we take from people we trust; and so it matters that children get their earliest education from people who are trustworthy and who will not abuse them.

I grew up in a warm provincial home with twelve siblings—six brother and six sisters, a full-time mother and a working father. We had no television at home; the only means of mass communication that we had was a radio that was as big as a television set. I climbed trees, I flew kites in the cemetery, I swam in the river, I played hide and seek in the Church yard of Betis, I was taught by my brothers to make my own toys. My childhood was nurtured by stories—all sorts of stories, stories of grandparents about the Japanese occupation, stories about floods and the comets and constellations that pre-empted them. Robert Fulghum I think is right when he says, “All I need to know I learned from Kindergarten.” I think I learned them all from way

before Kindergarten. (I started school immediately from Grade 1. There were no pre-schools then yet. Home was our pre-school; and mother was our teacher.)

With the kind of early education that I got as a child, you can imagine how my heart bleeds for kids nowadays who spend most of their time watching television, playing with a game boy or computer games, tinkering with a cell phone, staying in virtual reality and not given the chance to explore the real world.

I remember how I came home with my clothes really soiled from literally playing with soil and mud, chasing insects and hiding in bushes. I feel for modern kids who are told to stay home in order to stay clean, who are made to believe that the soil is dirty—not realizing that it is indoors where they get all the dust and the mites that cause them asthma. Already from my childhood I discovered that all the cleaning agents are to be found outdoors—the fresh air, the sun, the water, the earth. I remember how I marvelled at the power of a little soil to neutralize anything that smelled bad, how the soil sped up decomposition, and how hospitable it is to all kinds of life-forms that can benefit from her nutrients.

Education is about what it takes to make a virtual human being into a “real human being.” We have a saying for this in Filipino: “*Madali ang maging tao, mahirap ang magpakatao.*” This is my cultural basis for distinguishing between virtual humanity; in Tagalog, between *MAGING TAO* and *MAGPAKATAO*. It is not enough to be born of human beings to be a real human being. I think that is a strong idea in the Filipino worldview. Becoming human is the whole task and objective of education, achieving wholeness, becoming a person of integrity.

I think it is clear to us Filipinos that humanization is what education really is for. It is something that needs to be worked out, and which doesn’t just take place automatically; it is to be sought consciously and constantly. That it is an insult to call a human being “*hayop*” in Tagalog suggests that our true dignity lies in our humanization; and anyone who is not humanized is reduced to a plain beast (*Ang hindi marunong magpakatao ay nagpapakahayop.*)

We educate our students to become fully human; and the criterion for fullness of humanity for us Christians is no other than Christ. It is in that sense—not in the sense of sectarianism—that we must speak of Christian education. We form a human being to become as God has intended humankind to be—his own image and likeness, in the language of Christ, “children of God.”

Even if much of what we offer in our schools might be focused on “shaping minds”, the call to educate must remind us always that we form not just the mind. In this regard, it is important that Catholic schools get to rise above secular education’s tendencies to be too competitive and overly concentrated on rational formation. No longer do we take a high-IQ to be the sole criterion for intelligence. Most corrupt politicians and businessmen in our country are supposed to have been educated in the best schools and had very high-IQ’s. Obviously, it takes more than a superior IQ to form people of integrity. Nowadays, educators have started to become more conscious of what they call the EQ (emotional quotient), whose shaping is just as crucial as the shaping of the mind. The world of faith and spirituality, after all, is sensitive to the realm of the non-rational—the same realm in which the most vital aspects of human life are found—such as believing, hoping, loving, etc.

The “schooled” mind tends to be strongly biased for rational intelligence, rating students as superior or inferior against each other, but failing to recognize the many other forms of intelligence that students might be endowed with. Fortunately, we are now becoming more and more aware of the existence of what they call “multiple intelligences” in human beings. If it takes a whole village, nay, a universe to form a child, you can imagine what individualistic societies do when they detach the learner from the whole village, the whole universe that he or she needs, in order to grow up into a full human being.

## **CATHOLICITY**

I started by asking if “catholicity”, when paired with education, does not connote sectarianism. In the context of secularity, it goes without saying. Any religion-influenced kind of education is commonly regarded as “sectarian” in its most pejorative sense. I hope that is not what we mean when we append the term “Catholic” to the brand of education that we offer in our schools. Try looking up a free online thesaurus and you’ll be surprised what you’re going to get as synonyms for “catholic”: “so-pervasive and all-inclusive as to exist in or affect the whole world: cosmic, cosmopolitan, ecumenical, global, pandemic, planetary, universal, worldwide.” And rightly so, I must say, because these are values that are supposed to be inherent in Christianity. Not only is catholicity about universality and inclusiveness; it is also about wholeness, fullness of life as basic qualifiers for the kind of well-being we associate with “salvation”. Its opposite should be isolation, alienation, or even fragmentation.

The well-known Benedictine monk, Fr. Bobby Perez, who was an architect by profession before he became a monk, once told me that there are only three important principles in architecture: *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*.

Every structure that an architect builds, has to have these three characteristics—strength, functionality, and beauty. From architecture, Fr. Bobby has shifted to education at San Beda, and is, surprisingly, still applying the same basic principles which work in the task of education as well. We build well-rounded human beings in almost the same way we build edifices. They too must have strength, functionality, and beauty. Think about it for a while—do our institutions help form our students into persons who are strong, useful, and beautiful?

The distinctly Catholic character of the kind of education that we as Catholic educators offer, factors only we draw from the rich resources of our Catholic Christian faith and consciously hand them down to our students already distilled in the form of values, principles, attitudes, and convictions that motivate them to become more fully human according to the example of Christ. I do not even refer here to the task of communicating Christian doctrine which is the proper role of catechists. I refer rather to the basic mission of relating to our students as parents would do their own children, even as we communicate the particular disciplines we specialize in.

I find it unfortunate that most Catholic schools have relegated this task almost exclusively to “religion teachers” or exclusively to those with a degree in Religious Education. Compartmentalized from the rest of their subjects, the students would tend to treat “religion” as just another subject matter to memorize and conveniently forget after accomplishing the requirements. This is consistent with the same tendency to associate faith and religion with only

that which happens inside the Church and other “sacred places” and institutions, and has absolutely nothing to do anymore with the so-called “secular space.”

Following this kind of a worldview, strictly speaking, one can be a “good catholic” and be at the same time a smuggler, a corrupt politician, a jueteng lord, an abortionist, a userer, etc. This paradigm of “catholicity” limits religion to a set of doctrines, devotions, and pietisms that are confined to the so-called sacred space. The rest of the space that is supposedly “secular” tends to be left to values that alien to the Gospel. And modern men and women can live comfortably in this dichotomized, dualistic, compartmentalized, perhaps even conflicted worldview.

This is the kind of worldview Pope Benedict XVI has consistently assailed in the western world. And often, we just presuppose that the message does not apply to us because we do not belong to the western hemisphere. I remember seeing film entitled *GANITO KAMI NOON, PAANO KAYO NGAYON?* Perhaps we can ask that of ourselves today both as Catholics and as Filipinos, for us to be able to see clearly how the economy, politics and culture of globalization and modern secularism have caused in us as a society not just material poverty but a serious state of spiritual and cultural impoverishment as well.

## **THE WORD OF GOD**

I said I would save the best for last. In most gatherings, they say, the best part of the day is food. And food is what THE WORD OF GOD is about—food for a hungry, malnourished world.

Education is supposed to be a nurturing vocation and mission. It is a feeding task, through and through, because our mission as educators is to feed minds, to nourish souls, to help shape up our students into strong, useful, and beautiful persons who can be, in the language of Jesus “salt of the earth, and light of the world”. And I think you will agree with me if I say that your academic degrees, your specializations, and your individual areas of expertise are not enough to carry out this nurturing vocation and mission.

The students under your care are hungry—perhaps not physically, but spiritually. Does not the book of Deuteronomy remind us, “Not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord.” Jesus repeated those lines to the devil who tempted him to make shortcuts (to turn the stone into bread), the same way many students today are tempted all the time to make short cuts to success. They all want to make a million the easiest, the quickest, the shortest way possible.

We cannot feed with the Word of God without first of all allowing ourselves to be fed with the Word of God ourselves. It is therefore important that Catholic educators find time to keep themselves spiritually fit and well-nourished—perhaps by forming small prayer groups that can read, reflect, and share on Scriptures together, and above all through a regular attendance of the Eucharist.

At the end of the day, the Word of God we speak about is not just that which is contained in the book we call Sacred Scriptures or Bible. Remember, the writer of the letter to the Hebrew says, “In times past, God spoke through many manifold ways. In these last times, he has spoken through his Son.” The definitive Word of God—for us Christians, is none other than Jesus

Christ, the Word made flesh, the Incarnate Word. He too challenges us, his disciples to incarnate in our lives God's Word, so that like Paul we can say, "And I live, not I, but Christ lives in me." (Gal 2:20)

The Word of God must continually transform the whole educational environment so that it becomes a truly nurturing, educative, and transformative environment to everyone who becomes part of it. By that, I mean not just students and teachers and administrators, but even the non-teaching personnel as well. Only in the way can we safely say our institutions really provide not just schooling but education.

Let me end again with the questions I posed earlier: What does a student get from our schools? They may get skills; but do they get values? They may get knowledge; but do they get wisdom? They may obtain expertise; but do they develop a life of virtue? They may get information; but do they get what it takes to live a principled life, a life of integrity, a way of life shaped by our model of the human person *par excellence*—Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

# PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY

A Unitarian Universalist Sermon

By Jan Garrett

Presented in July 1998

Walt Whitman wrote in 1871:

Judging from the main portions of the history of the world so far, justice is always in jeopardy, peace walks amid hourly pitfalls and of slavery, misery, meanness, the craft of tyrants and the credulity of the populace, in some of their protean forms, no voice can at any times say 'They are not pervasive.' The cloud breaks a little and the sun shines out but soon and certain the lowering darkness falls again as if to last forever. Yet is there an immortal courage and prophesy in every sane soul that cannot, must not, under any circumstances capitulate. Viva the attack! The perennial assault. Viva the unpopular cause, the spirit that audaciously aims, the never abandoned effort pursued the same amid opposing proofs and precedents.

--Walt Whitman, cited in Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Common Courage Press, 1993), v.1, p. 204

## I. INTRODUCTION

Prophetic spirituality is a way of being religious imbued with a burning concern for social justice and the improvement of flawed social institutions. This aspect of the religious life is often missing when people consider spirituality to be merely a private, personal affair, with at best an indirect relation to the common good of society. Yet there is nothing far-fetched in speaking of prophetic spirituality, as we see when we look at some of the oldest parts of the Bible and the history of the liberal religion over last several centuries.

## II. SOURCES

The term *prophet* is Greek in origin. It originally referred to a person who could speak for a god and interpret his will to humans. Although the word soon acquires connotations of foretelling or predicting, especially foretelling doom, this aspect is less important than the function of calling attention to overlooked or suppressed values. Prediction is less essential to prophecy than the saying forth or proclaiming of what should be done, in accord with what the divinity, or the big picture, dictates.

Prophetic figures show up early in the historical and prophetic books of the Jewish Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament. Moses is a prophet when he utters the command of Yahweh,

Let my people go. Prophets important in a later phase of the Jewish tradition are Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, and Amos. They condemned the injustice and corruption of the rulers of Israel and Judah, warning rightly, in their case, that the injustice, if continued, would increase the likelihood of political collapse and enslavement by foreign powers. They called for return to basic moral norms. Of course, we should not deny what leaps out at us from the page, that the writings of these prophets combine a concern about justice for Hebrews with an extreme intolerance of non-Jewish religious traditions. These texts also ooze patriarchal bias. In fact, those who see the Bible as infallible often absorb intolerance and bias from the prophetic books while missing the concern for justice contained in the same books.

The New Testament, of course, conveys words and deeds attributed to Jesus and his early followers. In relation to the Old Testament, the New Testament is both an advance and a retreat. One advance is the Christianity, although it starts as a Jewish sect, seeks converts who are not Jews. In so doing it breaks with some of the narrowness and tribalism of Old Testament Judaism. A second advance, which really just stresses, something already implicit in earlier Judaism, is the importance of the creative Spirit and its ability to break through excessive attention to the letter of the moral law and the recognition, not always remembered by later Christians, that morality is made for human beings, not the other way around.

Yet early Christianity is limited insofar as it tends to abdicate the duty, recognized by the Jewish prophets, of speaking truth to power. Whatever the saying, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" meant for Jesus, it soon comes to mean that the Christian will avoid concern for justice in the wider society. But the same slogan, joined with its other half, "Render unto God that which is God's," led the early Christians to refuse even token worship of the Roman emperor. This set up at least the possibility of an antagonism between Christianity and imperial rule, at least prior to the ruler's conversion to Christianity. Moreover, the early Christians paid deliberate attention to building, maintaining and preserving their own voluntary associations, beginning with their Christian communities and churches. Over time they became skilled in building charitable associations, for example, to help the sick and the homeless. Some historians have maintained that such voluntary associations helped to prevent the complete breakdown of social order in Europe when the Roman Empire disintegrated.

The prophetic element in the Judaeo-Christian tradition revives in the context of the Protestant Reformation, beginning in the early 1500's. Here we need to concern ourselves with the radical or religiously liberal wing of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther began the Reformation with his attack the Catholic religious bureaucracy, with its Pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priest and their monopoly of religious authority. But Luther did not really want to do away with top-down church organizations. Thus the right wing of the Protestant Reformation, led by Luther, was still quite authoritarian. The liberal reformers, however, called for the priesthood and prophethood of all believers. They favored a ground-up, democratic conception of the religious congregation, known as congregational polity. This type of religious organization is a vital part of the Unitarian Universalist heritage.

This essentially democratic idea of how Protestant congregations should be run helped to promote representative government in England and in the United States. The idea was that people who are part of a community should have say-so in the government of that community. First put into practice in the radical Protestant congregations of the Reformation, this idea was soon was proposed for the society at large.

A similar and simultaneous development is the spread of religious toleration. At first the advocates of toleration wished only to tolerate diverse religious beliefs within a single church. When the dominant church resisted this approach, advocates of toleration proposed it for the larger society. From this derives the principle of the separation of church and state embodied in the first amendment to U.S. constitution. (Note. If the existence of the liberal religious church was a necessary precondition for the emergence of religious liberty in the nation-state, perhaps preservation of religious liberty in the state depends upon the continuing vitality of liberal religious denominations such as Unitarian Universalism.)

There is much more to the history of prophetic spirituality than we have time for today. If we were to understand this history thoroughly we'd have to study

- the religiously inspired fight for the abolition of slavery in the early nineteenth century;
- the social gospel movement at the end of the nineteenth century;
- the black churches as the mass social basis for the civil rights movement, whose leading spokesman as Rev. Martin Luther King;
- and in Latin America, in the cultural framework affected by Catholicism, the movement of liberation theology. Liberation theology is also influenced by Marxism but Marxism can be understood as a secularized expression of an egalitarian prophetic spirituality.

### **III. THREE THESES ON PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY**

What exactly is prophetic spirituality and why it is important? I have three main points.

First, prophetic spirituality is not the whole of spirituality, but it is or should be a good half of it. There is room for the more private and personal kind of spirituality, known historically as pietism, in the other half. This view is expressed forcefully in the writings of James Luther Adams, the Unitarian theologian who seems to have written more than anybody else on this topic. The pietistic and prophetic elements, he insists, go together. It is an error to abandon the individual dimension for the social—which, he thinks, is what some Marxists have done. But it is an equally serious error, and one more common for those who describe themselves as spiritual, to de-emphasize the prophetic and the social and to stress the individual and the private forms of spirituality. The prophetic voice not only criticizes public injustice but also challenges the practice of a merely private spirituality. There are those who do not lie, cheat or steal, who personally do not foment hatred of blacks or gays, and who cultivate their own personal spiritualities, but who do not act against the cultivation of racism or against other forms of organized injustice. Prophetic spirituality says: Private piety is not enough.

So, private spirituality or pietism is insufficient, a recipe for a one-sided religion. Prophetic spirituality calls also for a commitment to justice and to creating and preserving good institutions.

Secondly, prophetic spirituality relates to the more-than-human, to what James Luther Adams called the sustaining, commanding and renewing power. Sometimes he called it the power of being. When speaking to theists and UU Christians, of which he was one, he called it God. This

point is bound to be challenging for some of us. I know it has been for me because, like our humanists, I tend to “have a problem” with God-language.

When Adams spoke of this power of being, he used some words normally used to describe persons but he was careful not to overdo it. For example, he spoke of the power as commanding and giving, but he did not usually describe it as remembering, knowing or thinking.

This power is the source of grace. When grace breaks into our lives we are empowered to overcome pettiness, to act more nobly than before, to create new relationships, including alliances with members of other religious groups against injustice and intolerance, to overcome impasses, social and otherwise, to be helpful in new ways.

I can reconcile myself to speaking of this power by reminding myself that it is not a being in the ordinary sense of the term. It is not something that you can locate at a particular physical point or whose dimensions you can measure. It is, however, revealed in experience. Wherever there is creativity, mutual concern, or liberation from ignorance and frozen institutional forms, there it is.

This power is not merely what exists as hard fact; because a now existing fact is not sufficient to create the future. What is fact already is what it is. Past, finished, done with. Nor is this power simply what will be. What-will-be may be good, a liberation of positive possibilities; but it may also result from ignorance, or it may be an enslavement of human powers or destructive of ecological value. We stand, as existing beings, somewhere between a past that cannot now be changed and a future that may be, and in this present time we sometimes hear a command, coming not merely from something within us (as the language of “conscience” suggests) but from the totality of the real and the possible that envelopes us. When we are in tune with our best possibilities, and with what already exists and sustains us, we can hear this command and respond to it as we should.

We are of course talking about ethical experience, about the experience of the responsible person, son, daughter, parent, teacher, doctor, lawyer, citizen. There are nonreligious ways of describing ethical experience. Adams conceded that the use of religious language is a matter of deliberate choice. But this choice can be justified, he thinks, because the tension that it sets up, between the finite human and the inexhaustible power of being, which commands, sustains and sometimes renews, is fruitful in the production of good works. (Note: He sometimes speaks of “the tension between the gospel and the world”—essentially the same thing.) Of course, it may not be fruitful for everyone. Adams notes that there are secular social activists who have at least as much of the prophetic spirit as many of those who proclaim themselves believers.

The third point regarding prophetic spirituality is that the prophethood is for all religiously concerned persons. Protestant reformers spoke more often of the “priesthood of all believers.” Adams insisted that the prophethood of all believers is equally important.

Obviously, for a Unitarian Universalist, “believers” cannot refer to persons who subscribe to a particular creed. Instead it refers to people who orient themselves in a relation to the sustaining, commanding, renewing power that is more than merely human or narrowly self-interested. It does no matter whether you call this power God. It does not matter whether you believe that it comes from outside of nature or history altogether, though many view it as mixed up with both of them.

The phrase is “prophethood of *all* believers.” Ideally, then, we would all be prophets. We would all, for example, find occasion to stand up, in some practically useful way, for human dignity. It is no accident that there is a close connection between Adams’ notion of prophethood and the ideal of democratic citizenship in a congregation or society. Neither of these offices rest on the shoulders of a few. All members have access to the powers and responsibilities.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Last week’s speaker reminded us of the humorous quip that Unitarian Universalism is a non-prophet religion. I don’t know who invented this joke—probably a non-UU. We laugh at the jokes others create about us—and repeat them ourselves—because we recognize the partial truths they contain. In many Unitarian Universalist discussions of spirituality, the prophetic element is indeed absent. But now I feel the prophetic spirit coming upon me and I am compelled to prophesy myself: It would be a tragedy if Unitarian Universalism were to become a wholly non-prophetic religion. If that happens it will have forgotten a good half of its heritage and risk degenerating into a narcissistic cult.

#### **Postscript**

Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season.  
It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year.  
It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow.  
Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the playtime.

--W.E.B. DuBois (reprinted in *Singing the Living Tradition* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1993])

#### **Further Readings in Prophetic Spirituality**

James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously*, Max L. Stackhouse, ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.

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