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St. Scholastica's Priory
Manila

Dear Sisters,

The first Sunday of March, which is also the first Sunday of Lent is also National Migrant Workers' Sunday.

I have had the opportunity to work closely with migrant workers, in Tipanan, a Center for Filipino Migrant Workers we opened in Madrid in 1984. When I asked them what their greatest difficulty is in their situation, the great majority answered: LONELINESS. I was a bit surprised. I thought it would be economic, or maltreatment, or the hard work, but almost everyone I asked answered: LONELINESS. I think this captures what is the meaning of **exile, of an alien, of being a stranger, of not-belonging**. And I thought of the Psalm which says: "How can I sing a song to the Lord in a strange land?" Because of loneliness, short-term relationships are established. I remember that in many apartments of the migrant workers there was an unwed mother who would then bring home her child to the Philippines to be taken care of by the grandparents. One such mother, after visiting her child who was then 2 years cried to me because her child did not recognize her and refused to call her "nanay". But what can she expect when the child has never seen her or experienced being cuddled by her? Then there are the many liaisons, married women and men getting into relationships with each other because of loneliness. And so the ironic effect is they were supposed to be earning money for their family, but this family has come apart because of separation and infidelity.

And of course we know that many of our students in our schools who are having disciplinary problems have one or both parents working abroad. Truly the social cost of migration has not been evaluated. So as we enter into the Lenten Season, let us remember the sufferings and sacrifices of our brothers and sisters working abroad so that their children can go to school, so that they can one day have a house and a lot of their own, so that they can help their aging parents. But still more, let us pray for our country, that we may one day be able to provide good work to our citizens so that they can earn their living in their own country, with their family intact, and pouring their energy into the betterment of their society.

Lovingly yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

S T A T I O C O N F E R E N C E

SPIRITUALITY: ITS CHALLENGES TO ASIAN MIGRANT MINISTRY

Sister M. Hilda Buhay, OSB

Today, millions of Asian migrants are part of the massive labor migration phenomenon. The increased migration flows to and from Asian countries in the past five years indicate that international migration is currently in a period of widespread expansion in the continent.¹ Asian migrants populate cities, towns and even far-off villages around the world. Go to even a seemingly God-forsaken country and you will likely find an Asian migrant toiling the day away. Name any service oriented job and an Asian migrant worker is most probably engaged in it. New trends in Asian migration include greater numbers of illegal migrants, the trafficking of women and the increasing feminization of migration. The migration of women in particular are for marriage rather than for work.

Despite the tumult of global economics, the avalanche of Filipinos seeking jobs abroad will continue. Today, almost 10% of the Filipino population of approximately 80 million are outside the country and around 70% are affected by migration.² Such is the density, velocity and multi-directionality of the current Filipino labor migration, making the international community call the Filipino migrant communities a people in diaspora.

Asians Crossing Borders: A Secular and Sacred Journey

Secular Journey

The need to seek greener pastures in order to provide some comfort and a better living for themselves and the family, a college diploma, the simple dream of a house and a lot, marriage across the border or just the human desire to survive make Asian migrants cross the border. “Working abroad” has become an empowering magnet that draws the much desired *suerte* in life. Filled with hope and ready to take risks, they embark on their secular journey.

Sacred Journey

Asia is the locus of great religions. The religiosity and spirituality of Asian people feed their faith in the Divine, in its presence and transcendence. The Divine is the air they breathe and the food they take to endure and celebrate life. Christians visit cathedrals and go to churches where they can pray. Like the Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims feel this craving for the spiritual and the transcendent. Thus, Muslims look for their mosque to worship Allah, aside from making their hearts a *Mecca*, their pilgrim place for seeking the transcendent. Islam practice contains within itself an inward path that calls to anyone to go deeper into the perimeter of one’s entire life with the consciousness of God. Allah is in every Muslim.

Like the Israelites in the desert, Asian migrants are persistently challenged to rediscover the God in the context of being a labor migrant as they walk from one reality to another with their God within as company, leading and blessing them in their sacred journey. Although their exodus

¹ *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, Vo. 17, Nos. 3-4, 2008, p.350.

² *Ibid*, p.351.

may entail a long rugged path towards prosperity and liberation, it will be a faith journey – one filled with hope and promise. The Lord’s words to Jeremiah travel with them “*Be not afraid, for I am with you...*” (Jer.1:8)

Emerging Asian Migrants’ Spirituality

The Asian labor migrant’s adjustment takes on tremendous proportions because it has to deal with insecurity. Migrant life is marked by a triple oppression. As migrants (*race, ethnic*), they are confronted with the difference in physical, social and human geography of the receiving country. As migrant workers (*class*), they are not only exploited by the host society but also by their country of origin. From the perspective of being unmarried daughters, married women with children, raped and commodified, the face of society’s poverty is unmistakably a migrant woman worker (*gender*).

What makes them cope and stick it out? It is their spirituality! For Asian women especially, who are stereotyped as more religious than their male counterparts, spirituality is the chief source of confronting their domestication and exploitation. It is a necessary and personal defence. Turning to religion as their point of survival nurtures them in the midst of their alienation and “wilderness” experience, goading them to find meaning in something greater than themselves.

Unflinching Faith in God

The praxis of faith serves as a source of empowerment. Migrants depend on God for guidance, solace and strength. It is their fidelity to their faith in God, in others and in themselves that give them the fortitude to undertake their perilous journey. With daring hope, they believe that God will not abandon them.

For Filipino migrants, Sunday is usually their free day and the most favored day-off so they can go to Sunday Mass. The presence of the physical structure of the church is enough to strengthen their hope in their God. All over the world, the Filipino OFW has breathed new life into countless empty churches. Even the lack of an actual building does not deter them. In Taiwan a gym was transformed for the regular Perpetual Help novena.

Mosque service is a non-negotiable weekly event amidst confusion and oppression wrought by marginalization. Lula, from Pakistan, was my co-team member in the *Coordinadoras de Inmigrantes* in Parla (Madrid). I remember her usually requesting us to defer a meeting so she would not miss their Friday rites and ceremonies. Aside from reading the Koran as food for her spirit, she religiously observed the fasting prescribed for Ramadan. Occasionally, she invited us to partake of Pakistani food with the Muslim community.

A columnist in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* wrote the following observations about the decorum and the religious devotion of Filipina entertainers:

I once visited a bar in the suburbs of Tokyo where the hostesses were very young *Pinays*. I was very impressed with the way they dealt with the more aggressive among their Japanese customers. These girls were in total command of themselves and of their situation, even if their Japanese was barely understandable. One of them told me that all five of them prayed together at the beginning and at the end of every night before an image of the *Sto. Niño* which was magnificently enshrined right there among the cognac and whiskey bottles.³

“Bring gifts and enter His courts; worship the Lord in holy attire. Tremble before Him all the earth”. This verse of Psalm 96 aptly describes the religiosity of an old Vietnamese Buddhist

³ Randy David, “*Spirituality and the OCW*” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (June 2k 1996) p.2

woman. She fled Vietnam during the turbulent years and has been living in Holland for so long. Secularization however has not entered her home. Not a day passes without her bowing in prayer with her incense in her well-kept altars. She also zealously observes all Buddhist religious events complete with specially prepared ethnic food.⁴

While Asian migrants experience in the human heart a search for passing joys that are not lasting, they know deep in their heart that only God satisfies their desires. In their quest to satisfy human needs and wants, they yearn to assuage this craving for God so that His Presence may glow within their hearts as they take on their secular journey.

Creative Resistance

Asian migrants forge their struggle through their religious celebrations that become an effective weapon for denying their feelings of negation. Having found ways to liberate themselves in spite of the crippling constraints of the world they inhabit, they have empowered themselves.

A Catalan couple, Jorge and Estrella, was so edified participating in a regular Sunday Mass of the Filipino community in Barcelona. They said they had never experienced seeing a group so deep in their faith and hunger for God as reflected in their behavior in church. Estrella, marveling with emotion, enthusiastically narrated:

The pews were filled, crowds filled the aisle, in front as well as the back entrance of the church, people fill these spaces. At first we wondered what drew them but sensed that it was the deep faith in the Lord, community bonding and the comfort they receive from each others' sheer presence. When it was time to sing, the church was alive unlike the Sunday Masses of the Catalan churches. Oh, yes, they did not tire. After a long mass, they gathered again to cheer, to clap and shout with closed eyes swaying with their bodies to pray, to cry out their individual griefs and pains. "*El Shaddai.. El Shaddai*" *Nunca hemos experimentado una cosa asi en las Iglesias del España!* (Never have we experienced anything like this in the Spanish Churches.)

The spirit of joy and sharing (potluck arrangement) during the *kainan* after the Mass in the function room of the church maintains their identity and unity, seeking to be their own and increasingly responsible for their commitment rooted in their home countries. It is a way of re-defining themselves through their participation and service in various social and religious organizations. It can stir one to an experience of the Eucharistic table, being nourished by the "bread of life" that feeds on their power to overcome the fear and the oppression that prevent them from being creative. It reminds one of the Israelite community partaking of *manna* as they journeyed in the desert. Paradoxically, their celebrations are louder than their stress. "Except in rare instances do they crack: 'they gently bend with the wind.'"⁵

Organized religious activities help them resist. These include retreats, pilgrimages, block rosary and seminars tackling legal matters. The Sisters, priests and migrant ministers figure significantly in the religious strategy for resistance. Through their leadership, those who are musical ply their talents during programs to celebrate occasions. One is amazed at some migrants' sudden ability to sing and dance. The older ones swoon out their *folk songs* and *sway-balance* steps with *gusto*; the young blast their "*Pinoy Ako*" with the modern beat and "*giling-*

⁴ Gemma T. Cruz, *The Habit of Surviving: A Look at Filipino Womens Spirituality*, *In God's Image* p.4.

⁵ Randy David, *op.cit*

giling” of *Wowawee* dancers, each one lending vitality to each other, celebrating humanity and life in unison.

To express resistance directly or indirectly, they invent ways to digress from oppressive practices and policies, and are adept at concocting jokes through language manipulation. Their male employer, they call “*tatay*”; the female employer, usually the more authoritarian, “*si bruha ko*” In Hongkong, they substitute the word “*unggoy*” for the Chinese “*m’goie*” a word to express “*please*” or “*excuse me*”. In Germany, the word “*aso*” for the German “*ach so*”, to mean “*so that’s it!*” or “*really!*”

In buying things they cannot afford in their country, the Asian migrant strives to be “at home” with self in its otherness. “Payday drives homesickness away.” The money earned is the balm for loneliness and translates into commodities that inspire them to work hard. It becomes the liberating exercise of their creative power. In the lines of a poem written by one of them from Saudi Arabia:

*TV. Sterio at Beta binili nang tuluyan
Upang malunasan, kalungkutan sa buhay.*⁶

Creative resistances somehow stimulate catharsis as one combats the brunt of being exploited. Resilience has a way of resisting controls set over one. One perceives life’s blessing in spite of hardships as one romances with resistance. Dances, laughter, fun, jokes, play, even nonsense-talk often help to keep one’s balance, reawakening the inner child as they sharpen and enrich human experience. This perspective makes migrants experience the extraordinary in the ordinary, making them appreciate each moment as sacred.

Non-liberating Spirituality

Suffering is not foreign to most Asian people. For many centuries suffering has been the lot of Asian countries who have been mostly colonized by world powers. Moreover, Asia has more hungry children than the rest of the world combined.

The Asian migrant worker of whatever belief regards suffering as part of their religious faith. They speak of servanthood in a heroic way, equating loving with suffering and self-sacrifice even to the point of death, as with the case of Muslim fanatics who stake their lives as suicide bombers. *Pagtitiis* is a Filipino value that goes with personal maturity. For Christians, it is an expression of their solidarity with Christ who suffered and died on the cross. The crucified Lord is therapeutic to them, strengthening them in their daily struggles in life.

However, the unshakable belief that all that happens in life is God’s will, can leave the migrants complacent in an attitude of *Bahala na* . Most migrant workers are passive oppressed victims. Their sense of submission in the face of systematic abuses renders them helpless in fighting for their rights and makes them passive in organizing, net-working and advocacy work Embracing suffering can then become non-liberating if it becomes a cushion for the impact of oppression. Not exercising autonomy can cultivate a spirit of neutrality and at worst, an escapist’s spirituality that can lull one’s faith into a false sense of security. For instance, the DH’s tenacity to sacrifice for their loved ones, particularly for their family can be seen as a culprit for jeopardizing their personal development and vocation in life.

⁶ *Filomeno V. Aguilar (ed.), Filipinos in Global Migration: At Home with the World? Quezon City, 2002..*

Take the story of the abused victim Laura. Her favorite passage in the Book of Job helps her to continue to trust in the kindness of God. Her lot as a *mail-order bride* that brought her to a remote country in Denmark to serve a divorced Danish man made her feel at peace with the God-given life she has found despite grappling with abusive treatment and culture conflicts.

A Indonesian woman I met at the shelter house in Hongkong lost her baby three years ago. She did not dare call for medical check-up for fear of being caught without a work contract during the time of her pregnancy. She believes *Batar Guru* (Javanese God) will help her in delivering her child even without professional assistance. She gave birth just calling on *Batara* as she pushed her baby out. The baby came out after much bleeding and suffering. Some days later the baby died due to unknown causes.

Another case: for being the domestic helper of a family involved in the drug syndicate, Liza easily consented to be imprisoned without defending herself nor seeking legal assistance. Despite her innocence, her fidelity to her employer's family and her wish to imitate *Mama Mary's* docility made her passive in the face of outright injustice.

Migrants must be led to make themselves agents of their own liberation. Spiritual accompaniment will allow and empower the migrants themselves to voice their experience, their rights and their demands.

Jesus' involvement with oppression introduced into the world of discrimination a transforming dynamism aimed at complete renewal of reality. Christ's message and its practice brought Him into conflict with the authorities of His time. He showed his compassion both to the just and sinners without capitulating to denounce those in power, nor neglecting to confront those who dominate and oppress.

Sense of Guilt as a Spiritual Struggle

While Asian migrants struggle against alienation, they too experience the struggle with God, grace and sin. Despite the fact that their religion has a central role in everyday life, they succumb to go against the moral tradition and values it upholds. Unable to avoid hankering for "*the flesh pots of Egypt*," they reason out: "I am now free to permit myself to do what is not acceptable at home and what is against my religious conscience." There is a strong feeling of guilt for such decisions like converting to Islam or Catholicism, having an illicit relationship, committing abortion and homicide, prostituting, etc. They lie to their teeth about their age, education and civil status.

The searing pain one feels as one struggles with one's conscience is common to all believers. However, for women away from home, who possess a more delicate conscience, the hurt is more sharply felt. The experience can be more brutal and painful when one is bogged down by the thought of betraying one's faith, one's loved ones and one's country. This spiritual struggle can even lead them to mistrust their experience of a compassionate God who forgives their inconsistencies and human frailties. "*Sister, nagwala na din lamang ako, ay di magpakawala nang tuluyan.*" Or "*Kapalaran ko yan Sister, total nandiyan na ako ay di lubos-lubosin ko na!*" Amidst the difficulty of owning one's guilt, forgiving oneself, healing must truly be felt in order to recreate faith life. Belief in oneself has to be established and hope in a loving God, thus becoming a truly religious experience rather than yielding to worry about God's punishment and what others will think. Victims of such a spiritual combat will have to be challenged to face courageously the call to change. Conversion then becomes a tug of war and like the experience of Jacob who wrestled with an angel (Gen 32:29) it becomes an experience that enriches human and spiritual growth. The battle is not with God but with the false self that seeks control and this

is precisely what faith counters. Thus, the act of spiritual struggle itself is an experience that becomes a foretaste of liberation in growing towards an authentic graced experience.

Migrant Ministers' Response

Migrant spirituality is a spirituality of struggle. The very hardships and anxieties migrants go through open them to a profound experience of God in their inner journey of faith. As companions on this pilgrimage the ministers will have to look at Moses as a model for today's leadership. His call and mission was to lead the Israelites in their journey to become God's people. To draw lessons on humanity and spirituality, doing a *lectio* on the Book of Exodus can open up Moses' experiences and the common threads they share with today's ministers. Like him, ministers are stutterers in this work. However, to be effective companions in the people's quest to satisfy human and spiritual needs, they must show how personal and communal struggle alongside with perseverance can create a foundation for liberation and change. It is for them to take the stance of *servant*, *mystic* and *prophet* as Moses did.

As Servants

Moses not only has a predilection for the poor and the oppressed, his tempering quality of humility was one of the hallmarks of his greatness (Numbers 12:3). He did not see himself as special but rather, as all too human. He knew himself as he really was, and remained secure when threatened by persons and events. Moses was confronted in his leadership several times by people and by persons close to him, yet he did not take the criticisms personally, even if they deflated his ego.

Migrant ministers are the modern Moses. They claim and own their personal shadows as they discover their real self, the *imago Dei*. As humble servants who identify with those they minister, they dispense God's grace and compassion to all without prejudice, worthy or not. Not immune from criticisms and intrigues from the community, their self-confidence and acceptance of the demands of their call do not threaten them nor make them retaliate.

Envisioning themselves as shepherds, ministers commit to lead the struggling people towards the loving God whom they seek, championing their dignity as a human person with basic needs. Migrants have their own "Egypt" and "wilderness"; they need a spiritual compass to enlarge the horizons of their hope. Rather than concentrating on their waywardness and human sinfulness, no matter how ambivalent and "stiff-necked" they prove to be, the ministers do not downgrade them by emulating rules and destructive self-denial. Instead they encourage the development of their human talents, raise their low self-esteem and stimulate creativity to build up their morale -- healing and giving meaning to their failures and triumphs. Through their care, the sheepfold is honed in the knowledge and skills that will give them the capacity to stand firm in their struggle against oppression.

As Mystics

Moses was a contemplative person. He had experienced the Divine Presence in an extraordinary way. It was when He "turned aside to see" that he experienced the "burning bush" (Ex; 23-25). Continually connected with God, speaking with Him "face to face, as one speaks to a friend," his leadership had an effect on the Israelites and he became the catalyst of their spiritual growth.

The work of social transformation and liberation of people from oppression and exclusion can only be facilitated by ministers who "drink from their own wells and live their own life in the Spirit of Jesus" (G. Gutierrez). As one succumbs to the force of divine presence, to the

tremendous power of the divine claim over one's person, the ministers cannot but be in a state of self-surrender, a revival of their "burning bush" experience. The compassion for the other goes back to their "long and loving look at God" (Hopkins), source of whatever spirit is in the other. "What we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched – we speak of the Word of God." (1 John)

As Prophets

Moses was asked to announce good and bad news, denouncing evil and proclaiming salvation. "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Ex.10). this announcement explicitates the vocation and mission of Moses as a prophet.

The prophetic role of the migrant ministers cannot water down the divine message but must relay it in a human way so that it can readily be accepted as God loves will for the flock to be saved. In today's world of deception, truth is not without dispute. It intrudes upon public conduct, making an impact on persons and society so as to yield transformed attitude and behavior. Like the prophets, the migrant ministers will have to stick out their necks on behalf of an oppressed people.

Conclusion

The struggles and triumphs experienced by the Asian migrants in their secular and spiritual journey are precious stepping-stones in their journey of faith. They are pathways of a spirituality that is holistic and integral.

Search for what is human and divine can assuage the migrant's hunger for food in terms of secular life as well as God's offered salvation. This is akin to the new spirituality -- "such experiences of constantly striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence."(Sandra Schneiders).The spiritual is not a dimension added to the migrant's struggle and needs in order to provide religious motivation and sacrality. It is bound up with the life and all that life involves: freedom and food, community and sharing of resources, dignity and equality, creativity and celebration of the God of life and liberation.

Guide for Reflection and Sharing

Poverty and family obligations served as the basis of the "call" of the migrants to seek greener pastures. Which of their experiences do you resonate with? Get in touch with your own personal "call" to accept and/or do something: a task, a transfer, a mission, sickness, failure, conflicts, etc. What has stirred in you to accept the call? What have been the yearnings, struggles and the graces experienced?

Let the secular and sacred journey of the Asian migrants inspire your own journey of faith.

What has stirred in you to begin the journey as a Missionary Benedictine Sister?

What have been the challenges of staying in the journey?

What have been the desires, the yearnings and the graces of the journey?



Where Are You?

*I stand on the edge of myself and wonder,
Where is home? Oh, where is the place, where beauty will last?
When will I be safe? And where?*

*I am so tired of seeking for treasure that tarnish.
How much longer, God? Oh, which way is home?
My luggage is heavy. It is weighing me down*

*Then suddenly, overpowering me with the truth,
A voice within me gentles me
And says: There is a power in you, a truth in you that has not yet been tapped.*

*There is a road that runs straight through your heart.
Walk on it.*

*To be a pilgrim means,
To be on the move slowly;
To notice your luggage becoming lighter
To be seeking for treasures that do not rust
To be comfortable with your heart's questions
To be moving towards the holy ground of home
With empty arms and bare feet.*

*Do you want to go home?
There's a road that runs straight through your heart.
Walk on it!*

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Religious Life: The Dialectic Between Marginality and Transformation by Sandra Schneiders

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continuation...

RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE VOCATION TO PROPHECY

Prophecy is not primarily about foretelling the future. It is about telling what time it is, what it is time for, in the present. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel put it, the prophet's "essential task is to declare the word of God to the here and now." Jesus is the prophet par excellence, the one who announced that the time is now and what it is time for is the Reign of God. Prophecy requires three things: a clarity of vision and acuity of hearing that is a participation in God's view of history; the ability to announce that vision effectively both to the powers which oppose God's Reign and to the people who are oppressed by those powers; and the willingness to pay, even with one's life, for the ultimate triumph of God's covenantal order, the Reign of God.

First, the prophet has to see, to hear, from God's point of view. As Heschel says, "the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos." The immediacy to God and the marginality to the social order that the religious attempt to live is directly ordered to sharing God's perception of humanity in history, to the cultivation of sympathy with the divine pathos.

The choice of celibate solitude is ordered to contemplation, the actualization in prayer of immediacy to God. Contemplation is the place, the locus, of the coincidence of the contemplative's view with the divine view. If there is one theme that Merton returned to more than any other it is that of contemplation as the entrance of the human person into the sphere of God. In contemplative prayer, according to Merton, we pass through the center of our own being into the very being of God where we see ourselves and our world with a clarity, a simplicity, a truthfulness that is not available in any other way. And it is this view of reality which the contemplative must bring to bear upon the social order. For the religious, celibate solitude has as its primary purpose the fostering of such contemplation within which the religious participates in the divine perspective from which prophecy arises.

Anyone who has read much of Merton's writing on social issues has some sense of what the contemplative vision of society and history means. Merton gradually discovered the meaning of freedom, peace, community, love, and justice through his ongoing contemplative practice and so he was remarkably clear-sighted although certainly not infallible in discerning violence, slavery, mob psychology, and false mysticism masquerading as the quest for justice. His profound and public disturbance when a young member of *The Catholic Worker* staff, Roger Laporte, immolated himself to protest the Vietnam War probably did more than many at the time could grasp to keep the Peace Movement on track. Merton may not have been right in the strategy of his response; he acted precipitously and without full knowledge of the facts. But he was certainly right in focusing attention on the relation of means to ends even when the ends are unquestionably right. However urgent the quest for peace, human sacrifice could not be used as a means to attain it.

However, Merton's protest of that tragic event sharpened for him the issue of marginality. Some of Merton's friends in the Peace Movement, people he deeply respected and loved, who were irate at his intemperate response to Laporte's action, expressed their anger by condemning Merton's monastic distance from the public activities of the Movement. Merton was profoundly challenged by their charge that he was "in the wrong place" at this crucial time and that one whose body was not on the line had no right to pontificate on the issue. His reflection, however, drove him deeper into his conviction that it was really his own still unpurified self that was so vulnerable to and controlled by the image of him that others had. He had to choose again to remain on the margins, to remain a "guilty bystander" in the eyes even of those he most respected, in order to preserve the inner equilibrium and clarity of vision from which his own prophetic contribution could be made.

Religious, including those who are not in monasteries and thus physically marginalized, will always have to deal with the charge of relative non-involvement in the secular order and their own inner questioning of where one really should be when the stakes are as high as they are today. Many members of ministerial religious orders, of course, have participated personally in public social protest, engaged in organized political lobbying, and even held public office. But religious life itself, as I have tried to show, involves a certain social and political marginality by the very fact that religious do not have the same personal stake in the ordering of secular life that their lay companions do. It is not our children, our jobs, our homes that are on the line, or at least not in the same way.

Marginality, as Merton tried to explain to his contemporaries, if it is lived authentically at all, is agonizing ambiguity. Without any attempt at self-justification or any claims to superiority, it gives the religious a hermeneutical vantage point which is somewhat analogous to that of the poor and oppressed, those who are marginalized not by choice but by violence. To be outside the system, especially when one does not have an alternate source for the goods and services the system should make available, allows one to discern the contradictions and the violence of the system that those who participate fully in it are less equipped to see. It is no accident that women rather than the ordained in the Catholic Church have analyzed the clerical system and are making clear to the whole Church why a religious caste system cannot finally serve the ends of ministry. It is no accident that blacks rather than whites, even whites who actively participated in the civil rights movement, exploded the myth of equality of the American social system.

Religious are marginal by choice, but that marginality is in the service of prophecy, not of escapism. From the edges of the system there is a view of what the system does to those who are excluded, to those who are made means to other people's ends. If contemplation fosters immediacy to God, marginality fosters immediacy to the oppressed. The religious wants to be where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God. To feel the pathos of God is not a warm and comfortable religious experience; it is an experience of the howling wilderness driving one to protest.

The characteristic temptation for the religious, one which Merton felt very often and analyzes repeatedly, is to abandon the vocation to solitude and throw oneself totally into the fray on the side of justice for the oppressed. There is something self-evidently right about that choice. Indeed, it is the right choice for most believers. But for some it is not the right choice because God asks something different of them. Whatever direct action they may take, and for many religious in ministerial orders it may be extensive, their essential vocation is to be a consistent locus of that prophetic insight born of immediacy to God and social marginality which is essential to the spiritual integrity of all action on behalf of justice.

The second requirement for prophecy is the ability to speak the vision to both the oppressor and the oppressed. To the former the prophet must speak a message of criticism and a challenge to conversion, and to the latter a message of hope energizing action toward a different future. Walter Brueggemann in his marvelous book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, says that the first task of the prophet in speaking the vision is public lamentation. To lament is to declare, not by denunciation or condemnation but by public weeping, that everything is not all right. The guardians of the status quo, those who own, operate, and profit from the going system, want the oppressed to believe that everything is basically as it should be, that the system is designed and guaranteed by God, and that eventually all the minor problems will be remedied. The prophet says that the system is not God's plan; that God is on the side of the oppressed, of those whom the system grinds up and presses down; that the system does not have minor problems but that the system is a major problem.

The second task of the prophet is to recall God's promises and so, by projecting a vision of an alternate future, to engender hope. Hopelessness is a surrender to inevitability and the unchangeableness of the present arrangement. Those who control the system do so by paralyzing the imagination of the oppressed through the control of language for what cannot be said cannot be thought or sought. The prophet is one who has a fund of language that does not come from the system. It comes from the Word of God. With this new Word of promise the prophet can seed the imagination of the oppressed with the images that subvert the conviction of inevitability and divine legitimation of the system and engender hope for a different world.

Immediacy to God and social marginality are what equip the religious for this double prophetic task of public lament and energizing hope. In solitude and prayer the religious experiences the divine pathos for God's people. Sharing the divine pathos does not result in a new political program to rearrange the available pieces of the social puzzle but in a lament that will not be silenced, a howl of protest from the heart of the desert. It is the weeping of Rachel for her children who are no more; it is the lament of Jesus over Jerusalem which does not know the time of its visitation. But contemplative immersion in God also results in a new vision derived not from the status quo but from God's promises, in new images that will energize alternative strategies, in new language for the saying of things we were not supposed to think. Amos Wilder called Jesus' discourse in parable "the language of the Kingdom," a new idiom voicing things hitherto undreamed and unleashing energy toward a new creation?

Social marginality plays an especially important role in the prophetic task of announcing God's Word in the present social, political, and religious situation. While much can be done from within the system to ameliorate its worst effects there are few people who are willing and able to cut off the institutional branch on which they are sitting. To be on the edge, as Jesus was, gives one a certain freedom to see what is really happening and to say what one sees regardless of the consequences. Merton spoke often of his marginal situation which he valued because it gave him the distance which enabled that critical balance which is something "the monk owes to the world [f]or the monastic life has a certain prophetic character about it "

The third requirement for prophecy is the willingness to suffer, even to die, for the sake of the newness one is commissioned to announce. As Brueggemann says, the prophet speaks only "at great political and existential risk.

Immediacy to God in contemplation and social marginality is the source of strength for those who dare to criticize the establishment, whether secular or religious, and for those who energize the people for change. Prophets, from Moses on the far side of the Jordan to Jesus in Gethsemane, from Martin Luther King, Jr., on the balcony in Memphis to Dorothy Day in the

soup kitchen in New York City, from Oscar Romero in the Cathedral of El Salvador to Teresa Kane in Cathedral of Washington, D.C., have testified that the willingness and the strength to lay down one's life for justice's sake comes from face to face encounter with the living God who hears the cry of the poor.

Social marginality makes the prophet a natural target for establishment violence, both secular and ecclesiastical. The prophet lives on the edges of the system, not just physically but ideologically. The rules of the social order do not have a self-evident priority for the prophet for whom the presumption is not in favor of the establishment's values but always in favor of God's justice for the oppressed. Thus, the prophet not only challenges the law but when necessary breaks it and encourages others to do the same. This is a dangerous way to live and, as Jesus remarked, the tombs of the prophets are eloquent testimony to the tension between "social order" and prophetic criticism (cf. Luke 11:45-52). In a sense, prophets court death, physical or spiritual, because their vocation is not to survive within the system but to change the system.

A CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE TO RELIGIOUS LIFE AS PROPHETIC PHENOMENON IN THE CHURCH AND WORLD

Although prophets stand on the margins of society their vocation is intimately related to the historical moment in which they live. Thus, in speaking of religious life as a prophetic phenomenon in the contemporary Church we must attend to the present ecclesial situation. I want to suggest that religious life today faces a challenge which has ramifications for both Church and secular society and that the challenge is specifically to play a dangerous prophetic role in relation to a question which daily becomes more urgent. The question is that of obedience to lawfully constituted authority in Church and civil society.

Both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thomas Merton felt called upon to deal with the issue of obedience. King, following Gandhi, introduced Americans to the extensive use of civil disobedience as a non-violent strategy against racism and continued American prosecution of the Vietnam War. Merton, especially toward the end of his life, repeatedly questioned the current understanding of the religious vow of obedience that gave the superiors and the censors of his order nearly absolute power over the details of the monk's life and work, and drove candidates from monastic life by the imposition of a rigid and mechanized uniformity on all members of the community. Merton saw the potential for tyranny on the part of the superior and for infantilization on the part of the subject in the absolutist interpretation of the vow, and he repeatedly protested against it. But both King and Merton saw themselves as dealing with the abuses of authority. King did not question the validity of civil authority nor Merton the validity of religious authority. They did not question whether obedience was the appropriate response to authority but only when, how, and whom to obey.

In the twenty years since the deaths of these two prophetic figures, which are also the years of the aftermath of Vatican Council II, the question of obedience has been exacerbated by the progressive deterioration of morality in American public life and the increasingly autocratic exercise of papal power in the Church. We are, in my opinion, being driven to face the question at a deeper level. It is no longer sufficient to ask whether authority is being exercised badly and, if it is, how it can be reformed. Nor is it sufficient to refuse obedience to those who abuse authority. It is time to ask whether there is something faulty in the very conviction that God's will is necessarily or ordinarily expressed to most people through the will of a few people who hold office in Church or state. In other words, it is time to question whether our understanding of authority as the right of some to command and obedience as the obligation of others to comply with commands reflects a divinely ordained arrangement of human affairs or whether it

represents the sacralization of an intrinsically faulty human ideology of power. In short, is obedience a civil and Christian virtue or the strategy of those in power for maintaining systems of domination, a strategy which plays into the codependency of the multitudes who would rather react than act, rather surrender autonomy than assume responsibility.

A number of factors are raising this question at the present time. Historically, Nazism culminating in the Holocaust has called into question for all peoples of all times the alienation of personal responsibility through blind obedience to authority, which has traditionally been proposed to Christians as the supreme imitation of Christ in his obedience unto death.

Within the disciplines of philosophy and theology thinkers like Dorothee Soelle and Nicholas Lash have undertaken specific reflections on obedience in Christian experience. Soelle in a provocative little book called *Beyond Mere Obedience* accuses Christianity of elevating obedience to the pinnacle of the structure of virtue, a place that the Gospel assigns to charity. Lash, in an equally provocative book, *Voices of Authority*, describes the relativizing effect which the irreversible multiplication of authorities in every field of thought and action is having on the traditional understanding of authority and obedience.

In the practical order we are seeing the devastating effects of military obedience in incidents like My Lai; the ultimate dangers inherent in the chain of command mechanisms that control the use of nuclear weapons; the immorality in government that is permitted and justified as following orders; and the repression and demoralization of one group after another in the Church by the oppressive use of ecclesiastical authority. All of these factors are forcing us to ask whether the widespread situation of authority-generated injustice and oppression is merely an accident of the misuse of authority or a challenge to re-examine the entire issue.

Religions make a vow of obedience. This constitutes a claim to know something about the nature and role of obedience in Christian experience as well as a responsibility for safeguarding its evangelical character. But any spiritual practice, if carried out by large numbers of devotees over the course of centuries without radical reflective reexamination, can degenerate into an ideologically sustained routine. At that point it can be used against its own deepest purposes and those purposes themselves can become unavailable. I would suggest that this has happened to Christian obedience in general and religious obedience in particular. I would also suggest that religions, in virtue of their vow, are called in a particular way to engage in a prophetic critique of the assumptions which undergird our understanding of obedience as a Christian virtue.

Because of the importance of the practice of obedience by subordinates in the power operations of those in office, any challenge to the traditional understanding of obedience is bound to be viewed as subversive. The administration's defense of Oliver North as an American hero is no more disturbing than recent events in the Catholic Church which make it very clear that virtually anything will be tolerated except a challenge to papal authority. What has correctly been called "creeping infallibilism" has combined with a ruthless centralization of ecclesiastical control that is clearly aimed at the suppression of all centers of authority in the Church except the juridical one. Theological development, pastoral creativity, episcopal teaching, respectful dissent by the faithful, and the exercise of the legitimate autonomy of religious congregations have all been the objects of vindictive repression in recent years. In every case acquiescence has been demanded in the name of obedience.

It seems to me that this situation is not merely an in-house Catholic problem. Catholics form the largest single denomination in the United States and are represented in disproportionately high numbers in the national legislature, the military, and the federal law enforcement agencies.

Catholicism is, for better or worse, the strongest moral voice in contemporary Christianity, and it is Christianity which supplied the moral and spiritual rationale, the theology, for the understanding of obedience to which Hitler appealed, illegitimately no doubt, but very effectively. It is Christianity, through the family, the parish church, and the parochial or church school, which continues to teach a theology of obedience that presents submission to parental civil, and Church authority as the quintessential Christian virtue. What I want to suggest is that the understanding of obedience with which we are currently operating is dangerous in the extreme. We are playing spiritual and societal roulette by our failure to question radically the assumption that, in the absence of immediate and compelling evidence to the contrary, doing what we are told by those in positions of authority is the best way to fulfill the will of God.

Feminist analysis has helped us to see how patriarchy, the hierarchal system of domination and subordination which originated in the family as male headship in relation to women, children, and other dependents was gradually generalized as the appropriate, indeed divinely instituted, principle of all organized social life. Our current theology of obedience rests on a sacralization of patriarchal ideology. As feminist criticism enables us to see the essential destructiveness of patriarchy as a principle of social organization, it also enables us to see that the theology and spirituality of obedience as it has been generally understood throughout the Christian centuries is highly questionable.

It is not within the scope of either our time here or my abilities to attempt a full scale reconstruction of the theology of obedience. But perhaps it is possible to suggest certain theological propositions which, if mutually articulated, could function as coordinates for a renewed theology of obedience. The first is that obedience, if it is to be understood as a Christian virtue, cannot derive its intrinsic value either from its contribution to human power structure or from its contribution to social order or efficiency but only from its role in an enlightened search for and commitment to the divine will.

Secondly, and as an immediate corollary, obedience in the sense of the term, i.e., interior submission of mind and will to the will of another, can only be offered to God. It is an expression of our creaturehood, of the experienced fact that we are not absolute originators of our own being and action but responders to God's creative initiative. The more deeply a person enters into union with God the more attuned to the divine voice he or she will be. If there is someone whom we might expect to hear and articulate that voice with particular clarity it is surely the saint or the prophet rather than the office holder.

Thirdly, all human beings are essentially equal before God and nothing, including accession to civil or ecclesiastical office, erases that foundational equality. All hierarchical systems are provisional human arrangements which implicate us in various processes of cooperation, but none of them creates the conditions of ontological superiority and inferiority implied in the classical understanding of obedience. Finally, no human being, however highly placed or specially consecrated, actually holds God's place in relation to another human being. A person, because of his or her role in the community, may enter in special ways into the systems of mediation of the divine will that we attempt to construct as more or less reliable supports for our fallible discernment, but no human being speaks, purely and simply, with the voice of God. Therefore, there is no escape from the inalienable responsibility that every human bears to discern God's will and to act on that discernment regardless of the consequences. This responsibility is not fulfilled by merely ascertaining that the action commanded is not sinful, as the classical formulation has it. We are responsible not merely not to sin but to participate in the positive achievement of God's will in our world.

A radical rethinking of the theology of obedience in terms of these coordinates, namely, the religious meaning of obedience as a direct response of the creature to divine love rather than as a response of one human being to another, radical human equality, and the realization that personal moral responsibility can be neither eradicated nor alienated by assigning discernment to another, could lead to a new and healthy understanding of authority and obedience in both Church and civil society. It would definitively undermine the unaccountable exercise of power masquerading as authority as well as the facile alienation of responsibility in mindless subordination. It would delegitimize the recourse to violence for the sake of dominative control and necessitate the development of means of persuasion and reconciliation.

It is my conviction that religious have a particular stake in responsibility for the development of such a renewed theology of obedience. By undertaking the prophetic task of rethinking the vow of obedience which they profess in the context of that immediacy to God which characterizes religious life, and beginning to practice that vow differently on the margins of the institution, they can offer to the Church and through the Church to society at large resources for the Exodus from patriarchy which is fundamental to the building of a just and peaceful world.

Undertaking such a prophetic task will not be looked upon tranquilly by either the ecclesiastical or the civil establishments. To repudiate the understanding of Church and state as intrinsically unequal societies, to undermine the ideology of obedience as religiously mandated submission to those in power, to call into question the simple equation of office with authority, and to reimagine obedience as contemplative attention to God in every situation is to threaten the system which keeps believers sheep in the Church and citizens pawns in society. It is to energize people for autonomy and responsibility. Those in power rarely surrender it willingly, and so those who would undermine that power for the sake of Gospel freedom must be prepared for the fate of all those who have claimed that it is better to obey God than humans.

PRAYER FOR ST. ALPHONSUS CATHOLIC SCHOOL TURNOVER

This prayer was composed and prayed by one of our HS Faculty members, Mrs. Lida Pestaño, after the acquaintance meeting between the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (DOLSH) sisters and the Grade School and High School PTA Board. The DOLSH Sisters were accompanied by their Provincial and Provincial councillor who are both Australians and who are, coincidentally, conducting community visitations. Both are first-timers in the Philippines.

“Most Loving God, we praise your Holy Name and we thank you for the many blessings you have showered upon St. Alphonsus Catholic School community all these years through the unwavering leadership, commitment and dedication of the Benedictine Sisters. We look back through the years with deep gratitude in our hearts and in our minds. We fervently pray that you will always bless all the Benedictine Sisters who are about to leave us in due time. We implore you to grant them always good health, safety and perseverance as they continue working in your vineyard.

“Everything happens in God’s [your] time.” Now, you have sent us another flock of faithful servants, the Sisters of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. Dear God, we thank you for they have responded to your call with humility and eagerness to serve you in their new apostolate here in SACS. We thank you for giving us this special time – for Parents’ Teachers’ Association to heartily welcome them. We thank you for the safe journey of the DOLSH Sisters to their new home. We pray that you will bless and enfold them in your mantle as they find their way to serve you best. Together with the Benedictine Sisters, we will work hard to realize the school’s vision-mission, goals and objectives. We pray that you will keep them strong, healthy as they undertake their new educational apostolate with us.

Loving God, we thank you for the undying commitment of the parents who represent the PTA. They have been carrying out their responsibilities without counting the costs, and the SACS community is indeed very happy and very proud of them. Please bless them always that they will never lose faith and hope in you amidst financial crisis and challenges in nourishing and nurturing their children.

Lord, we are one in community lifting our hearts and minds to you, praising your goodness, thanking you for your gifts, and imploring your mercy to fill us with fervent hope, steadfast faith and boundless love so that we will be forever strong and committed to each of our duties and responsibilities to sow the seeds of love, and transform lives as administrators, teachers and parents, thus, making St. Alphonsus Catholic School your lovely dwelling place. Amen.

**MAY THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS BE EVERYWHERE LOVED FOREVER SO
THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD MAY BE GLORIFIED!”**

Note: “May the Sacred Heart of Jesus Be Loved Everywhere Forever” is the motto of the DOLSH Sisters.