



Roma, 9-13 / 05 / 2016

Weaving Solidarity for Life
– Living and witnessing as women religious of Apostolic Life –

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Lord, how many years of my life have been dedicated to filling the clay pitcher that I am with enough water to satiate my thirst and contribute to the commitment of satiating the thirst of many other people. After many years, Lord, I note that this action of filling the pitcher each day no longer responds to the desire I feel within myself, a desire coated with something much more, which I myself do not know how to define, but that impels me beyond myself...

Lord, thank you for the water you have given me each day. Now, however, I am asking much more of you: guide me directly to the fountain, the fount that simply and gratuitously flows from your heart enamored with life. This is the transformation I am asking of you – that I may be capable of relativizing the clay pitcher that I am and give priority to you, the fount of living water!

Rationale:

Dear Sisters!

I invite you to begin this moment of reflection and dialogue with a little exercise. Please put a piece of blank paper and a pen in front of you. The action of contemplating the blank paper and pen is an invitation. If we desire to make a note of a thought, a new gesture will be basic: move one of your two hands... We do not know the magic formula of the responses that could spring forth ready, automatically, for the many questions that we formulate today about Apostolic Religious Life for women – about our past, our present and mainly about our future. These answers are not hovering someplace above us. They are within us, in the same sacred space from which we have asked God the same questions. The next 40 minutes of our time will be dedicated to reflection, to discernment. We ourselves are the subjects of this little process, we, women who live and witness our vocation, in dialogue with God who chose us and has led us up to now.

Let's go to the first step: dear Sisters, write the following three words on your blank paper:

WHAT – WHY – HOW

The first two are the most common questions that come to us from current society: **What** are you doing? **Why** do you do it? They are significant questions, because they make the dailiness of our lives visual.

What are we doing? We are loaning our hands and feet, our ears and mouths, our skin and lungs to God so that God can continue to care for life through our actions, our work. But ... would it be ours exclusively? Are we doing this better than the laity?

Why do we do it? So we can respond to the call to follow Jesus, to do what he did, to witness to the Father's deep love for the world. This is the first **motivation**, the final one and the only one. But ... would it perhaps be ours exclusively? Are we better followers of Jesus than our parents, our brothers and sisters, than any other person?

Dear Sisters, let us renew our awareness that we are not special for **what** we do, nor for **why** we do it. All Christians are predestined for this answer. Religious Life is the **POWER OF A "HOW."** Let us emphasize the word – **how**. It is our *way of doing*, it is the *manner we follow Jesus* that gives meaning to our being Women Religious of Apostolic Life. We are the **power of the how** for the Church and Society. The strongest, most intense word to express this concept today is PROPHECY. We witness through the incarnation and visibility of an *essential support* that describe our being: 1) mystical life that generates the daily energy of handing over our lives to the God of life, being stimulated to pronounce vows through the boundless freedom the Gospel proposes to us; 2) the evangelical relationships that guarantee community love like blood circulating in our veins and making us capable of embracing what is different; 3) the commitment with the missionary announcing of the sign of God's face that we call Charism, and that makes it possible for the world to **touch, to experience love**.

The word weave, weaving (Assembly theme), confirms what we have reflected upon in the first five minutes... We will use another two minutes to create two images, with our heart's glance: the first is that of a weaver – that woman with magic hands using the loom, mixing threads and colors and searching within herself for the pattern to be woven; the woman silently using her feet and hands till she has realized the project of warming people in times of cold, of making life more beautiful in the spring time. The weaver works with a smile on her face or while singing a love song. Let us enrich this a moment, filling our hearts with the image of God –

*"For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them."* ([Ps.139:13-16](#))

Now let's imagine a large and heavy machine for producing weavings. All you have to do is press some buttons, some other buttons, and after a few minutes gather many meters of identical material that will be quickly sold and resold someplace in the world... The machine does not smile nor sing love songs, **but it is very efficient and competent**. Sisters, don't you perhaps believe that the tiredness or frustrations we sometimes experience at the end of a lot of work can indicate something?

Dear Sisters, how are we living, how are we witnessing? Like a machine turned on day and night for greater production? Or like a weaver who has before her eyes the **person** that will be warmed, valued, and honored?

Starting from this motivation, I move to share some considerations, first of all about the current reality of Apostolic Religious Life for women that invokes a conversation, and then about the signs of the future we are dreaming to embrace.

First aspect:

Naming two challenges of our current reality

1. We are becoming fewer and fewer, especially in the western part of the world. *Will this be our most important challenge?* Even if it is, we must deal with it. First of all we need to dialogue about the **quality of the vocational invitation we are directing today at the young people**. Do we know today's young people? Do we understand their values, their limitations, their utopias, their stories, their disappointments? Are we spending enough time learning with these young people? I am not referring to learning to use Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest. No, I am referring to learning with the young women what regards their way of looking at life, cultivating their faith, integrating values, establishing relationships, announcing the Gospel, following Jesus! Do we spend time dialoguing with them, asking those who know their way of seeing life, nourishing faith, integrating values, establishing relationships, announcing the Gospel, following Jesus?

When they come to our homes, whom do they encounter, machines or weavers? When we dialogue with them about the Charism, do we reveal the **mysticism** that marks our fundamental identity or do we parade past them the quantity of our places, houses, activities we have around the world? Are we encouraging the young people to follow Jesus with us, or are we handing out vocational materials with photos and images we idealized about ourselves? Think about it well....

But we can also accept with simplicity the fact that we are living the sunset of a model that no longer finds expression today. Why should a young woman become a religious to accomplish a task that can be carried out perfectly well as a laywoman? In western countries where most of us live, many women Religious occupy a place as **temporary substitute**, carrying out all very good activities, but ones that keep us far from the testimonial radiating that our charism asks of us. Yes, today we are still acting as substitutes for the clergy, and as substitutes of the civil state. And this attitude is not captivating!

Therefore, our crisis does not depend on the fact that we are few... This small aspect of the crisis is a chance, an opportunity – it is thrusting us to a new point of view about **identity and meaning** about **radical discipleship** (including lifestyle and prophetic dimension of the religious vows.) We have **the mission of "awakening the world,"** as Pope Francis tirelessly repeats!

2. It is true that when we get together as those in charge of our Congregations, the first question we ask each other regards "vocations" ... *Do you still have any novices? And young women? How many?"*

But there is always another question on the "tip of our tongues," **what are we doing regarding our apostolic works**, that are the secular patrimony of our Institutes? How many meetings, how many consultants, how many attempts to travel along what was once our place of apostolic works – schools, hospitals, social centers for children, adolescents, women and the many people who found the response to their cries for a more dignified life in our Congregations. How many generations of women religious gave their lives in these sacred places of care through instruction, health care, social charity....

Do we feel comfortable stating that these same works are the "name" of our crisis today? Or are we directly open to a careful and evangelical listening to the signs of the times? It is quite important to point out that this dynamic we call "signs of the times" was already heard by the generations of our founders. Today the signs of the times are shaking us from all sides. Today the invocations are others and we know them: peace, concern for creation, mercy, shelter for refugees, struggle to overcome human trafficking, culture of life, of dialogue, God's plan....

Where do we find the criteria that direct us in our needed discernment? Are we sure that giving up our works means overcoming the crisis? No, Sisters! Our place, as women religious, is not **there where we live, or where we work; our place is where we love, where we witness!** Our first commitment consists in manifesting – prophetically – the **Charism** that seduces us, identifies us, the first love with which we responded to the call. This is the Charism that we must radiate, communicate, prophesy. Remember that our specific way of living the Charism can be the best way the world has for reading the Gospel, for knowing God.

Sisters, this is a very special time for Apostolic Religious Life. When we recognize that from a point of view of productivity we are becoming useless in the western world, this same world is challenging us to recover what is specific to us: we are a sign **that points to God's operating presence in history.** We have already done all the possible reforms, restructurations, redimensioning: buildings, houses, communities, structures, activities. It is time to approach the source, it is time to grow in depth.

The prophet Hosea, when stressing love, seduction, puts an expression of pain on God's lips, **"My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them."** (Hosea 11:7) How painful is this lament of God! It is as if he were saying: I so want you to look at me, but you do not take your eyes off yourselves!

Summarizing this aspect, we are clarifying about the question of apostolic works. Should we maintain them? Or sell them? Or give them away?

Let us try to respond by updating the exercise on our blank papers... On it we have underlined the word **how.** Now, Sisters, after a moment of silence, write the word that best defines the Charism the Holy Spirit has entrusted to your Congregation so that it be witnessed to the world.

Sisters, what is the main word that synthesizes our Founding Charism?

(moment of silence)

Each place impregnated with this message ceases to be a geographic or social place, in order to be transformed into a God-enlightened space where people experience God-love: LOVE clothed in the color of the Founding Charism. This is the criteria. We will no longer have difficulty defining if an "apostolic work" can be transferred to other people or groups, or if it is a God-enlightened space of our prophecy today.

Ready recipes for the process connected to apostolic works are not known, but there is an open door ... which already has two names: partnership and networking. They are two dynamics that we have taken from sociology and they mean "going to do something together." Today these dynamics are also undergoing a conversion. In addition to partnering and networking, we are trying to assure a covenant. This is a biblical category. Its origins are in the fact that it is God's initiative. On our part an attitude is sufficient – bringing God to the center of our decisions. If networking and partnering allow us to act with better results **for the apostolic work**, a covenant between us will have the aim of responding to God's dream: life for everyone, life in abundance. This reflection lacks in-depth study: how do we include the "Communion of Charisms?" How do we speed up the moving closer together of the various Institutes, while valuing the originality of each, but with our gaze and hearts turned toward the search for unity? On the occasion of the closing of the Year of Consecrated Life, we heard: *"a new journey is required of the Congregations. At this time in human history and the history of the Church we are called to be transformed into "communion specialists" ... "to build unity of charisms among us and with all the Church, in order to evangelize together in all the contexts of the Church and in all cultures of the world."* (Father João Braz de Aviz in the opening talk of the Meeting *Consecrated Life in Communion*, Rome, January 29, 2016)

There is more than one paragraph that I consider significant to include here: even without having a broad understanding of Apostolic Religious Life for women in Asia and Africa, I know how aware we are of the importance of breaking down borders, sharing life and experiences and establishing a covenant among the cultural, historical, geographical and religious differences. The assessment of an Apostolic Work involved in an Asian or African context does not require following the parameters used in the western part of the world. The frontiers of life, health,

instruction, nourishment, family are defined by the local reality, not by a general concept. What makes us equal, Sisters, is the awareness that today we have to prepare ourselves to “begin again,” and that God is calling us right at the beginning and is inviting us to witness his love much more than to build up “*our works*.” This applies for every place in this world. If we were able to share with each other all those papers upon which we have written the word that identifies our CHARISM, we would be surprised by the similarity that unites us here, regardless of our geography or culture.

The dynamic of covenant is personal, communal and universal. The Word of God specifies, “*Now, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine....*” (Exodus 19:5-6; cfr. Also Dt. 14:2; 26:18) We can certainly be committed to transforming our reality with the determination of establishing a covenant among ourselves.

Second aspect:

Give **hope** its rightful place

or

Give a **future** to our past...

I chose to begin this second part of dialogue with a quote from the book of Job:

*“... For there is hope for a tree,
when it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and its shoots will not fail.
Though its roots grow old in the ground
and its stump dies in the dry soil,
at the scent of water it will flourish
and put forth sprigs like a plant.
(Job 14:7-9)*

The text is rich, and is one of Job’s responses to the wise man who tried to give an explanation to the events that had struck him. Job makes it clear that this is not the human wisdom he needs. He needs hope!

Let us also listen to the voice of Francis, our beloved Pope:

“So I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create ‘alternate spaces,’ where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive.”
(Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated II, 2)

The women and men prophets of the Bible ask the people to understand the **present** in terms of a **future action of God**. They both were people oriented toward the future, scanning the future. They shouted out so that the people **would change direction, would act with the future in mind**. The prophecies insist on repeating the phrase “something new,” new heaven, new era, new heart, new spirit, new earth, a new Jerusalem. Prophecy is always a bearer of hope. Isaiah is quite objective: “*Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past. Behold, I will do something new, now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it?*” (Is. 43:18-19)

It is in our interest to **PERCEIVE the signs of the future that God is defining for us**. Perceiving is something that implies all our senses – touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing. The basic attitude that directs us in this step is that of **making room for hope**.

After having thought and prayed, I chose the word JOY as the connecting thread of the step that follows. What gives us joy today? What are the new initiatives that bear joy, today, to other people, especially to those who have lost joy?

Sisters, once again please take the paper where you underlined the word HOW, and where you defined your CHARISM.

Together we must **PERCEIVE** what God is already doing in our midst. Thus, Sisters, we will perceive that the seeds of the future are here, now.... And a place for hope will grow in our hearts. There will be four key words that we can note here and use as a sign of the hope or as an alarm for greater attention.

a) Key word: mysticism –

Do we **perceive** that each Sister, community, ministry is impregnated with life and prophetic witness of mysticism that nourishes our vocation, our radicalness in following Jesus? Yes? Then the air we breathe, the words we say, the actions we do all witness this core. In our mission as leaders, do we motivate our Sisters and the Community to the life of prayer rooted in the Word of God, the daily source of intimate dialogue and real conversion? Yes? Then we redeem the value that the rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours offers for our daily life, the Eucharistic mystery bears fruit in us. We are people capable of adoration; we learn to contemplate God's dynamic presence again in the silence of little things; we accept creation's groans and pains in our life; we make room for the sharing of this mystical experience with other people.

➤ *Dear Sisters, if we perceive the joy in us of being on this path, then we are welcoming and irrigating the seeds of the future that God is tossing on the fertile ground of Religious Life today. And we are giving hope the place it deserves...*

b) Key word: circular gospel relationships –

Do we **perceive** the meaning of Jesus' Word, "But it is not this way with you... (Lk. 22:26) and "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers" (Mt. 23:8)? Do we understand that Life in a Religious Community "more than an instrument for carrying out a specific mission, fraternal communion is a *God-enlightened space* in which to experience the hidden presence of the Risen Lord"? (Vita Consacrata 42)

Yes? Then we are making progress in the exercise of shared leadership, evangelical authority. We know how to give space for people before administration. We invent time and place for open and merciful dialogue, for the joy of fun, for loving embraces among us. We model ourselves in the Divine Trinity for accepting diversity, becoming **sacrament of new relationships** in a wounded and broken world. We humanize our communities, redeem the human, responsible freedom that widens our horizons and generates solidarity.

Then we are able to fight valiently against a passive comfort that tends to set in, against self-referentiality, closedness, tribalism, existential sadness. Blessed Year of Mercy that allows us to pass through the holy door of our hearts and also the holy door of the hearts of our sisters, and there, in the very depth of our being, accept the forgiveness that opens her arms to us.

➤ *Dear Sisters, if we perceive the joy in us of being on this path, then we are welcoming and watering the seeds of the future that God is tossing on the fertile ground of Religious Life today. And we are giving hope the place it deserves...*

c) Key word: Mission as boundless charismatic irradiation –

Let us once again listen to Pope Francis: "For all of us, the essential rule remains the Gospel ... In this way, the "deposit", the charism of each religious family, is preserved by obedience and by wisdom, working together. By

means of this journey, we are preserved from living our consecration “lightly”, in an unincarnated manner, as if it were some sort of gnosis which would ultimately reduce religious life to caricature, a caricature in which there is following without renunciation, prayer without encounter, fraternal life without communion, obedience without trust, and charity without transcendence.” (Homily, February 2, 2015)

Do we **perceive**, Sisters, that we exist for service to the Reign of Jesus? Do we perceive any other apostolic service has its main significance among us if we become a parable of the Reign for the Church and the world? This is the place of charismatic witness. We are Sisters of Charity, of Jesus, of the Heart, of Mercy, of the Holy Family, of Our Lady, of Providence, of various men and women saints. We are servants, missionaries, recollects, adorers, daughters, apostles. We are Franciscans, Teresians, Benedictines, Carmelites, Dominicans, Ursulines, Salasians. We are of Calvary, of the Cross, of the Resurrection, of the Eucharist, of the Assumption and many others. Sisters, we **are the Gospel the world can read...**

Sisters, do we **perceive** that this witness we are to give by vocation is prophecy, denounces sin and announces hope? Sisters, are we heading out for places where humanity’s wounds are the most exposed? Yes? Then we are offering to our older Sisters the possibility of living the missionary dimension in their particular moment of life more intensely; we are leading the young vocations along the surprising paths our founders and foundresses traced out for us; we are sensitive to the new calls the Year of Consecrated Life set out for us. Then our ministries, our works, our social-political militancy, our projects will breathe in this vitality.

➤ *Dear Sisters, if we perceive the joy in us of being on this path, then we are welcoming and watering the seeds of the future that God is sowing on the fertile ground of Religious Life today. And we are giving hope the place it deserves...*

d) Key word: Formation –

Sisters, do we **perceive** that all us us are in a state of ongoing formation? That we need to “be born again,” to incarnate the newness the Holy Spirit is inspiring in these new times? Yes? Then we implement an appropriate methodology of the gradual process of steps to introduce, accompany and confirm the people given a vocation by God to follow Jesus in the way we call “Religious Life” *until Christ is formed in you* (Gal. 4:19); we foster mystagogical experience interpreted as **leading someone along the path of the mystery**, giving her the priority about the transmission of contents. Then we are aware of the fact that we form (or sometimes de-form) through contact, by means of life environment, with witness, through our lifestyle. Remember that the word **mystagogue** has the same root as the word **mysticism**! Mysticism, this experience that the new generations of Religious Life are searching so much for today, is not a profession that is learned. It is a way of being that comes from the deepest experience of God. Leading a person to this depth is forming for Religious Life. The greatest challenge in Religious Life is not in encountering mystagogic Formators. The real challenge is finding **mystagogic Communities**, God-enlightened places where witnessing is infectious among us who have the same vocation in common. Formation communities, communities that love, invite to love, and sow love....

➤ *Dear Sisters, if we perceive the joy in us of being on this path, then we are welcoming and watering the seeds of the future that God is sowing on the fertile ground of Religious Life today. And we are giving hope the place it deserves...*

Dear Sisters, it is not easy to conclude when you know the existence of many other elements that can influence the present and the future of Apostolic Religious Life for women. There is a piece of paper in our hands with a brief itinerary:

How,
Founding Charism,
4 keys for opening the door of hope!

May God strengthen and enlighten our reflection and decisioning processes in the exercise of our mission of animating our Congregations on the path toward tomorrow.

I suggest a final time of meditation on the familiar “six notes” of the Religious, Dolores Aleixandre:

1) Rely on reality:

because, like the earth hides a treasure, it bears God’s presence: as near to us as our daily bread.... You can scale Mount Horeb or Mount Tabor to search for him, but you must learn to listen to his Word in the public squares or in the potter’s shop because it is among human beings that it is spoken.

2) Wake up your ears and your eyes:

His voice can resonate like the roar of a lion or the sound of a subdued silence. It is expressed in the center of yourself and also in the blossoming of the almond tree, to remind you that just as you are not responsible for the arrival of spring, you are even less responsible for the fruitfulness of His Word. God himself sees to this.

3) Live while being on guard and tranquil:

Do not be afraid, but remain vigilant, because He can suddenly appear and knock on your door in the middle of the night. If you will open, he will enter and eat supper with you; if you allow, He will carry you to the desert to speak to your heart or allure you with the stream of his love.

4) Take care of your heart and listen to what it has to say:

His voice indicates the paths so that you can return home, to your center, there you encounter the only necessary thing, your Father who is hidden and infuses his breath so that all your being concentrates on his Son. Learn to be and remain there, to experience his mercy and be impassioned with his world, breathing in the name of Jesus like a perfume that spreads.

5) Penetrate into another wisdom:

Be ready to let go of yourself like an old cloak, your learnings and certainties. The seed of the Reign grows without your knowing it. Even if the pathways you are walking seem dark, you can trust: your shepherd knows where his is taking you. According to Him, in order to make progress, you need to walk the uncommon path of loss, and the narrow gate is the one that leads to the wide space of happiness.

6) Accept your unique name:

God tattooed it on the palm of your hand and gives it to you printed on a small white stone, like your unique and individual way of living in communion with Him. Rejoice, you are invited to participate at the banquet of the king and the place at his right hand has not yet been reserved.

(Six notes for learning to be mystical persons, Dolores Aleixandre)

Sister Márian Ambrosio, idp

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