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St. Scholastica's Priory  
Manila

Dear Sisters,

The readings of the First Sunday in September are all about the love of neighbor. But they focus on a seldom discussed aspect of this love namely: fraternal or sororal correction. When we think of love of neighbor, we think of being kind, doing good things, caring, affirming, encouraging, etc. But here, we are reminded that we are our "brother's/sister's keeper" in the sense of turning him/her from his/her evil way (First Reading, Ex.33, 9) and in Mt. 16-15-20 which is the second reading, an actual process of correction is suggested beginning with a one to one talk, then asking others for help and finally taking recourse to authority and to prayer. Superiors will tell you that one of their most difficult duties is to correct a Sister. And yet it is a part of caring to help someone to find his or her way back to the right path. When I was not a Superior, I never corrected anybody unless I truly have an affection for her, because I know if I don't like somebody, correction will be an ego - trip. But sometimes the best person to bring back someone to his/her senses is a peer, especially someone who is considered a friend. I think this is behind the "synpectae" which St. Benedict would send to an erring brother when he has just admonished him. We do not want to have "universal novice mistresses" among us who correct everybody with self righteousness. But it certainly is a blessing if we have a friend who can be forthright with us who can tell us about our blind spots with sincerity and genuine concern. And sometimes when decisions to do the right thing is especially difficult, we are fortunate if we have someone who will pray with us and Christ assures us that where "two or three are gathered in His name, he is in the midst of them." I had once a very difficult decision to make when I was in Rome. Sr. Kunigundis and I made adoration after Compline about it and that is why I will never forget her for that act of real sisterhood. I hope each of you have such a friend.

Sincerely yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

# STATIO CONFERENCE

## FAITH

By: Sr. Ruth F. Bartonico, OSB

### **Faith: A Human Experience**

Does one need religion in order to have faith?

“In truth and in fact, faith is a significant factor in every human life because we all need to believe in something to make life meaningful and manageable. We cannot foresee the future, and therefore cannot know in advance whether our decision will be the right one. Since finding absolute certitude in every aspect of life is impossible, we must have some form of faith to keep our psychological balance or we might become neurotic. Faith, therefore, is our constant human companion.” (Ian Knox, *Theology for Teachers*, p. 17)

Just recently an issue of the *Time Magazine* published an article entitled, “Optimism Bias: Humans May be Hardwired for Hope (*printed with this statio conference*) by Tali Sharot. The article is part of a book written by the author about her study on the “brain’s innate optimism.” The article opens with the following:

“We like to think of ourselves as rational creatures. We watch our backs, weigh the odds, and pack an umbrella. But both neuroscience and social science suggest that we are more optimistic than realistic. On average, we expect things to turn out better than they wind up being. People hugely underestimate their chances of getting divorced, losing their job or being diagnosed with cancer; expect their children to be extraordinarily gifted; envision themselves achieving more than their peers; and overestimate their likely life span (sometimes by 20 years or more).

The belief that the future will be much better than the past and present is known as the optimism bias. It abides in every race, region and socioeconomic bracket. Schoolchildren playing when-I-grow-up are rampant optimists, but so are grownups: a 2005 study found that adults over 60 are just as likely to see the glass half full as young adults.

You might expect optimism to erode under the tide of news about violent conflicts, high unemployment, tornadoes and floods and all the threats and failures that shape human life. Collectively we can grow pessimistic — about the direction of our country or the ability of our leaders to improve education and reduce crime. But private optimism, about our personal future, remains incredibly resilient. A survey conducted in 2007 found that while 70% thought families in general were less successful than in their parents' day, 76% of respondents were optimistic about the future of their own family.

Overly positive assumptions can lead to disastrous miscalculations — make us less likely to get health checkups, apply sunscreen or open a savings account, and more likely to bet the farm on a bad investment. But the bias also protects and inspires us: it keeps us moving forward rather than to the nearest high-rise ledge. Without optimism, our

ancestors might never have ventured far from their tribes and we might all be cave dwellers, still huddled together and dreaming of light and heat.

To make progress, we need to be able to imagine alternative realities — better ones — and we need to believe that we can achieve them. Such faith helps motivate us to pursue our goals.”

The introduction of the article ends with this positive note.

“In fact, a growing body of scientific evidence points to the conclusion that optimism may be hardwired by evolution into the human brain. The science of optimism, once scorned as an intellectually suspect province of pep rallies and smiley faces, is opening a new window on the workings of human consciousness. What it shows could fuel a revolution in psychology, as the field comes to grips with accumulating evidence that our brains aren't just stamped by the past. They are constantly being shaped by the future.”

The above scientific evidence is good news to the modern mind that seems to be losing its sense of the transcendence. There is hope in the capacity of humankind to save itself from the incredulity and idiocy of human actions that may lead humanity to disastrous wars and irreversible ecological disaster. We need this faith in order to strengthen our resolve to forge a better future for our world and for the future generation. In the words of U.S. President Obama's campaign battle cry: “YES, WE CAN!” We need this resolute faith in what humans can do.

### **Our Christian Faith**

It is to be emphasized, however, that there is a difference between ordinary human faith and religious faith, namely, the object of the faith. “The object of religious faith is not something, but *someone* who relates to us and to whom we can relate in a personal way” (Knox, p.17). We call the object of our faith: GOD, who revealed himself to us, has spoken to us, and who has been present with us in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. This is what makes our faith unique. Hence, Christian faith is believing in the God revealed by Jesus Christ, who wants to share his eternal life with us and “whose power, working us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20) - transforming our daily thoughts, hopes, attitudes and values (cf. CFC 137).

By God's Revelation (Jesus), “the invisible God, from the fullness of his love addresses humankind as his friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company” (cf. Dei Verbum 2), thus, bringing each one of us into a personal relationship with God. It is Jesus, who spoke in human language, who revealed to us “how extraordinarily rich God is in grace” that saves us through faith ((Eph 2:7, 8).

By his life, Jesus revealed to us what it means to be human – God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do (Eph. 2:9, 10). It is not presumptuous therefore to say that we are not here in this world by accident. The scripture affirms that God chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and faultless before him in love (Eph 1:4). He has lavished on us all the things we need for life and for true devotion,

through the knowledge of him who has called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Pt. 1:3)  
These scripture truths are neatly captured by Pope Benedict VI in one of his homilies:

We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution.

Each of us is the result of a thought of God.

Each of us is willed,

Each of us is loved,

Each of us is necessary.

It is important to realize that our understanding of “who we really are” is vital in the maturing of our faith, manifested in our daily actions. That is why to the misbehaving Christians in Corinth, St. Paul had these words: “Put yourselves to the test to make sure you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Do you not recognize yourselves as people in whom Jesus Christ is present?” (2Cor. 13:5)

### **Faith: A Gift, yet our Doing (CFC 149)**

One of the paradoxes of faith is that it is “a gift, yet our doing.”

On the one hand, faith is a gift. Jesus tells us, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me.” And St. Paul in his first Letter to the Corinthians reminds us, “Nobody is able to say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.”

On the other hand, faith is also a task. Peter’s second letter tells us to “do your utmost to support your faith with goodness” (2 Pt. 5). In the same way, St. James warns: “Faith: if good deeds do not go with it, it is quite dead!”

### **Faith-in-Action**

The August 1 issue of the Philippine Daily Inquirer had on its front page a featured commentary on the recent Ninth International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society held in Miami, Florida. In that conference, Dr. Harold Ivan Smith who spoke about terror management theory, presented the paper, “Lady in Yellow: Corazon Aquino as a Role Model for Widows. Here are excerpts:

Smith cited the role of faith and prayer in Cory’s resilience. “One cannot understand how she managed death anxiety without assessing the influence of her catholic faith and spirituality.”

“The world witnessed a courageous widow who took faith seriously, and prevailed as President,” he stressed, adding he admired how she “balanced” grief and death anxiety.

**Cory, who died of colon cancer on August 1, 2009, at the age of 76, truly lived her faith and in the process restored hope in a nation that had grown tired, restless and hopeless from 20 years of corruption and oppression, he added. (*emphasis mine*)**

Those who attend to the grieving would also need to explore the role of faith and spirituality in their work. “Given the impact of religion and spirituality on death anxiety, clinicians must respect (a person’s) spiritual experience.” *By Cathy S. Babao Guballa*

The magnitude of influence of Cory’s lived-faith once again reminds us of the power of an authentic witnessing in spreading the good news of our Christian faith. Cory’s lived- faith has brought to us in the flesh what the scripture has been telling us: our faith in Jesus opens our eyes to see what hope God’s call holds for the believers, the richness of the glory of the heritage God offers among his people, and how extraordinarily great is the power that God has exercised for those who believe in Him (Eph. 1:18,19).

### **The Love of Christ Impels Us...**

*Conscious of being sent by the Lord  
to bring the Good News of salvation to all strata of humanity,  
we seek to lead people to faith in Jesus Christ  
and communion with the Loving Father. (Constitutions V.1)*

While preparing for this statio conference I found a book, written by Kathleen Norris, in our library. The book’s title is, *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith*. In the preface, Norris made a reference of Mallarmé who pointed out that “like a poem which is not made out of ideas but of words, faith does not conform itself to ideology but to experience.” This resonates with what our Church teaches about faith: “Christian faith is more than a set of truths to be believed; *it is the way of Christ which leads to life* (CFC674, cf. CCC1696). Norris, thus in her book, narrates short personal anecdotes of how she rediscovered her faith and how she finds new meaning to formulaic words, such as eschatology, salvation, heaven, etc., that are being used in Christianity in her ordinary day-to-day life and in her encounters with others. Here is an excerpt from the chapter on Incarnation:

“The power of the Lord Most High will overshadow you; *therefore*, the child will be called Son of God.” (*emphasis mine.*) Mary says very little, and she says it simply: “Here am I,” and “let it be.”

The angel’s “therefore” seems alarmingly significant, the seed of what Christian theologians have for well over a thousand years termed the scandal of the Incarnation. It also resonates with my own life. When a place or time seems touched by God, it is an overshadowing, a sudden eclipsing of my priorities and plans. But even in terrible circumstances and calamities, in matters of life and death, if I sense that I am in the shadow of God, I find light, so much light that my vision improves dramatically. I know that holiness is near.

And it is not robed in majesty. It does not assert itself with the raw power of empire (not even the little empire of the self in which I too often reside), but it waits in puzzlement, it hesitates. Coming from Galilee, as it were, from a place of little hope, it reveals the ordinary circumstances of my life to be full of mystery, and gospel, which means “good news.” (Kathleen Norris, p. 31)

Our religious vocation enjoins us to be “shepherds” of faith; but to be credible witnesses it is essential that we get in touch, first, with our own faith-life to be able to “speak about faith with authority.”

Our first encounter with the truths of our faith is the Creed.

Unfortunately, many of us were taught only to memorize it; but our catechism teaches us that they are “saving, liberating truths” (CFC 227, c. NCDP 172-79). What do these descriptions of the Creed mean to you? How have you experienced them in your Christian life?

In what aspect of your faith-life do you still need to grow?

**Full trust in the goodness of the Lord = humility and willingness “to be sent”**

*“You see before you the Lord’s servant; let it happen to me as you have said.” (Lk. 1:37,38)*

**Believing in God’s Power working in “Me and in Others” = courage and strength in overcoming the tendency to wallow in self-pity, insecurity, and other forms of paralyzing fears, and being an encouraging presence to others especially to co-sisters**

*“My grace is enough for you: for power is at full stretch in weakness. And that is why I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions and distress for Christ’s sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong,” (2Cor. 12: 9,10)*

*“I have been crucified with Christ and yet I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ is living in me. The life that I am now living, subject to the limitations of human nature, I am living in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”(Gal. 2: 20)*

**Encountering the Living God in the Scriptures = being “excited” for Lectio and for the Divine Office, consistent and persevering in waiting**

*The Canaanite (Syro-phoenician) woman pleading to Jesus for the healing of her daughter. (Mt. 15:21-28)*

**God’s Healing and Mercy = wisdom and fortitude**

*“Sir, do not put yourself to any trouble because I am not worthy to have you under my roof; and that is why I did not presume to come to you myself; let my boy be cured by your giving the word.” (Lk. 7:6,7)*

*“Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word and I shall be healed.”*

How do you see your day-to-day life with the “eyes of faith?” What are your transformative, life changing faith experiences?

One of the tasks of catechesis in faith is to clarify some misconceptions about it. **Faith is not simply a “leap in the dark.” Our Christian faith is grounded on a solid foundation namely, God’s words in the Scripture.** And therefore, if we want to grow genuinely in our Christian faith, it is important that we know and understand the Scriptures like the back of our hands, so to speak. To grow in knowledge is not simply an intuitive and age-old wisdom but bears a scientific stamp as suggested by the author of the study which I mentioned at the beginning of this conference.

“The question then is, how can we remain hopeful — benefiting from the fruits of optimism — while at the same time guarding ourselves from its pitfalls?

I believe knowledge is the key. We are not born with an innate understanding of our biases. The brain's illusions have to be identified by careful scientific observation and controlled experiments and then communicated to the rest of us.”

In other words, we need to be open to the many ways by which we can grow in our Christian faith. We live in the world of the “wired” generation that is awe-struck by the marvels of science and technology. Likewise, we cannot deny that science has helped us understand more and more the wisdom of the human body and psyche. With this in mind, perhaps it is about time to look into and evaluate the gains of science in enlightening our faith and in finding out how can these be effectively utilized in our communication with the young generation in regard to the Christian faith. This is in fact in line with the message of Blessed John Paul II in his address to the scientists in 1980.

“The claim to truth of science based on rationality is recognized; in fact it is accepted in its contents, completed, corrected and developed in its independent rationality. And precisely in this way it becomes the property of the Christian world....For there can be no fundamental conflict between a reason which, in conformity with its own nature which comes from God, is geared to truth and is qualified to know truth, and a faith which refers to the same divine source of all truth.” (The Christian Faith, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., art.164.)

We, Benedictines, are very lucky indeed that our spirituality is soaked with many ways by which we can grow in an authentic Christian faith. First and foremost of these is the *Lectio Divina* where we can fully immerse ourselves in the words and Spirit of our Triune God. Let us pray that we may never be tempted to compromise with anything less our desire to grow in faith, hope and in love of God in *Lectio Divina*.

*O God, we pray for a more enlightened faith. May our faith-response to your invitation lead us to a genuine conversion so that “as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with inexpressible delight of love.*

To end, let me share with you a poem. (*It is good if you can translate it in your own dialect.*)

Faith -- is the Pierless Bridge  
Supporting what We see  
Unto the Scene that We do not --  
Too slender for the eye

It bears the Soul as bold  
As it were rocked in Steel  
With Arms of Steel at either side --  
It joins -- behind the Veil

To what, could We presume  
The Bridge would cease to be  
To Our far, vacillating Feet  
A first Necessity.

By : Emily Dickinson

To the world at large, faith seems to have no basis in reality, no visible means of support. And yet it connects us, supports us, when we need to move from the present reality, pleasant or unpleasant, agreeable or shocking, to what is not for us real. In that way, faith can carry us from the here and now to the eternal, to the unseen, but it can also carry us to the future here on earth when things will be different. Sometimes we need to be able to envision that in order to go on.

We are told by Ms. Dickinson that faith is not substantial in the real world; the eye cannot perceive it because of its lack of substance. Yet it is as solid as a bridge made of steel. It bears our spiritual selves to where we need to go spiritually with the utmost solidity, as in a steel cradle, supported with the sturdiest steel arms, like solid, secure railings that will not let that cradle fall off the bridge.

She finally tells us in the ultimate sentence, quite elegantly, that the bridge of faith takes us to something far beyond our sight, something that, if we could simply presume its truth – the way we absolutely know Paris is in France and France is in Europe, even if we've never been there -- we wouldn't need the bridge at all. There is a circular closure to this poem. If we could hold as a given the place where faith takes us, we wouldn't need faith at all. We never would have. But we can't presume. Until we reach the destination in reality, faith will remain the pierless bridge, invisible but solid.

(see <http://www.eliteskills.com/c/7002>)

*Faith is man's obedient response to God's revelation (n. 13). By faith man accepts the truth of Christ's revelation which is guaranteed by God. Because an act of faith involves freely entrusting oneself to God and freely assenting to His revelation, it has a moral dimension. Preceded by the gift of grace and assisted by the Holy Spirit, it is an act of both the mind and the will. "Men and women can accomplish no more important act in their lives than the act of faith; it is here that freedom reaches the certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth" (n. 13).*

(John Fagan, derived from Fides at Ratio, see  
<http://catholiceducation.org/articles/education/ed0294.htm>)

AMEN!

## THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD MAY BE GLORIFIED!

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<http://catholiceducation.org/articles/education/ed0294.htm>

## The Optimism Bias

By TALI SHAROT



We like to think of ourselves as rational creatures. We watch our backs, weigh the odds, pack an umbrella. But both neuroscience and social science suggest that we are more optimistic than realistic. On average, we expect things to turn out better than they wind up being. People hugely underestimate their chances of getting divorced, losing their job or being diagnosed with cancer; expect their children to be extraordinarily gifted; envision themselves achieving more than their peers; and overestimate their likely life span (sometimes by 20 years or more).

The belief that the future will be much better than the past and present is known as the optimism bias. It abides in every race, region and socioeconomic bracket. Schoolchildren playing when-I-grow-up are rampant optimists, but so are grownups: a 2005 study found that adults over 60 are just as likely to see the glass half full as young adults.

You might expect optimism to erode under the tide of news about violent conflicts, high unemployment, tornadoes and floods and all the threats and failures that shape human life. Collectively we can grow pessimistic — about the direction of our country or the ability of our

leaders to improve education and reduce crime. But private optimism, about our personal future, remains incredibly resilient. A survey conducted in 2007 found that while 70% thought families in general were less successful than in their parents' day, 76% of respondents were optimistic about the future of their own family.

Overly positive assumptions can lead to disastrous miscalculations — make us less likely to get health checkups, apply sunscreen or open a savings account, and more likely to bet the farm on a bad investment. But the bias also protects and inspires us: it keeps us moving forward rather than to the nearest high-rise ledge. Without optimism, our ancestors might never have ventured far from their tribes and we might all be cave dwellers, still huddled together and dreaming of light and heat.

To make progress, we need to be able to imagine alternative realities — better ones — and we need to believe that we can achieve them. Such faith helps motivate us to pursue our goals. Optimists in general work longer hours and tend to earn more. Economists at Duke University found that optimists even save more. And although they are not less likely to divorce, they are more likely to remarry — an act that is, as Samuel Johnson wrote, the triumph of hope over experience.

Even if that better future is often an illusion, optimism has clear benefits in the present. Hope keeps our minds at ease, lowers stress and improves physical health. Researchers studying heart-disease patients found that optimists were more likely than non-optimistic patients to take vitamins, eat low-fat diets and exercise, thereby reducing their overall coronary risk. A study of cancer patients revealed that pessimistic patients under the age of 60 were more likely to die within eight months than non-pessimistic patients of the same initial health, status and age.

In fact, a growing body of scientific evidence points to the conclusion that optimism may be hardwired by evolution into the human brain. The science of optimism, once scorned as an intellectually suspect province of pep rallies and smiley faces, is opening a new window on the workings of human consciousness. What it shows could fuel a revolution in psychology, as the field comes to grips with accumulating evidence that our brains aren't just stamped by the past. They are constantly being shaped by the future.

### **Hardwired for Hope?**

I would have liked to tell you that my work on optimism grew out of a keen interest in the positive side of human nature. The reality is that I stumbled onto the brain's innate optimism by accident. After living through Sept. 11, 2001, in New York City, I had set out to investigate people's memories of the terrorist attacks. I was intrigued by the fact that people felt their memories were as accurate as a videotape, while often they were filled with errors. A survey conducted around the country showed that 11 months after the attacks, individuals' recollections of their experience that day were consistent with their initial accounts (given in September 2011) only 63% of the time. They were also poor at remembering details of the event, such as the names of the airline carriers. Where did these mistakes in memory come from?

Scientists who study memory proposed an intriguing answer: memories are susceptible to inaccuracies partly because the neural system responsible for remembering episodes from our

past might not have evolved for memory alone. Rather, the core function of the memory system could in fact be to imagine the future — to enable us to prepare for what has yet to come. The system is not designed to perfectly replay past events, the researchers claimed. It is designed to flexibly construct future scenarios in our minds. As a result, memory also ends up being a reconstructive process, and occasionally, details are deleted and others inserted.

To test this, I decided to record the brain activity of volunteers while they imagined future events — not events on the scale of 9/11, but events in their everyday lives — and compare those results with the pattern I observed when the same individuals recalled past events. But something unexpected occurred. Once people started imagining the future, even the most banal life events seemed to take a dramatic turn for the better. Mundane scenes brightened with upbeat details as if polished by a Hollywood script doctor. You might think that imagining a future haircut would be pretty dull. Not at all. Here is what one of my participants pictured: "I was getting my hair cut to donate to Locks of Love [a charity that fashions wigs for young cancer patients]. It had taken me years to grow it out, and my friends were all there to help celebrate. We went to my favorite hair place in Brooklyn and then went to lunch at our favorite restaurant."

I asked another participant to imagine a plane ride. "I imagined the takeoff — my favorite! — and then the eight-hour-long nap in between and then finally landing in Krakow and clapping for the pilot for providing the safe voyage," she responded. No tarmac delays, no screaming babies. The world, only a year or two into the future, was a wonderful place to live in.

If all our participants insisted on thinking positively when it came to what lay in store for them personally, what does that tell us about how our brains are wired? Is the human tendency for optimism a consequence of the architecture of our brains?

### **The Human Time Machine**

To think positively about our prospects, we must first be able to imagine ourselves in the future. Optimism starts with what may be the most extraordinary of human talents: mental time travel, the ability to move back and forth through time and space in one's mind. Although most of us take this ability for granted, our capacity to envision a different time and place is in fact critical to our survival.

It is easy to see why cognitive time travel was naturally selected for over the course of evolution. It allows us to plan ahead, to save food and resources for times of scarcity and to endure hard work in anticipation of a future reward. It also lets us forecast how our current behavior may influence future generations. If we were not able to picture the world in a hundred years or more, would we be concerned with global warming? Would we attempt to live healthily? Would we have children?

While mental time travel has clear survival advantages, conscious foresight came to humans at an enormous price — the understanding that somewhere in the future, death awaits. Ajit Varki, a biologist at the University of California, San Diego, argues that the awareness of mortality on its own would have led evolution to a dead end. The despair would have interfered with our daily function, bringing the activities needed for survival to a stop. The only way conscious mental time travel could have arisen over the course of evolution is if it emerged together with irrational

optimism. Knowledge of death had to emerge side by side with the persistent ability to picture a bright future.

The capacity to envision the future relies partly on the hippocampus, a brain structure that is crucial to memory. Patients with damage to their hippocampus are unable to recollect the past, but they are also unable to construct detailed images of future scenarios. They appear to be stuck in time. The rest of us constantly move back and forth in time; we might think of a conversation we had with our spouse yesterday and then immediately of our dinner plans for later tonight.

But the brain doesn't travel in time in a random fashion. It tends to engage in specific types of thoughts. We consider how well our kids will do in life, how we will obtain that sought-after job, afford that house on the hill and find perfect love. We imagine our team winning the crucial game, look forward to an enjoyable night on the town or picture a winning streak at the blackjack table. We also worry about losing loved ones, failing at our job or dying in a terrible plane crash — but research shows that most of us spend less time mulling over negative outcomes than we do over positive ones. When we do contemplate defeat and heartache, we tend to focus on how these can be avoided.

Findings from a study I conducted a few years ago with prominent neuroscientist Elizabeth Phelps suggest that directing our thoughts of the future toward the positive is a result of our frontal cortex's communicating with sub-cortical regions deep in our brain. The frontal cortex, a large area behind the forehead, is the most recently evolved part of the brain. It is larger in humans than in other primates and is critical for many complex human functions such as language and goal setting.

Using a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanner, we recorded brain activity in volunteers as they imagined specific events that might occur to them in the future. Some of the events that I asked them to imagine were desirable (a great date or winning a large sum of money), and some were undesirable (losing a wallet, ending a romantic relationship). The volunteers reported that their images of sought-after events were richer and more vivid than those of unwanted events.

This matched the enhanced activity we observed in two critical regions of the brain: the amygdala, a small structure deep in the brain that is central to the processing of emotion, and the rostral anterior cingulate cortex (rACC), an area of the frontal cortex that modulates emotion and motivation. The rACC acts like a traffic conductor, enhancing the flow of positive emotions and associations. The more optimistic a person was, the higher the activity in these regions was while imagining positive future events (relative to negative ones) and the stronger the connectivity between the two structures.

The findings were particularly fascinating because these precise regions — the amygdala and the rACC — show abnormal activity in depressed individuals. While healthy people expect the future to be slightly better than it ends up being, people with severe depression tend to be pessimistically biased: they expect things to be worse than they end up being. People with mild depression are relatively accurate when predicting future events. They see the world as it is. In other words, in the absence of a neural mechanism that generates unrealistic optimism, it is possible all humans would be mildly depressed.

## Can Optimism Change Reality?

The problem with pessimistic expectations, such as those of the clinically depressed, is that they have the power to alter the future; negative expectations shape outcomes in a negative way. How do expectations change reality?

To answer this question, my colleague, cognitive neuroscientist Sara Bengtsson, devised an experiment in which she manipulated positive and negative expectations of students while their brains were scanned and tested their performance on cognitive tasks. To induce expectations of success, she primed college students with words such as *smart*, *intelligent* and *clever* just before asking them to perform a test. To induce expectations of failure, she primed them with words like *stupid* and *ignorant*. The students performed better after being primed with an affirmative message.

Examining the brain-imaging data, Bengtsson found that the students' brains responded differently to the mistakes they made depending on whether they were primed with the word *clever* or the word *stupid*. When the mistake followed positive words, she observed enhanced activity in the anterior medial part of the prefrontal cortex (a region that is involved in self-reflection and recollection). However, when the participants were primed with the word *stupid*, there was no heightened activity after a wrong answer. It appears that after being primed with the word *stupid*, the brain expected to do poorly and did not show signs of surprise or conflict when it made an error.

A brain that doesn't expect good results lacks a signal telling it, "Take notice — wrong answer!" These brains will fail to learn from their mistakes and are less likely to improve over time. Expectations become self-fulfilling by altering our performance and actions, which ultimately affects what happens in the future. Often, however, expectations simply transform the way we perceive the world without altering reality itself. Let me give you an example. While writing these lines, my friend calls. He is at Heathrow Airport waiting to get on a plane to Austria for a skiing holiday. His plane has been delayed for three hours already, because of snowstorms at his destination. "I guess this is both a good and bad thing," he says. Waiting at the airport is not pleasant, but he quickly concludes that snow today means better skiing conditions tomorrow. His brain works to match the unexpected misfortune of being stuck at the airport to its eager anticipation of a fun getaway.

A canceled flight is hardly tragic, but even when the incidents that befall us are the type of horrific events we never expected to encounter, we automatically seek evidence confirming that our misfortune is a blessing in disguise. No, we did not anticipate losing our job, being ill or getting a divorce, but when these incidents occur, we search for the upside. These experiences mature us, we think. They may lead to more fulfilling jobs and stable relationships in the future. Interpreting a misfortune in this way allows us to conclude that our sunny expectations were correct after all — things did work out for the best.

## Silver Linings

How do we find the silver lining in storm clouds? To answer that, my colleagues — renowned neuroscientist Ray Dolan and neurologist Tamara Shiner — and I instructed volunteers in the fMRI scanner to visualize a range of medical conditions, from broken bones to Alzheimer's, and

rate how bad they imagined these conditions to be. Then we asked them: If you had to endure one of the following, which would you rather have — a broken leg or a broken arm? Heartburn or asthma? Finally, they rated all the conditions again. Minutes after choosing one particular illness out of many, the volunteers suddenly found that the chosen illness was less intimidating. A broken leg, for example, may have been thought of as "terrible" before choosing it over some other malady. However, after choosing it, the subject would find a silver lining: "With a broken leg, I will be able to lie in bed watching TV, guilt-free."

In our study, we also found that people perceived adverse events more positively if they had experienced them in the past. Recording brain activity while these reappraisals took place revealed that highlighting the positive within the negative involves, once again, a tête-à-tête between the frontal cortex and subcortical regions processing emotional value. While contemplating a mishap, like a broken leg, activity in the rACC modulated signals in a region called the striatum that conveyed the good and bad of the event in question — biasing activity in a positive direction.

It seems that our brain possesses the philosopher's stone that enables us to turn lead into gold and helps us bounce back to normal levels of well-being. It is wired to place high value on the events we encounter and put faith in its own decisions. This is true not only when forced to choose between two adverse options (such as selecting between two courses of medical treatment) but also when we are selecting between desirable alternatives. Imagine you need to pick between two equally attractive job offers. Making a decision may be a tiring, difficult ordeal, but once you make up your mind, something miraculous happens. Suddenly — if you are like most people — you view the chosen offer as better than you did before and conclude that the other option was not that great after all. According to social psychologist Leon Festinger, we re-evaluate the options post-choice to reduce the tension that arises from making a difficult decision between equally desirable options.

In a brain-imaging study I conducted with Ray Dolan and Benedetto De Martino in 2009, we asked subjects to imagine going on vacation to 80 different destinations and rate how happy they thought they would be in each place. We then asked them to select one destination from two choices that they had rated exactly the same. Would you choose Paris over Brazil? Finally, we asked them to imagine and rate all the destinations again. Seconds after picking between two destinations, people rated their selected destination higher than before and rated the discarded choice lower than before.

The brain-imaging data revealed that these changes were happening in the caudate nucleus, a cluster of nerve cells that is part of the striatum. The caudate has been shown to process rewards and signal their expectation. If we believe we are about to be given a paycheck or eat a scrumptious chocolate cake, the caudate acts as an announcer broadcasting to other parts of the brain, "Be ready for something good." After we receive the reward, the value is quickly updated. If there is a bonus in the paycheck, this higher value will be reflected in striatal activity. If the cake is disappointing, the decreased value will be tracked so that next time our expectations will be lower.

In our experiment, after a decision was made between two destinations, the caudate nucleus rapidly updated its signal. Before choosing, it might signal "thinking of something great" while

imagining both Greece and Thailand. But after choosing Greece, it now broadcast "thinking of something remarkable!" for Greece and merely "thinking of something good" for Thailand.

True, sometimes we regret our decisions; our choices can turn out to be disappointing. But on balance, when you make a decision — even if it is a hypothetical choice — you will value it more and expect it to bring you pleasure.

This affirmation of our decisions helps us derive heightened pleasure from choices that might actually be neutral. Without this, our lives might well be filled with second-guessing. Have we done the right thing? Should we change our mind? We would find ourselves stuck, overcome by indecision and unable to move forward.

### **The Puzzle of Optimism**

While the past few years have seen important advances in the neuroscience of optimism, one enduring puzzle remained. How is it that people maintain this rosy bias even when information challenging our upbeat forecasts is so readily available? Only recently have we been able to decipher this mystery, by scanning the brains of people as they process both positive and negative information about the future. The findings are striking: when people learn, their neurons faithfully encode desirable information that can enhance optimism but fail at incorporating unexpectedly undesirable information. When we hear a success story like Mark Zuckerberg's, our brains take note of the possibility that we too may become immensely rich one day. But hearing that the odds of divorce are almost 1 in 2 tends not to make us think that our own marriages may be destined to fail

Why would our brains be wired in this way? It is tempting to speculate that optimism was selected by evolution precisely because, on balance, positive expectations enhance the odds of survival. Research findings that optimists live longer and are healthier, plus the fact that most humans display optimistic biases — and emerging data that optimism is linked to specific genes — all strongly support this hypothesis. Yet optimism is also irrational and can lead to unwanted outcomes. The question then is, How can we remain hopeful — benefiting from the fruits of optimism — while at the same time guarding ourselves from its pitfalls?

I believe knowledge is key. We are not born with an innate understanding of our biases. The brain's illusions have to be identified by careful scientific observation and controlled experiments and then communicated to the rest of us. Once we are made aware of our optimistic illusions, we can act to protect ourselves. The good news is that awareness rarely shatters the illusion. The glass remains half full. It is possible, then, to strike a balance, to believe we will stay healthy, but get medical insurance anyway; to be certain the sun will shine, but grab an umbrella on our way out — just in case.¶

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<http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,2074067,00.html#ixzz1Tte3mtRm>

An Interview with Sister Inigo Joachim SSA  
By Fr. Amaladoss SJ

### **Religious Life in Asia Today**

*Sister Inigo, you attended the international conference on the theology of religious life held recently in Rome. What struck you most at the conference?*

Consecrated life is being strongly challenged on all the continents by a climate of increasing cultural secularization.

*Vocations to religious life seem to be going down even in Asia. Why does that seem to be the case?*

I think that the crisis is due to a perception of the growing irrelevance of religious life, even in Asia. Religious life is all about being seized by the living God. If we make anything else primary, we are not talking about religious life anymore. Whatever we are doing and wherever we are doing it, we must work out of this fundamental God experience.

Religious are much appreciated for our efficiently managed institutions of education, health care, and pastoral and social services, which are still necessary in Asia. But viewed from the traditional Asian values of contemplation, mysticism, renunciation, simplicity, compassion for the poor and authentic love for Mother Earth, we are not perceived as God-realized spiritual guides. Our professionalism and our comfortable and secure middle class lifestyle leave people untouched because they do not always see in us credible witnesses of Jesus and his radical commitment to God's reign. Our traditional interpretation of vows and structured practices of prayer create confusion in the minds of young people who often come from rural backgrounds with their simple God experience. Religious life has become a profession rather than a call for radical living.

The globalized secular world provokes a profound crisis in religious life. Young people no longer see it as a relevant option to channel their idealism and generosity. They are also reluctant to make life-long commitments. The rapid entry of new means of communication like the Internet, mobile phones, and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook are distracting.

*How can we reinterpret the vows today in an Asian context in a relevant manner?*

Our vow of poverty confuses young people who have been forced to live in actual poverty throughout their entire lives and who are fighting to eradicate it from society. It is ridiculous when religious have more money or comfort in the religious community than their families have in the village, and religious life itself is seen as a way of socio-economic mobility. What difference does obedience make for someone who belongs to a culture where one never decides on his or her own, but is always expected to obey one's elders? What does the vow of celibacy mean in a culture where one is often forced to give up marriage for the sake of a job or for taking care of the family? And celibacy becomes even more difficult to explain in the face of

the sex scandals within and outside the church. We are, therefore, challenged to re-interpret the vows for young people so they make sense to ourselves and to others.

In order to share our time, energy, talents, gifts, finances, and knowledge with the poorest and the unwanted, we voluntarily choose total personal possession-less-ness; through the vow of evangelical poverty, we renounce the use of goods for personal benefits and prestige, and work for justice. As a community of service mindful of using power only with and for others and never against or over them, we use prophetic obedience to discern God's design for the world. And through the vow of consecrated celibacy we are called to create relationships with nature, with God, and with others in our fragmented and fractured society. This vow is a commitment to equality in a society filled with discrimination. A deep continuity with the radical spirit of our founders should go hand in hand with a certain discontinuity with past forms of religious life in order to respond to the present signs of the times.

According to the thinking of Jon Sobrino SJ, the vows make it possible for us to be present in the desert, at the periphery, and on the frontiers. *In the desert* because chastity makes us present where there is no one else or where no one wants to go because there are no familiar and permanent roots. *At the periphery* because being in solidarity with the poor not only removes us from the center of power but also renounces the prestige that material goods give. And *on the frontiers* because obedience empowers us to be present where the risks and dangers are greater and where prophetic activity is more needed to denounce evil.

*How does culture affect religious life?*

Culture is a way of life of a group of people – the behaviors, shared beliefs, values, customs, lifestyle, and symbols that they accept and pass along by imitation and communication from one generation to the next. As religious we have to identify ourselves with the culture of the poor and not with the culture of the dominant group. Unless young candidates joining religious life are helped to understand and appreciate their land, culture, and people and their people's way of living, beautiful practices, and beliefs, our religious life becomes alienating. The congregations in India, including the indigenous ones, still keep the Western model of formation that is hardly suited to present-day India and to today's vocations. The training that young religious receive from their formators, the location and setting of formation houses, their lifestyle and outlook should facilitate an ongoing interaction with the grassroots realities of our country.

*The Buddhists have their monks, and the Hindus have their sannyasis. What is special about the Christian religious?*

The Hindu sannyasis renounce the world because they consider it an obstacle for self-realization. The Christian religious renounce attachment to the world in order, paradoxically, to be involved in it with a view to its transformation. Hindus can teach us values like fasting, almsgiving, renunciation, contemplation, and silence. From the Buddhists we can learn asceticism, nonviolence, and meditation.

*Community/ communion has been an important dimension of religious life. How can it be lived meaningfully in Asia today?*

We are called to communion. Some of the most satisfying moments in our religious life are those of togetherness, of being loved, valued, or missed. If we were to look for the worst moments, we would naturally recall being left alone, abandoned, and rejected. Loneliness is

painful because we desperately desire to be connected irrespective of age, gender, or status. Most of the problems in religious life are community problems. There is a community in every religious house, but often no communion.

Communion can have various dimensions.

- *Communion with God:* Our God is not an isolated monad, but a communion of persons – the Father, the Son, and the Spirit – living in perfect unity and harmony. We, too, created in the image of God, need to be in communion with God.
- *Communion with One Another:* Communion cannot come merely by following a common timetable, by living under a common roof, or by eating together. Communion comes about when individuals are made to feel welcomed, valued and loved. We are related to each other neither functionally nor hierarchically but as persons, as brothers and sisters, as children of one God. Communion is a relationship that transcends office and function.
- *Communion with the Poor:* By the poor I mean those who are materially poor and live in situations of inhuman poverty. In the poor in such situations, the image of God is denied and scorned (Puebla Doc: 1142). Communion with them is necessary for all religious and is based on solidarity not on paternalism.
- *Intercultural and International Communion:* Many Asians today are migrating to other Asian as well as non-Asian countries. Living and working together can be a challenge in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. The challenge can be met only when one group does not dominate the others and when each individual is respected and accepted, irrespective of his or her origin. A fusion of cultures, which is at the same time rooted in the culture of the place where the community is situated, should be seriously attempted. This requires great sensitivity along with individual and collective self-emptying, especially on the part of the dominant group.
- *Communion with Nature.* Instead of reverencing our oneness with nature, we tend to exploit common resources to satisfy selfish needs.
- We can also speak of *communion and partnership with people of other faiths and with all people of good will.*

*Are there new forms of religious life emerging today? Are there any examples? Can they be effective in Asia?*

At the meeting in Rome, we did hear of new experiences of people sharing a simple life of witness with the poor in Brazil, Italy, and Australia.

The most significant mark of our age is evolution. But traditional forms of religious life – often seen as a closed system, basically monastic in structure – can no longer adequately engage the newness of God who is breaking into the world from the future. We are challenged by the perennial newness of the Spirit, by the pluralistic context of the present moment, and by the paradigm of a complexity determined by the profound changes taking place in our global society through technology and communications.

*Leadership:* These new forms of religious life place the leaders alongside rather than above the members of their communities. Leadership is seen as service and not as status or privilege. Power is exercised in a social process where a group is called to collaborate, promoting the diversity of gifts among the members while striving for unity.

*Community Living:* Shared leadership – with each member having clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the fostering of life in community – becomes an option. This calls for personal maturity and responsibility.

*Prayer:* Meditation, contemplation, and creative integration of life's realities become the ground for new forms of prayer to sustain and support an incarnational, holistic spirituality. The recitation of the Divine Office, with its plethora of words and non-inclusive language, may yield to silence and interiority. Sharing on the Word of God can bring more attention to feminine images.

Faced with the crisis in consecrated life – with diminishing numbers and perceived irrelevance – we should never give in to despair. We should let ourselves be guided by the Spirit who calls for courage and daring to accept the uncertainties and the complexities of a reality that is in continuous transformation. We must acknowledge that we do not have the last word, but that we are only one among the many voices and presences through which God is present and active in the world. We have to move beyond the logic of the world in order to open ourselves to the logic of the Reign of God and trust the words of the Lord: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

*What would be your one message to Asian religious today?*

As we reflected in the seminar, only when religious men and women are deeply rooted in God, open to the action of the Spirit, aware of their radical call, humanly balanced, professionally prepared, sensitive to the cry of the poor, and capable of giving their lives until martyrdom will apostolic consecrated life enjoy a new springtime.