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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial

page 2

STATIO CONFERENCE THE MAN OF GOD ST. BENEDICT

by Sister Mary Thomas Prado, OSB

page 3

Trajectories of Renewal in Religious Life and Mission

by Lode L. Wostyn, CICM

continuation

page 10

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St. Scholastica's Priory

Manila

Dear Sisters,

The second reading of the First Sunday in July is one of the most consoling passages in the Bible. I quote it in full:

To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but the Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ: for whenever I am weak, I am strong.

It almost needs no comment. Just read it lectio-like, savoring each sentence. St. Paul is such a great figure that he seems to be so far above us, but in this passage he is all of a sudden just one of us struggling against forces within himself that he feels almost hopeless about. Don't we have some such trait, or vice, or weakness, or defect that we are very conscious of and which we honestly want to get rid of and yet find ourselves falling again and again into. In such moments, it is good to know that "God's grace is sufficient for us," and that "whenever we are weak we are strong," and that the power of God is actually manifested in our infirmity. Each one of us has such a big EGO and this ego permeates everything we do and of ourselves we don't seem to want or we feel ourselves unable to overcome it. And so we should be grateful if God sends us something that whether we like it or not will cut into it, however painful it may be to us.

So with St. Paul let us boast of our infirmities so that "the power of God may dwell in us!"

Lovingly yours,

A. Mary John Mananzan OSB
Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

STATIO CONFERENCE

THE MAN OF GOD ST. BENEDICT

By Sister Mary Thomas Prado, OSB

Introduction

What more is there to say about our Holy Father St. Benedict that has not been said? And through what lens will this conference be written? What does it hope to add to the existing literature and reflection on his life?

Neither a scholar on monastic studies nor the RB, I would like to write this Statio's conference through pastoral lens - looking at St. Benedict and the life he lived and the Rule he wrote, and the choices he made and the influence he had, and the personality that shaped monastic life and the monastic life that shaped his personality.

Last year our Interior Design students had an exhibit of their chair designs called "Sit and Flair." The second display was along our administrative offices hallway. Definitely creative and unique, many asked if we could actually sit on them. That was exactly the purpose of the exhibit -- it was to make people start talking! This conference is also meant to start a conversation, a conversation built upon prior reflection and which hopefully would lead to further reflection that will not end on Statio Sunday only.

I. St. Benedict to Filipinos

Who is St. Benedict to Filipinos? Does it match what we know of him?

In our country St. Benedict may not be as well-known as St. Francis, St. Clare or St. Anthony but a good number of the faithful are devoted to him. Mang Jun, the father of one of our staff in school, was a former policeman. He came to know about St. Benedict in 1980 through his comrade in the police force who was saved from a shoot-out – the bullet hit the Benedictine medal instead. After several experiences of "miracles" of healing from sicknesses, protection from danger, petitions granted through the saint's intercession, Mang Jun has persuaded his family to become devotees of the saint.

Asking for protection is a common content of the devotion of Filipinos to saints. While on fieldwork for my thesis-project in a remote agricultural barrio in Laguna in 2005, my host brought me to a chapel dedicated to its patron, San Benito. Nobody knew where the statue came from, nobody knew the life story of the saint, but everybody knew "the story" – the little chapel was saved from fire because of the statue of San Benito. Every year the barriofolks celebrate St. Benedict's feast to thank him (which is neither July 11 nor March 21) and continually pray for good harvest and protection against a whole range of dangers and calamities.

Young people today are often skeptical about religious matters. However, in a testimonial lunch given in honor of our newly-licensed accountants last year, one of the successful examinees recounted holding on to the medal of St. Benedict when the licensure examination was getting tough.

Protector, miraculous healer, inspiration, guide – this is who St. Benedict is to the Filipino faithful. And now to history ...

II. St. Benedict, the disciple

I have chosen only one book, *Benedict's Disciples* edited by David Hugh Farmer and published in 1980, by which to anchor and frame my reflections on the life of St. Benedict. In the first chapter on St. Benedict, Rt. Rev. Dom Aelred Sillem writes:

“...it is not possible to write a Life of St. Benedict as one can write a Life of St. Francis of Assisi or St. Teresa of Avila. We do not have materials which would enable us to enjoy a vivid, intimate picture of his personality such as we find in the letters of St. Teresa or St. Francis of Sales, nor do we know more than the outline of his life. Leaving aside later legendary matter concerning his ancestry and his two disciples Maurus and Placid, which have left their traces in iconography and even in liturgy, we have only two sources: the second book of St. Gregory’s “Dialogues,” entirely devoted to Benedict, and then, Benedict’s own Rule.

Gregory’s “Dialogues” belong to a literary category difficult for the modern reader. They were written in 593-4, nearly fifty years after the probable date of Benedict’s death, to show that sanctity and miracles did not belong only to the past, but that they were saints and miracle-workers in contemporary Italy... The narrative in Book II, as in other three Books, is thus a sequence of miracle stories, interspersed with theological and spiritual reflections ... he (Gregory) does not give us the material we would like for a Life of Benedict; he gives us no chronology and only slight glimpses of his way of living and thinking, as these emerge from the miracle stories. He does however give us a reliable outline of his life and an impression of his personality, austere and awe-inspiring, yet also tender and gentle (p.23).”

The meager literature certainly limits but it does not altogether render the task of knowing the holy man impossible. Psychologists look for “patterns” in the life of a person in order to understand him or her. Such patterns are also seen in the life of St. Benedict.

“Only approximate dates can be offered, Benedict was born about 480 ... The town of Nursia, now Norcia, in the Sabine country some seventy miles north-east of Rome, claims to have been his birthplace, though Gregory tells us that he was born “in the province of Nursia”, which suggests the neighborhood rather than the town itself. We are told that the people of this hill-country had a reputation for physical and moral toughness and austerity. He was born *liberiori genere*, which suggests that his family belonged to what we would call provincial gentry rather than to the patrician background which later legend claims for him. His family was doubtless Christian and devout, for his sister Scholastica had been dedicated to God from her infancy, presumably by her parents. Benedict received his early education at home, but was then sent to Rome to study letters – ‘grammar school’ rather than university studies. He was accompanied by his nurse ... (p.23)”

Assuming that St. Benedict’s early life was one of peaceful existence in the laid-back province of Nursia, we are told that the background of his life in his adult years was one of conflict in the Church and in civil society. These factors would eventually influence his choices as well as the values he pursued.

“The schism in the Roman church on the election of Symmachus in 498 may have begun before Benedict’s flight from Rome to Subiaco, and could have even played a part in his decision. This schism lasted until 514, and thus coincided with the first half of the years at Subiaco. In 537 the election of Pope Vigilius opened yet another troubled period, which ended only after Benedict’s death, so that the ecclesiastical background of Monte Cassino years was so full of conflict as had been that of his early years... In the political sphere ... in the Eastern Empire Justinian succeeded (Odoacer) in 527, and in 535 there began a Gothic War to reconquer Italy for the Empire; the war, with the tragic consequences in suffering and famine, continued until the complete reconquest of Italy in 555 (p.27).”

This background in the Church and civil society was also present in St. Benedict’s personal life as he faced conflicts in every step of his journey. What pattern of choices did he make that eventually shaped his own monastic journey?

A. A Pattern of Flight

In Gregory’s account, we can see that St. Benedict’s response to his personal struggle and conflict was one of *flight*. The first one was in Rome when he was confronted with its moral and political decadence. He fled Rome.

“We are not told how long Benedict continued his studies, but only that, fearing the temptations to which a career in the great city would expose him, he decided to abandon them. Gregory’s *despectis litterarum studiis* suggests that he has not yet embarked upon the study of rhetoric or of Roman law. Instead he adopted monastic life. So he set out for ‘the desert’, accompanied, somewhat unexpectedly, by his nurse; perhaps the devoted woman was difficult to elude (p.23).”

The second flight came soon after. The first miracle performed on the broken tray drew attention to the young Benedict causing great discomfort. He fled Enfide.

“...the pair (Benedict and Cyrilla) were at first detained by the insistent hospitality of the people of Enfide, now Affide, and lodged ‘in’ the church of St. Peter there, presumably in one of its dependencies. Here Benedict’s first miracle, a homely and attractive one, drew unwelcome attention to him, and he again took flight, eluding this time his unfortunate nurse, and found his way to Sublacus, now Subiaco, some fifty miles east of Rome (p.23).”

The third episode of flight came after a failure to reform the monks who asked him to be their abbot. They attempted to poison him. He fled Vicovaro.

“Gradually his reputation grew, so the monks of a neighboring monastery asked him to become their abbot. Benedict knew of their easy-going ways, and accepted only with misgiving. His attempts to reform them were perhaps over-hasty, and the monks decided to rid themselves of the saint by poison, which was evaded only through a miracle. Benedict returned quietly to his cave (p.25).”

The fourth flight seems to be the last one. Benedict was not to stay in the solitude of his cave again because other disciples sought him to be trained in monastic life. He built twelve monasteries at Subiaco. As his reputation grew so did jealousy of him that would cost another attempt on his life. He fled Subiaco for Monte Cassino.

“Benedict’s growing reputation and influence provoked the jealousy of a neighboring priest, who, after another unsuccessful attempt at removing Benedict himself by poison, set out to destroy his monastic foundation by sending women to seduce the monks. Benedict realized that the underlying motive was merely jealousy of himself, and determined to end the persecution of his monasteries by moving elsewhere. He was accompanied by a few monks. His intention was thus not to resume the solitary life to which he had once returned after his unsuccessful attempt to reform the monks of Vicovaro. Instead he settled at Monte Cassino, some eighty miles south of Rome, just off the Via Latina from Rome to Naples (p.25).”

Fuga mundi or flight from the world is described as a practice of separation from one’s surroundings in search of a mystical experience or as part of the eremitical enterprise of seeking union with God in solitude and prayer. St. Benedict’s flight from Rome ending in the cave at Subiaco and his flight from Vicovaro back to his cave had these elements of *fuga mundi* – a separation from the world to be anchored in Christ. But as we know, this flight did not last long, his anonymity was short-lived. Holiness cannot be hidden.

The flight from Enfide, Vicovaro and Subiaco were perhaps motivated by other things but they surely made a statement - NO to fame, glory, competition, compromise of monastic values, jealousy and malice. Flight is usually associated in our modern day with avoidance and passivity. In the case of St. Benedict, there was always something good and something new that happened after his flight from his former life and experiences. When he fled the decadence in Rome there followed the manifestation of God’s miraculous powers through him. After he fled the attention of the people of Enfide, he settled for solitude in the cave at Subiaco. His flight from the monks at Vicovaro gave birth to the experience of monastic life in Subiaco, and the eventual flight from Subiaco signaled a fresh start of another structure of monastic life in Monte Cassino – a single, larger community different from the arrangement in Subiaco. Flight, in the experience of St. Benedict, was letting go in order that new life can begin. Phrased in theological terms, it is a pattern of death and resurrection.

B. A Pattern of Being Led by the Spirit

When St. Benedict fled Rome, did he have a definite destination in mind? Did he follow a path he wanted or was he led?

“... he fell in with a monk named Romanus from a monastery on top of the cliff; to him he opened his heart, and from him he received the monastic habit, which in those days was equivalent to making monastic profession. In the face of the cliff was a deep cave, and here Benedict lived unknown and in complete solitude for three years. To one familiar with the structures which Benedict was himself to establish later in his Rule, the situation was anomalous. For one thing, if we infer from his desire for the monastic life at least some knowledge of its tradition, he might have learnt from Jerome or Cassian that the solitary life should only be embarked upon after a solid formation in the cenobitical life. But neither he and Romanus appear to have envisaged his beginning his monastic life within the community little more than the cliff’s height above his cave...It may be significant that Benedict, who must have had at least some contact with contemporary Italian monasticism, did not put himself at the school of any existing institution: in his

cave, the Holy Spirit prepared him for a work which was to be at once deeply traditional and a new beginning (p.24).”

The image of this holy man opening and allowing himself to be led by the Spirit is repeated in many instances of his life. “Gregory underlines that the initiative for the contacts which began after the three years in the cave did not come from Benedict himself, but rather from God: a priest was guided by a vision to seek out the solitary and to share with him the Easter meal. Later, Benedict was found by some shepherds, who brought him food and received in return spiritual instruction from him (p.25).” St. Benedict did not seek out the monks of Vicovaro or those from Subiaco. They came to him. Much that he wanted to return quietly to his cave when he left Vicovaro, he had to revise plans as he was called to embrace cenobitic life instead in Subiaco and in Monte Cassino.

The entire life of St. Benedict is one of listening and engagement with the Spirit who irresistibly led the direction of his monastic journey. It is this same Spirit that led him to new insights and creative transformations in monastic life. The Rule is framed in one word only: listen. In the various chapters there are many other admonitions to listening: listen to the Scriptures, to the writings of the Fathers, to one another in community especially to the young, to the *senpectae*, to the several daily calls for obedience, humility, conversion and so on. Benedict’s monastic journey certainly attests to a person of discernment founded on intense listening to the Spirit.

C. A Pattern of Embodying Change

As mentioned earlier, the background of St. Benedict’s life was one of conflict and strife in the political and ecclesiastical spheres. It is said that war and its tragic consequences in suffering and famine continued for a long time until the complete reconquest of Italy in 555. Yet the RB, which is approximated to be written about 540, does not bear any trace of this conflict situation with its “tranquil pages.” There is the call to seek peace and pursue it but this peace, above all, must be sown and grown within the community by keeping order in the monastery, taking human differences and weaknesses in the distribution of goods in the monastery, looking at all the members and their different needs in the various times of their lives and so on. His earlier experiences of flight made Benedict start over and over again in figuring out what worked in a community.

While the empire in the surrounding environment crumbled, the monasteries became fortresses of strength. While famine conditions threatened lives, the monasteries were self-sufficient and self-governing. Themes in the RB – stewardship, humility, obedience, right relationships, service of authority, the common good, co-responsibility, simplicity of life, care for the weak, stability - tell us indirectly that the opposite situations were happening outside the monastery walls. In other words, change that was hoped for in the society and church was embodied first in the monastery. “Benedict was to be proclaimed one day Patron of Europe, but his influence lay, not in political or even in ecclesiastical involvement, but in the creation of cells of intense Christian and cultural life (p. 27).”

III. St. Benedict, the abbot

The final source of reflection on St. Benedict's character is in the depiction of the ideal abbot in chapters 2 and 64 of the Rule. First and foremost, St. Benedict led his community as a spiritual father, guiding his monks in their search for God by example and teaching, by spiritual guidance and monastic observance in the monastery. A man soaked in the word of God, he took this model from the New Testament – authority holds the place of Christ in the monastery. He was guided by the divine law.

St. Benedict, the abbot, must have tried to avoid all temptations to favoritism and must have loved and esteemed the members equally (vv. 16,17). Having lived with a variety of personalities and display of human behavior (from undisciplined and restless, negligent and disdainful to the obedient, docile and patient) in three different monasteries – Vicovaro, Subiaco and Monte Cassino, he knew what it was to use argument, appeal and reproof (v. 23), varying the ways of dealing according to circumstances and characters (different strokes for different folks as M. Angelica calls it). He was a stern taskmaster but also a devoted and tender father to his monks (v. 24).

If the Rule was written in Monte Cassino after a whole experience of monastic life, St. Benedict knew that wisdom and goodness of life far exceed all the qualities of a leader. He cannot teach what he had not lived. The years that might have tempered the Abbot Benedict show in Chapter 64 – the abbot, he says, must not be excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or oversuspicious. Monte Cassino must have experienced an abbot in Benedict who knew how to challenge them to grow in virtue but loved them deeply with their frailties. The experience of the years must have taught him to value discretion, discernment and moderation (vv.17, 18).

Conclusion

Sr. Aquinata Bockmann, OSB in her book, *Perspectives on the Rule of St. Benedict*, concludes by saying that this is the way she imagines Benedict:

- with both feet firmly planted on the ground,
- with open ears listening in all directions,
- having penetrating, kind eyes that see through the surface
and discover Christ in everything and everybody,
- with arms stretched out toward the monastics of very different natures
and toward all people especially the needy,
- but above all with a wide heart where Christ lives,
who spurs him on so that, together with all monastics, he will reach the final goal.

For me I imagine Benedict:

- challenging our complacencies and waning idealism,
- urging us to a life of continual search for truth, for inspiration, for insight,
- coaxing us to listen, to discern and to act,
- and admonishing us above all toward a singular love -- to prefer nothing
to the love of Christ .

How do you imagine Benedict?

Suggestions for prayer, reflection, study and sharing:

1. How has St. Benedict “come alive” (whether as guide, inspiration, protector, etc.) in your vocation journey?
2. Study a chapter of your choice in the RB that you think reflects the personality and image of St. Benedict.
3. Following the tradition of our patron St. Benedict, in our Priory-wide project of renewal - what “cells of intense Christian and cultural life” do we need to create in order to respond to the disintegration we see in our political, social and economic life; what areas of our personal and communal life do we need to make a statement to say NO and YES to; and what creative transformation is the Spirit calling us to?
4. A most appreciated gift among our faculty in SSC – Manila is the Benedictine medal. This is in part due to the many years of propagation of the medal by our School President. Someone out there has yet to know about St. Benedict. Share a part of our tradition - share a medal; share a piece of monastic wisdom; share an anecdote in the life of St. Benedict ... so that in all things God may be glorified!

Trajectories of Renewal in Religious Life and Mission

Lode L. Wostyn, CICM

Continuation...

d) The fourth road, also opened by the search for community life, considers the way we look at leadership: from an authoritarian to a ministerial leadership, and moving on beyond patriarchy towards inclusivity

When I entered the novitiate, novices were not supposed to question the decisions of the Novice Master. The quality of a novice was measured in terms of docility. The religious adopted the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the Church, destroying a long tradition of communal life. The voice of God was the voice of Father or Mother Superior, or the voice of the parish priest. Some religious, among them Josemaria Escriba, were firm believers in the validity of this authoritarian system. We read in *The Way*: “Obedience the sure way. Blind obedience to your superior, the way of sanctity. Obedience in your apostolate, the only way: for, in the work of God, the spirit must be to obey or to leave (941).

LG, which is the framework for the renewal of religious life, affirms the basic equality in the Church, based on Baptism. We are a people of priests, prophets and kings, all responsible for the mission in the Church and the world. The forms of leadership should be rethought, based on our common responsibility: collegial leadership subsidiarity, *diakonia* (service). These ideas are followed up in *PC*. N. 15 points to the primitive Church as “an example of community life when the multitude of believers were of one heart and one mind” (*cf.* Acts 4:32-37). Religious should reintroduce complete equality in their communities and remove the distinction between monks/priests and brothers, sisters in teaching and “working” sisters taking care of the household. N. 14 describes the role of the Superior in terms of “service” and insists that “responsible obedience” encompasses the contribution as human persons of all members.

We should, mention here two new perspectives on leadership, which were opened by the feminist movement. The first one is the critique of patriarchal governance. The Church was and is still a patriarchal Church, in which leadership is seen in terms of a patronizing role. The members of the community are forced into a childish subservience. Sisters got a patriarchal spiritual director who taught male spirituality to innocent novices. They had lived in a patriarchal society and continued to live on in the patriarchal rule of Mother Superior, learning the male virtues of courage, strength. Discipline, hard work, and unbending decisiveness, and so on. A lot has already happened to correct this patriarchal situation but our Church still has to start the deconstruction of patriarchy. Hans Küng says it in a very naughty way: “We (the Church) are one of the few surviving dictatorships in the world”.

After this deconstruction or perhaps better, during this deconstruction, we have to open a second road, the road of reconstruction of our Church and religious life in terms of a discipleship of equals. O’Murchu repeats the words of Chittister: “Religious women should be outstanding and outrageous feminists”, and I would add, male religious should declare their solidarity and also be willing to reconsider the whole structural set-up of our Church in all its aspects: governance, teachings, guidelines or laws, rituals, spirituality and so on. In this reconstruction, sisters have to confront a number of issues: the reshaping of the institutional lifestyle, the development of their own feminine workforce refusing to be the servants of the holy

bishop and priests, solidarity with the feminist movements in society, the re-evaluation of feminine sexuality, and so on. I conclude with O'Murchu: "What is at stake is not rebellion but assertiveness. (...) The retrieval of recent decades has not been in vain and has reclaimed for women (and men) that what has been so brutally suppressed for so long, namely the uniqueness of feminine wisdom. The need to sustain and deepen this recovery – a new feminine paradigm – must become a primary task for all religious in our time, and for women religious in a unique way".

e) A fifth and last trajectory of renewal is our understanding of mission: "from strangers to citizens of this earthy city – opening a new horizon: we need to embrace God's creation, and to become co-creators on God's wonderful masterpiece, planet earth, surrounded by an ever expanding universe"

The greatest challenge for religious life in today's world may be a sentence of *LG* n. 46: "Let no one think that by their consecration, religious have become strangers to their fellow human beings or useless citizens of this earthy city". The parallelism with *Gaudium et Spes* is obvious: "They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthy responsibilities" (n. 43). "Not everyone who cries: 'Lord, Lord!' will enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but those who do the Father's will and take a strong grip on the work at hand" (cf. Mt 7:21). The Christian tradition has been strongly influenced by a Platonic dualism: spirit-body, soul-matter, supernatural-natural, spiritual-worldly. The religious were at one end of this duality: in the spiritual, the supernatural, the things of the spirit and soul. The laity were at the other end, in the world. Religious, being on the side of the spiritual should, however, constantly be reminded that they are sinners. Plato and Jansenius are certainly the companions of Josemaria Escriva when he writes: "do not forget that you are just a trash can", "a vile worm, ugly and miserable in the sight of that God who puts up with so much from you!" (*The Way*, 592 and 598).

PC gives a more positive evaluation of the human condition and of the task of the religious by suggesting that something should be done about the training of religious to make them competent in the field of their apostolate, "even to the extent of winning appropriate degrees" (n. 18). "Communities... should resort to suitable techniques, including modern ones, and abandon whatever activities are today less in keeping with the spirit of the community and its authentic character" (n. 20). In *PC*, we have some daring suggestions yet the introduction of the eschatological perspective (religious as signs of the eschatological character of the Kingdom) seems to re-affirm the dualism between active and contemplative religious life.

Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* and the subsequent long-winded Encyclicals of John Paul II, are still anthropocentric and fail to address a reflection which in the meantime developed in science: a **new cosmology and ecology**. The whole of Creation is understood as a live organism in which we as human beings have our home, being interconnected with all life around us. We live "interbeing" (*Thich Nhat Hanh*). In Christianity, we have been caught in the anthropocentric view which casts us in the role of the possessors and exploiters of the planet. We have to recover the broader picture and develop the critical values taught by Jesus of Nazareth in his proclamation of the coming of the Reign of God. I shall simply sum up some themes, mentioned by O'Murchu, without developing them:

1. Universalism: We need to think globally, interdependently, inclusively.
2. As interdependent creatures, we have to cultivate our mutual co-responsibility

for the life of our beautiful planet.

3. Wholism: mutual relationality is the driving force throughout the entire universe.
4. Ecological Health.
5. An earthy spirituality: reclaiming our rightful place in Creation and acting responsibly as co-creators on the earth is becoming the single most urgent spiritual challenge now facing us. As religious, we are bound by our allegiance to the Church, yet we should learn to look beyond: “the world is bigger than the Church”.

Conclusion

Some years ago, the first year theology students of Maryhill School of Theology organized a consultation around the theme: “is there a perennial theology? The same thing could be done for religious life: “is there a perennial religious life? Are our religious Institutes perennial?” I believe Vatican II answered: No! Our institutes are part of the Church on pilgrimage in history, part of a church that tries to be a sign of salvation, of the Kingdom in constantly changing historical contexts. We are on a trajectory, on a road, which means we have constantly to renew ourselves, following the principles suggested by *PC* n. 2:

- Our fundamental norm, the supreme law, is Jesus of Nazareth. At the deepest level, we have constantly to refocus religious life to bring it into conformity, at a particular stage of history, with the Gospel of Jesus.
- Secondly, we need to be loyal to the spirit of our Founder, which does not mean that we have to follow texts and prescriptions of the Founder that may be time bound.
- Thirdly, the charism of our religious Institutes directs us to a particular mission in the world. This mission should also be constantly rethought in the light of the challenges of our contemporary world.

Are we on the right track? We constantly have to repeat the reflection-action spiral: see-discern-act, a discernment that links us with all disciples of Jesus. Are we, as religious, signs of authentic humanity, signs of loving kindness, compassion, freedom, peace, justice, being inspired by the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth?

II. THE TRAJECTORY OF THE RENEWAL MISSION

The Spirit of Jesus quite shook the understanding of the mission of the Church during the Council and the years of crisis that started in the 1970's. We would like to leave this crisis behind, yet the fast-changing world forces us to move on and rethink and reframe our vision-mission. I can only give a short survey.

At the time of the Council, the most revolutionary statement was perhaps in *LG* n. 16, that affirmed that there is salvation outside the Church. Without intending it, the Council Fathers caused the collapse of a particular mission enterprise that planted or transplanted the Church in non-Christian countries, to baptize people and bring them to salvation as new members of our Church. The “planting of the Church” vision is still present in the Document *Ad Gentes* while the

first elements of a new mission theology appeared: mission as participation in the *Missio Dei*.

After the Second Vatican Council, we went through a crisis: a moratorium on mission, mission is everywhere, mission on the six Continents, and the most shocking: “missionaries go home”. When I arrived in the Philippines in 1969, some missionary priests told me to go home. This was not a very encouraging start.

In the reformulating of a mission theology, the two Encyclicals, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI and *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II offered some new ground. This resulted in three lines of thought:

- Mission is a participation in the *Missio Dei*. By its very nature, the Church is in mission because it participates in God’s mission, God’s reaching out to humankind. It is ultimately the God of all peoples who calls the disciple-community and it is the same God in Jesus who accompanies us on this mission.
- Mission is a *proclamation of the Gospel* and an invitation to conversion in terms of Baptism and joining the Church. I have some problem with this understanding of mission, especially in Asia where we see or have to see mission in terms of dialogue. On the other hand, a dialogue is only meaningful if we bring to this dialogue the Gospel and our conviction that we received liberation and salvation in Jesus, crucified and Risen. Others, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Muslim is supposed to do the same for his own beliefs.
- Mission as *liberating service to the Reign of God* is a vision that was strongly supported by the FABC for the Asian context. As members of the Church, Christians and religious have to immerse themselves in the Asian reality and as disciples witness by their life to Jesus of Nazareth, work for justice, peace and harmony among the peoples of Asia. Mission should start from below, from discipleship that tells the still story of Jesus. Because of the Asian context, explicit proclamation mostly ends up in proselytism that becomes a counter-witness. The Churches of Asia have to “discover and live their own identity”, as communities of disciples of Jesus, or “they will have no future” (FAPA I, 70). But in pluralistic Asia this identity will always be that of a “little flock” in the sea of diverse religious and cultures. It is a *Missio Inter Gentes* that allows our Master, Jesus of Nazareth, to enter into dialogue with the Asian reality of poverty, cultures and religious.

In conclusion, I should like to give an example of such a dialogue with Jesus, told by Anthony de Mello. In his story, Jesus meets a “proclaimer” of the Good News. Jesus can be very naughty! A Christian once visited a Zen master. “Allow me to read to you some sentences from the Sermon on the Mount”. “I shall listen with pleasure”, said the master. The Christian read a few sentences and looked up. The master smiled and said, “Whoever said those words was truly enlightened”. This pleased the Christian. He read on. The master interrupted and said, “Those words come from the Saviour of humankind”. The Christian was thrilled. He continued to read to the end. The master then said, “The sermon was pronounced by someone who was radiant with divinity”. The Christian’s joy knew no bounds. He left, determined to return and persuade the master to become a Christian. On the way back home, he found Jesus standing by the roadside. “Lord”, he said enthusiastically, “I got that man to confess that you are divine”. Jesus smiled and said, “And what good did it do you, except to inflate your Christian ego?” (*Amen*).

Conclusion

I have tried to describe the road that religious will probably have to follow in the coming years. In our fast changing world and Church, we can only present a very tentative trajectory for the future of religious life. On this road religious will have to move towards a new praxis. According to Chittister, we are confronted with seven issues in this new praxis:

1. Viability by our willingness to rebuild religious life from scratch. In order to bring the Reign of God now, we have to face the issues I mentioned, the issues of globalization and the issues of Asia (“a triple dialogue”),
2. Face the issue of the value of religious life itself: how to be come fully alive to the will of God, to the Reign,
3. Face the issues of the institutional Church,
4. Face the womens’s issues,
5. Face the issue of new ministries (the homeless, the desperate the victims of violence, etc.),
6. The need of a new spirituality, discarding a privatized spirituality,
7. The question of value definition: the new virtues we need in our contemporary world.

The Congress on Religious Life, held in Rome in 2004, suggested we develop seven contemporary virtues on our journey. “The following of Jesus which we intend to realize through consecrated life in our time calls forth in us certain attitudes to which we have given the symbolic title of ‘seven contemporary virtues’. With these, we assume the new face of consecrated life as ‘a sacrament and parable of the Reign of God’”.

1. Depth: Gospel discernment and authenticity
2. Hospitality and gratitude
3. Non-violence, meekness, loving kindness
4. Liberty and spirit
5. Boldness and creativity
6. Tolerance and dialogue
7. Simplicity: Valuing the resources of the poor and despised