

# CONVERSATIO 2009



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial

*page 2*

STATIO CONFERENCE

The Transfiguration

by Sister Soledad Hilado, OSB

*page 3*

Prophet and Teacher

by Antonio M. Pernia, SVD

*page 7*

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St. Scholastica's Priory

Manila

Dear Sisters,

The Priory Government has started its animation sessions in relation to the Priory-wide Renewal - going around the different communities of our Priory. I have facilitated 4 by now and I have found the sessions very fruitful and according to the feedback, really helpful to the Sisters. I would like to share with you some insights. In the sharing of the Chosen Path or Rivers of Life where the Sisters reflected on their religious journey from entrance to the present, what struck me as most significant is the fact that **COMMUNITY LIFE IS THE MOST DIFFICULT AS WELL AS THE GREATEST BLESSING** in the Sisters' life. I listened to the Sisters how they confessed that they almost went home at different stages of their life because of difficulty in the community. There is the disillusionment as Juniors when they were assigned to their province assignment and became witness to the open conflict among the perpetually professed Sisters. But one said that on hindsight when she persevered in spite of that she found herself more strengthened in her vocation. Another thing that caused conflict was envy, jealousy and the spirit of competition. It is humbling to realize that as religious, we are not immune from these petty but really destructive emotions. It is like the "sting of the flesh" or in this case of the spirit, that St. Paul mentioned in his epistle that he begged God to take away from him but which God allowed to prevail so that God's power will be manifested in our weakness. On the other hand the Sisters also shared that it was the community or more specifically some Sisters in the community who helped them keep their vocation in time of crisis, who accompanied them, who encouraged them, who journeyed with them in the difficult periods of their life. So it was and so it will be.

Let us cherish our community, because as cenobites, it is the only venue where we can work out our salvation and grow into fullness in Christ.

Lovingly yours,

*A. Mary John Manangan OSB*  
Sister Mary John Manangan, OSB

# STATIO CONFERENCE

## The Transfiguration

By Sister Soledad Hilado, OSB

We in the priory are in a year of efforts at “radical renewal” which we resolved to do after our soul-searching leading to, and during our last Manila Priory Chapter. It is in the spirit of those efforts that we take a look at this month’s suggested point for reflection. The month of August is home to the beautiful feast of the *Transfiguration of Our Lord*. We like to think that his invitation to the three chosen apostles to be alone with Him on the Mountain, is extended to us too. And so, we pause a while and re-view the scene.

*“Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain where they could be alone by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured; his clothes became dazzlingly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter spoke to Jesus: ‘Rabbi,’ he said, ‘it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say; they were so frightened. And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and there came a voice from the cloud, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.’ Then suddenly, when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus.” (Mk. 9:2-7)*

**...a high mountain.** Tradition tells us that this “high mountain” is Mt. Tabor – a mountain that can be seen from almost any place in eastern Galilee. It is said to be a “perfect mountain”, seeming perfectly rounded and smooth. Climbing it even by a zigzag road is challenging. Only true pilgrims make it to the top. Today there is at the top a Syrian-style basilica, fairly new, less than a century old. To the right is a Franciscan hospice and to the left among olive groves is a small Orthodox monastery.... Not far from the base of the mountain is the Sea of Galilee from where the sun rises... later to set into the Mediterranean (Pennington, 75,76).

**...Jesus took with him Peter, James and John.....** Why these three? Peter was to be the rock on which He would build His church. John, was the “beloved” and would be the only one of the chosen twelve to be with Him unto the end – at the foot of the Cross. How about James? He was the brother of John, and was one of the first called by Jesus to follow Him. Later he would become the first bishop of Jerusalem. Still he does not seem to be as special as the other two..... Perhaps we could think of James as *every one*. Jesus invites every one to be with Him.

**...there he was transfigured...** The word is an interesting one. The Greek word is *metamorpho*, which means to transform, literally or figuratively. It means to change into another form; also, to change the outside to match the inside. This was the case in the Transfiguration: to “match the outside with the inside”. Jesus’ divine nature was “veiled” in human form, and the transfiguration was a glimpse of that glory. The voice of God attested to this – as it did at the baptism of Jesus. (*Learn More about Jesus Christ*).

- The divinity of Christ, proclaimed by the Father’s voice, is also revealed by the symbols of light and whiteness, representing eternity and transcendence: “His garments became

glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them” (*Mk. 9:3*). Then there is the cloud – a sign of God’s presence during the Exodus and over the tent of the Covenant (John Paul II, *General Audience*, 26 April 2000).

- On the transfigured face of Jesus a ray of light which he held within shines forth. It invites us to open the eyes of our hearts to the mystery of God’s light, present throughout salvation history. At the beginning of creation, God had said, “Let there be light,” and there was light separated from the darkness. In the Psalms, light is “the mantle with which God covers Himself” (cf. Ps. 104:2); in the Book of Wisdom the symbolism of light is used to describe the very essence of God: wisdom, an outpouring of God’s glory, is “a reflection of eternal light” superior to any created light (cf. Wis 7:27, 29ff). “I am the light of the world,” Christ says in the Gospel, “he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (*Jn 8:12*) (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006).
- There is too the Trinitarian dimension of Christ’s transfiguration: the Father’s presence with His revealing voice is explicit; an implicit glimpse of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the cloud is based on the parallel event of the Baptism in the Jordan, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ like a dove (*Mk. 1:10*) (John Paul II, *General Audience*, 26 April 2000).

**Christ is the center.** Two witnesses of the Old Covenant appear with him: Moses, mediator of the law, and Elijah, a prophet of the living God. So overwhelming was the experience that Peter, the impulsive one, cries out: “Lord, let us build three tents here – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah!”

- Why this ecstatic experience for the three chosen ones? It was a “glimpse of heaven,” a foretaste of the glory that heaven would bring after this life on earth. It would be a source of strength during the events that would follow – the betrayal... the agony in the garden... the passion... the Cross..... In spite of that Peter would stumble... till the cock crowed. We do not read about James... but we know that John would be the only one at the foot of the Cross.
- “When one has the grace to live a strong experience of God, it is as if one is living an experience similar to that of the disciples during the Transfiguration: a monetary foretaste of what will constitute the happiness of Paradise. These are *brief experiences* that are sometimes granted by God, especially *prior to difficult trial*. (Benedict XVI, 2006; italics mine).
- No one, however, is permitted to live “on Tabor” while on earth. Indeed, human existence is a journey of faith and as such, moves ahead more in shadows than in full light, and is no stranger to moments of obscurity and also of complete darkness. While on this earth, our relationship with God takes place more by *listening* than by *seeing*, and the same contemplation comes about, so to speak, with closed eyes, thanks to the interior light that is kindled in us by the Word of God (*Ibid.*).

**“Listen to him.”** We listen to Him in His **Word**, contained for us in **Sacred Scripture** – in the Law and the prophets – and now also in the New Testament. We listen to Him in the **events of our lives**, seeking to decipher in them the message of Providence, of God. We listen to Him in **our brothers and sisters**, especially in **the lowly and the poor**, in whom and for whom Jesus demands our concrete and active love. To listen to Christ and obey His voice in the main way, the only way that leads to the fullness of joy and of love. (Benedict XVI, 2006). “Listen, my daughter/son...” St. Benedict tells at the start of his Rule.

**... alone by themselves...**

- ❖ Tabor represents all the “mountains” that lead us to God according to an image dear to mystics.
- ❖ Jesus leads **us** too... to where we could be alone with Him. We have our daily *lectio* where we really are alone with Him... if we like.... “Our path to contemplation begins in *lectio*, in letting the inspired Word of God enter us, shape us, and call us forward in faith and hope” (Pennington, 78).

We are again together with Him during the Divine Office and at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass (John Paul II)... We get an invitation too as the gong rings for the hourly prayer... or at any other time... Inside us, in our hearts, we can be – and are – alone with Him.

“At the heart of prayer is person-to-person contact with the living Lord... Prayer is interpersonal union with the tri-personal God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... a matter of being aware of a God who is already close to us in Christ” (Casey, 163).

**And then they see only Jesus.** “At a gentle touch on the shoulder, the awed disciples dare to look up, and they see only Jesus....” They would see only Jesus when they live the faith of the mountain – see Him in every man, woman, and child (Pennington, 80).

- We are granted the grace to rejoice in the company of the transfigured Lord when we immerse ourselves in the things that are above through prayer and the celebration of the divine mysteries. But, like the disciples, we also must descend into daily life where human events challenge our faith. (John Paul II, 1999)

Let us ask God, through the intercession of Mary, Teacher of faith and contemplation, to enable us to receive within us the light that shines brightly on the face of Christ, so that we may reflect its image on everyone we meet. (John Paul II, *Introduction to Holy Mass*, Aug. 6, 2000).

And now we pause to look into ourselves – when and how we have followed, and continue to follow Christ’s invitation *to be alone with Him on the mountain...* and how, as with Peter, James and John, the experience has changed, and continues to change our lives.

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## **Suggestions for sharing:**

1. A special experience of God or spiritual joy or a feeling of well-being that somehow preceded a time of trial.
2. Seeing “only Jesus”
  - in events;
  - in those we live with or come in contact with
3. Lectio in your life

(Editor's note: This will be the first of the series of Fr. Fernia's talks that will be published in *Conversatio*.)

## Prophet and Teacher

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*Antonio M. Pernia, SVD*  
*Rome*

What does it mean to be a religious superior today? What does it take to provide effective religious leadership in today's world? Perhaps we can take a cue from the two most recent leaders of the Catholic world – John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Many observers believe that there is basically a continuity between the last two popes in terms of substance and fundamental direction. However, the same observers usually note a difference in style and emphasis. The basic difference in style and emphasis is perhaps best expressed by a comment of one journalist a few months after Benedict XVI assumed the papacy: "The huge crowds continue to come to St. Peter's square. But while they came to SEE John Paul II, now they come to HEAR Benedict XVI." One is reminded here of the biblical expressions "to see a prophet" (cf. Mt 11:9) and "to hear a teacher" (cf. Lk 21:37-38).

John Paul II's papacy was characterized by symbolic gestures. It will be remembered for the powerful images which were often flashed on TV screens and now engraved in the minds of so many people – John Paul II gathered with the leaders of world religions for a day of prayer for peace in Assisi; John Paul II adorning the crown of our Lady of Fatima with the shell from the bullet that felled him at St. Peter's square; John Paul II huddled with his would-be assassin, Ali Agca, in a room at the *Regina Coeli* prison in Rome; John Paul II inserting a note of apology in a crack at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem; John Paul II, clad in colorful vestments, kneeling in front of the Holy Door at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

An important leitmotif of his pontificate was HOPE for the future of humanity and the role of the Church in ensuring that that future be completely humane. Justice and peace, war and violence, human solidarity and fraternity, the dignity of human life were some of the themes that resounded from his speeches and writings. His message was aimed at arousing hope and confidence in the future by encouraging human beings not to be afraid to open their doors to Jesus Christ who is the true "Redemptor Hominis". What emerged in this papacy was the figure of a unique "prophet of hope".

Benedict XVI's papacy, I think, will be characterized by profound teaching. It will be remembered for the eloquent discourses and speeches which often become the object of

discussion and analysis even in the secular media – the homily at the funeral of his predecessor in office, John Paul II; the homily at the Eucharistic celebration which opened the conclave that elected him the 265<sup>th</sup> pope; the lecture he gave to the University of Regensburg during his visit to Germany; the systematic catechesis on the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church during his regular Wednesday general audiences; his encyclicals, *Deus Caritas Est*, *Spe Salvi*, *Caritas in Veritate*; his outstanding book on *Jesus of Nazareth*.

What emerges to be a major leitmotif of his pontificate seems to be FAITH in God which is essential to the genuine fulfillment of the human person. Faith and reason, the Christian roots of Europe, the dictatorship of relativism, the sanctity of human life, death and dying, and other related theological questions are some of the concerns he deals with in his discourses and addresses, his writings and homilies. His insistence on the essentials of the faith flows from a concern about the blurring of the faithful's Christian identity. What begins to emerge in this papacy is the figure of an outstanding "teacher of the faith".

Obviously, every characterization is limited and necessarily falls short of reality. It is not as if John Paul II's papacy was completely devoid of profound teaching. One only needs to mention his numerous encyclicals and apostolic exhortations. Nor are symbolic gestures totally absent from Benedict XVI's pontificate. One only needs to recall the image of Benedict XVI standing beside the Grand Mufti at the Blue Mosque in Turkey or walking barefoot during his visit to Auschwitz. The point here is that, taking a cue from John Paul II and Benedict XVI, religious leadership today seems to entail both courageous prophetism and clear teaching. It requires the task both of fostering hope and deepening the faith. Indeed, in our Society today, these aspects of religious leadership may be called for now more than ever.

On the one hand, *pessimism* and *discouragement* can easily creep into our congregation and provinces or regions. This could result from several factors – the lack of vocations and the ageing of members in some provinces or regions; the situation of almost insurmountable physical, material and financial difficulties in others; the absence of visible results of our efforts in still other provinces or regions; or even the restriction of religious freedom and outright persecution in a few other provinces or regions. Sometimes we are plagued with doubts about the relevance of our presence, the meaningfulness of our missionary activities, our significance for the future. At times we ask: Do we still have a future? What kind of future do we have? Is it not better to begin learning the art of dying? In such situations, the religious leader needs to foster hope and confidence by offering a clear vision of our life and mission in the congregation and provinces or regions. We cannot give in to pessimism and discouragement. We cannot allow doubts to sap out our religious zeal or the uncertainty of the future to paralyze our missionary activity. We need the optimism and courage of a prophet to show us the way.

On the other hand, we can easily fall prey today to *mediocrity* and *individualism*. The seductions of a comfortable and secular lifestyle can erode our religious missionary spirit. We settle for the minimum and do not aim to make a difference. We shy away from difficult assignments and prefer to choose our own work. We give more importance to our individual

plans and projects over our common mission and tasks. We look more for personal fulfillment rather than strive to give our contribution to the mission of the congregation. We search for what the congregation can do for us and never bother about what we can do for the congregation. In such situations, the religious leader needs to remind us of the essentials of our vocation and strengthen our religious missionary commitment. We need to believe again that God has called us, and that therefore who we are and what we do are all a response to God's call. We need to be convinced that mission is God's and that there is something sacred about our call to collaborate with God's mission. We need the insight and clear-headedness of a teacher to guide us.

Religious leadership as described here can seem to be a daunting task. None of us is John Paul II or Benedict XVI. But neither is anyone of us called to be exactly like John Paul II or Benedict XVI. As religious leaders today, I believe we are called to be, in the context of our congregations, a little of John Paul II and a little of Benedict XVI. We are called to foster hope and deepen the faith. In our own small way, we are called to be prophets and teachers. Prophets of hope and Teachers of the faith.