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St. Scholastica's Priory

Manila

Dear Sisters,

The message of the readings for the first Sunday in August is summarized by the phrase: - VANITY OF VANITIES AND ALL IS VANITY. The two things which the readings referred to by this phrase are: WORK (first reading, Ecclesiastes, 1, 2) and POSSESSIONS (Lk: 12, 13-21). Actually WORK and POSSESSIONS are themselves good but it is a fact that these could be made escape mechanisms for spiritual meaninglessness and barrenness.

When I was in the U.S. and saw my relatives and other Filipinos holding two or three jobs almost having no time for family, I asked them: Are you working to live or are you living to work? In the convent, we could use work to escape the emptiness of our souls, to prop up our low self-esteem, and to compensate for our loneliness. Many begin to identify their worth with their work or position so that when they have to retire, they feel bereft, "put on the shelf:" and loss of self-esteem. It is putting priority on WHAT I DO over WHAT I AM. And Ecclesiastes comments: "I considered all I had achieved by my work and all the toil it had entailed and found that it was all meaningless and chasing wind!"

With regards to riches and possessions, the Gospel narrates the story of the rich man who amassed wealth and riches but God called him before he could enjoy any of it. When Romulo Neri told Jun: "Moderate their greed", Jun realized that greed cannot be moderated. The more one has, the more insatiable one becomes. Maybe we don't have this extreme case in the convent. But don't we all feel the urge to possess, to acquire, to collect, to be attached to the material things we use?

As we reflect on these manifestations of attachment, we pray for the grace of detachment, of surrender, of really preferring nothing to the love of Christ.

Sincerely yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

125TH JUBILEE STATIO CONFERENCE

Conversatio Morum **- Vow and Mission-** **By: SEOUL PRIORY**

These days many religious congregations are going through confusing crisis situations feeling threats that are big and small, within and without. The problems the congregations have can be categorized into three aspects: first the laxity of monastic spirit, secondly decrease of vocations in number, thirdly economic independence. When we look at them closely we realize these three are linked into one. The wisdom of traditional monastic teaching tells that when one is faithful to the monastic discipline the way it should be, the problems of vocation and finance naturally are solved. This means that being faithful to our disciplined life is the most important thing. The degradation of monastic life always had begun by neglecting the source of evangelical solitude and poverty.

Our Constitution says: "By our profession of *conversatio morum* we oblige ourselves to live as religious according to the Rule of St. Benedict and our Constitution." (Const.202) We who decided to live a life as religious according to the Rule and Constitution and made vows before God and Saints, have no other choice of life. Nonetheless our steps are not stable and often stagger and run about in confusion. Materialism and individualism permeate our monastic life, and in no time we seek convenience and indolence which is far from evangelical poverty. Also individualism grows. The voice of renewal of religious life goes up. Therefore we need to reflect on the vows and examine our lives accordingly.

The vow of *Conversatio Morum* is a concrete and radical evangelical life which includes all the discipline religious pursue. By making the vow one promises to accept the monastic way of life, renouncing the worldly way of life of the past. It means to get away from the worldly things and change one's whole life by dynamic and unceasing effort till death. We should replace worldly desire, comfort, pleasure, property, carnal desires by humility, poverty, chastity, and renouncement. It is a promise to engage oneself in seeking God by untiring prayer and fraternal service of love. In the process of seeking God, one is led to unceasing repentance and inner renewal, and this fits monastic life.

In other words, monastic life is living Christ's paschal mystery. Jesus went to the Father through His death, and it is the model of the monastic life flowing throughout the whole of the Holy Rule. Therefore living monastic life as it should be is a choice of the paschal mystery. It is accepting personally the death and resurrection of Jesus and descent of Holy Spirit. Monastic life is directed to share the suffering of Christ, and this implies that we share already on earth the everlasting paschal life. Thus we see our vow of *Conversatio Morum* is a way of making Christ's paschal mystery visible in this life; we come to realize what it means to be religious and what we hope to become.

The life of a monastic is a pilgrim and a process which requires time. Therefore Benedictine faithfulness and ascetical struggle go on throughout the whole lifetime. We need to persevere till death because it is a process. *Conversatio* is not complete at the moment of making the vow, it is dying to a false-self and rising in the life of Christ. Likewise to live *Conversatio Morum* by profession, one becomes a grain of wheat that falls on the ground and breaks and dies every day and every moment for oneself and for others.

Lastly, let us consider the relationships between the vow and our apostolic summons. One can gradually reach the fullness of evangelical life and a perfect love by living the vow faithfully. Then such a life itself is spreading the Gospel and becomes a symbol of the kingdom of God to come. Constitution 513 says: "Whatever service a sister may do within the community, she is contributing to and responsible for the common task of evangelization. Our ailing and elderly sisters participate effectively in our mission by their prayers and their suffering borne in patience." Even though she is not sent to mission, when she lives the life the way it should be - wherever she is and whatever she does - she is taking a part in mission.

Father Amrhein also writes in his constitution draft that everybody ought to contribute to mission or for the house of mission by his personal service. When he lives the right law with right spirit, God's blessings are bestowed upon him. They should work for the love of God, and hope for their reward from Him. One should be prepared to do anything, sometimes he should be resolved to do the meanest work and unfamiliar tasks.

When things are hard, we should not despair or criticize or complain. It is a chance to show that we are brave, constant and eager workers. We, who are moved by love of God, find joy in working for Him, and such a joy becomes a sign of true missionary vocation.

Let us take this time of various crisis situations we are facing individually or in community as whole as a good opportunity and pray, asking God's mercy, that he enkindle in us the flame of true repentance and renewal.

Guide Questions for Reflection:

1. How does the worldly surge of materialism and individualism affect our religious life?
2. What do you think it means to live Christ's paschal mystery in our vowed life?
3. Where in the Holy Rule can you find Christ's paschal mystery strongly suggested?
4. What do you think it means to live the vows faithfully in our concrete everyday life?

Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society

By: Prof. Rita Noronha

(EXCERPTS)

I. The Catholic Church and the Women's Question: Sources of Inspiration

The sources of inspiration for the Church to seek change in the subordinate situation of women are many.

1. Time of Jesus, Early Christian Traditions and Women

The movement of women's empowerment could definitely be traced to Jesus for whom the empowerment against all forms of bondage, poverty, suffering, disease, untouchability, sexual slavery and adultery, was a priority. The women who associated with Jesus were empowered women; they collaborated with Jesus as equals and participated in his table fellowship. Many women were collaborators in the movement initiated by Jesus. They accompanied him during his public ministry along with his male disciples. The women were the first apostles to build communities of believers through their proclamation (Samaritan woman). They were the first witnesses of the Resurrection. The early Christian women showed exemplary courage in bearing witness to Christ in the face of persecution. They not only preached the Gospel, but also established house churches. Christianity attracted women because it enabled them to overcome entrenched patriarchal taboos, judgmental attitudes and the biases of the Jewish religion/society. Christianity reasserted the dignity of women as worthy persons. In its long history the Church has been peopled with powerful women, military leaders, judges, chatelaines and controllers of property, many of whom are revered as Saints.

2. Social Teachings of the Universal Church

Time and again the Church has emphasized the need to reassert the dignity of women in the Church and society, and has called upon all the Church bodies, at the global, national or local levels, to contribute to the process of enabling women to realize their full potential. Since the early 1960s, the Social Teaching of the Church (STC) has expressed ever more clearly the Church's understanding of the vocation of women in society and the Church. While denouncing the terrible and manifold oppression of women, the STC has highlighted the positive contribution of women throughout history. Considering the growing awareness of women as a "sign of the times" (*Pacem in Terris*, n. 41) and the process of women's liberation as substantially positive (JOHN PAUL II, 1995, *Letter to Women*, n. 6), the Church has proclaimed the essential equality of all human beings and condemned every type of discrimination (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 29). She recognized women's equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social and political life" (*Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 13, 14 May 1971) and welcomed their indispensable participation in the Church's life and ministry (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 9, and *Justice in the World*, n. 42, 31 August 1975). Pointing out that human "conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women" and "has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity", John Paul II affirmed the need for an

effective campaign for the dignity and promotion of women in all areas of life, for this is “a part of God’s plan for humanity” (*Letter to Women*, n. 3 and n. 6).

3. Action Oriented Contributions to Women’s Development/Empowerment

Ever since a secular and open education was promoted by the missionaries in early times, the Church-related institutions have been in the forefront of providing opportunities for education (formal and non-formal) to women of all communities, particularly Christians. Many girl children from all castes and communities were able to gain access to education for the first time in schools run by missionaries. This has contributed significantly to the development of women. The Church’s health care networks are also present in various parts of the country. As a result many women, leaders, educators, professionals, activists and initiators of other social services (both Christian and others), have emerged. Through the developmental interventions, Church bodies have focused upon promoting the organization of marginalized women and men (jointly or singly), and have facilitated their visibility and active role in tackling issues related to their economic deprivation and social marginalization. Church-inspired initiatives have contributed to the active participation of marginalized women in local self-governance. Innovative services initiated and sustained by the Church and related religious and secular groups (including those under women’s leadership) for the welfare, development and promotion of health care among women have received public recognition. Church leaders, both religious and lay (women and men), have also taken a stand against human rights (inclusive of women’s rights) violations and have inspired many others to join in this process. The Women’s Commission at the CBCI level, and women’s commissions, desks and councils at the regional and diocesan levels have played a major role in keeping the question of women alive.

4. Feminist Theology: The Insurrection of Suppressed Memories

Influenced by the divergent feminist movements and perspectives that have emerged in the northern and the southern nations of the world, women and men feminist theologians have sought to unearth the dimension of theology that have elements of liberation. Feminist theology questions some of the premises of conventional theology which did not recognize full humanity to women as persons created along with men in the image of the divine. It questions the patriarchal appropriation of the Scriptures and traditions and the distortions that have entered into the theological, liturgical (prayers, hymns) and canonical sources, the biological essentialism or determinism that permeate the conventional theological discourse, leading to the prioritization of the mother and wife roles of women to the exclusion of her other roles and responsibilities as partners in building a more humane and just Church and society. It also criticizes the perceptions that see the women’s role as being complementary to men’s and take the male as the norm driving women to the margins; the concentration in the hands of men of the leadership or decision making/resource control and allocation roles in Church-based institutions, while allocating to women the subordinate roles of nurturers, care givers, unpaid or lowly paid workers, and other forms of discrimination, behaviorally and systematically manifested in the Church and in society at many levels. It seeks to end the marginalization, discrimination and exclusion (silence and invisibility) to which the women (religious/lay) have been subjected in the Catholic Church.

Such a critique has naturally provoked a lot of defensive reactions from those who think feminist theology goes against the traditions and conventions of the Church universal and indigenous culture. However, by openness to these 'women-centric perceptions' the voices from the margins nurture a healthier dialogical climate that benefits the Church and society immensely.

II. The Contemporary Scenario of Gender Relations

We live in an increasingly globalized world. In order to understand the context of the subordination of women in particular and gender inequalities in general, it is necessary to look at the global and national *scenarios* in this regard.

1. The Emerging Global Picture

Research studies and many narratives of recent lived experiences with some hunting and food-gathering groups, small scale- pre-industrial societies and other Adivasi or indigenous people, on various continents, reveal that many of these societies are characterized by an egalitarian cooperation and sharing. Egalitarian gender relations were seen not only between men and women but also among women and men as groups. There were virtually no reports of domestic violence among them. Further, there is evidence that the economically developed northern countries of Europe, those that have attained a higher degree of income equality (i.e. Sweden, Norway), show a higher status of women in relation to men. Those countries where there is high economic inequality (e.g., US and England) manifest not only higher levels of gender disparity, but also high levels of social inequality between and within various ethnic (race, kinship, religion and nationality based) groups. In short, there is evidence to show that in those societies where there is a dominant male hierarchy, there is more domination over women, whereas in more egalitarian, sociable societies where physical power, position and authority count less, the women's status is showing improvement.

However, generally in various countries of the world, many women face some form of discrimination as a subordinated sex group. Various international conferences (Vienna, 1993, Cairo, 1994, Copenhagen, 1994, Beijing, 1995, Beijing and New York, 2005) have highlighted the gross forms of discrimination against, and atrocities on, women that are prevalent in many nations across the world. Statistics show that the killing of women, though it exists in various forms the world over, is quite high in countries such as China, India, Korea, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Sexual and domestic violence have deep roots in many mainstream northern as well as southern cultures. Asian men settlers abroad (in the U.S. and England) have been found to be among the most violent wife abusers in the developed countries. Housework continues to be least shared. The use of women's bodies (increasingly that of men's too) as sex objects or commodities in ads and films, pornography especially child pornography, child sex abuse and teenage girl pregnancies are emerging as issues of concern in the developed countries. The increasing rates of divorce and marital conflict and the resultant effects on child and adult mental health are also a manifestation of the social crisis that is facing the Western world. The trafficking of women and girls for sex and slavery is another issue with a global dimension. Positions of governance in political

institutions such as parliaments, cabinets and high level government departments and the judiciary, continue to be predominantly in the hands of men in most countries. The exceptions are countries such as Norway, which are deliberately moving in the direction of an equitable representation of women in governmental structures/cabinets and legislatures and an equal access to education and jobs.

The contribution of women throughout history, and at present, to various fields such as agriculture, crafts, science, community building, freedom struggles, ecology and human rights movements and peace building, health care and healing is not adequately recognized. Their life sustaining knowledge and experience remain sidelined. There is evidence to show that the credit for the scientific discoveries made by women have been reaped by some male scientists including Nobel laureates. The mainstream knowledge of human sciences, technologies and professional disciplines (engineering, medicine, management, psychiatry, social work, law and environmental studies) continues to be rooted in patriarchy.

However, it is heartening to note that there is some awakening at the global level. An increasing number of women and men are questioning injustices committed against women and especially against people of the marginalized groups. There is a growing realization that if there is inclusive/equitable sustainable development, then there will be justice, peace and good health for all. An immense amount of feminist work in all fields of human knowledge inclusive of history, literature, sociology, anthropology and psychology is beginning to be recognized.

III. The Forces Behind Gender Inequality

1. Complexity of interrelated causes/sustains gender inequality

There are multiple interrelated causes responsible for gender discrimination/inequality. In patriarchal societies, patriarchy is at the root of gender discrimination, especially the subordination of women. Patriarchal or male-headed institution, male pro-culture and gender identifies (men and women) sustain and perpetuate gender discrimination. The three dimensions that sustain and perpetuate patriarchy leading to discrimination against women are shown in the diagram below (are further clarified in this section).

Causes of Gender Inequality

Patriarchal Power that Works Through Strategies

Within Culture

Within Institutions

Patriarchy or patriarchal culture Ideas, Myths, Theories and	Male dominant patterned or structured relations (Roles/positions, Rules, Resources, outcome)
Perspectives, Customs, rules, regulations, laws	Marriage Family Economics
Linguistic concepts and statements	Political parties, Governmental institutions
Behavioral expressions/ actions Practices, Rituals, objects	Educational, Religious, Health, Sports, Scientific/ technological, Professional (Research/academic) and civil society (non-profit) agencies

To be continued.....