The world, the Church, religious life are in crisis. All around, we see structures, forms and institutions unraveling or imploding; the earth is at risk; societies are increasingly disabled by growing inequality, economic crises, extremisms, tyranny, violence, wars. There is relational breakdown everywhere, at every level, including within the Church. We are witnessing what many have referred to as a major paradigm collapse, even as a profound shift begins to unfold.

Barbara Fiand writes that “[w]hen paradigms collapse, the only creative thing to do is to let go, so that free space is created for the new to emerge.” She observes that attempts to adjust old views and try to fit them into the new vision that is emerging only end up distorting and de-energizing, even destroying creativity. The letting go is difficult, since, among other things, not all of us are aware of the death of our primary paradigms at the same time and, therefore, we keep holding on; we keep looking through outdated lenses ... [and our] vision becomes blurred ... somehow we think that not letting go is ‘being faithful to our founders’. We keep looking for the living among the dead and, as a consequence, the resurrection escapes us.

There is a profound need in the world for right-relationship at all levels. The call to religious life now is to embody right-relationship, especially by being a quality of presence that is transformative and healing and that becomes an agent of “opening up human awareness” and supports the transformation of human consciousness necessary for God’s future to unfold.

We are in a time of crisis of consciousness. Across disciplines, crises of consciousness are recognized as signs of health and development in a system. Still, as we know only too well, it can be very unpleasant to experience them. As Fiand points out, individuals, groups, and systems are “ontologically designed toward expansion of consciousness and [normally] go through different developmental phases of awareness.” Each phase reaches its peak and then gradually disintegrates, and in the disintegration lie the seeds for moving to the next deeper level of awareness. This disintegration is thus both a painful loss and a necessary condition for the “turning points of growth.” We often experience “crisis” as the painful aspect of growth; it is also, fundamentally, the creative moment. No level of consciousness yields easily to the next one. The individual or group or society will experience confusion, pain, struggle, dislocation, and, often, intense resistance. “But the pain is necessary to facilitate the letting go and to stimulate the process of conversion ...” which opens to the new awareness necessary for moving into the future.

In 2011 we witnessed the beginning of a “phase shift” in our human community, as ordinary citizens from North...
Africa to Wisconsin determined that the existing realities of social organization in their societies were no longer sustainable and the costs of maintaining them too high. This shift in their consciousness and vision set off a veritable psychosocial and sociopolitical earthquake, whose aftershocks continue resonating and initiating profound social realignments across the world, even as actual earthquakes and climate disasters worldwide shift public awareness of climate change to a new level. These major shifts inevitably cause turmoil and confusion while offering an unprecedented opportunity to reorganize at a higher level of awareness of what responsible human society can be. Like society, religious life is in a time of “crisis” and thus of precious opportunity.

**Releasing the past to prepare for present**

Constance FitzGerald, OCD (2009) speaks of the current situation of crisis in society, in the Church, in religious life, as a situation of impasse. She describes the current impasse as centered largely in memory and imagination, in the conflict between the past and the future. And she notes that memories and the “past” are a potential limitation as we try to move toward the future.

Following are 12 key points described in FitzGerald’s model, points I consider especially useful for understanding the current situation in religious life, which is poised at the threshold of moving into a new awareness, a new time. I have tried to explain and connect them, drawing directly from FitzGerald’s text.

1. We (in society, in religious life) are “encumbered by old assumptions, burdened by memories that limit our horizons, and therefore un-free to see God coming to us from the future.”

2. The Church and religious life are immersed in an impasse, a crisis of memory, which can only be transformed by openness to contemplative grace and to what FitzGerald calls “purification of memory.”

3. Our Catholic identity is deeply rooted in remembering and in tradition. It is important to be aware of the nature of our relationship (positive/negative, attached/non-attached) to memory and how it affects our being in the present and our availability to the future.

4. Typically, the “cave of our memory” is too cluttered, too much filled with memories, beliefs, and expectations for there to be open space inside from which to see, experience, and respond to the God who comes to us and calls to us from and into the future—a future that is fundamentally different from what we can project it to be based on our past reality.

5. Availability to the call into the future requires openness to entering into a process of purification of memory, of de-linking memory from our present self, so that the past no longer has the same hold on us.

6. The process of purification of memory is destabilizing, and can be disorienting. It is a liminal experience. It is essential to the process of moving toward and into the future.

7. How long the dislocation or even turmoil of the purification process lasts (individually, communally, societally) depends on the extent to which the past encumbers God’s approach.

As FitzGerald explains, following John of the Cross, availability to the call into the future requires openness to entering into a process of purification of memory, of de-linking memory from self, so that the past is no longer “accessible” in the same way as the basis for finding meaning and defining expectations for the future. This is not about “deleting” the past, but rather about no longer clinging to or being overly defined and constrained by the visions, expectations, relations of the past, so it becomes possible to stand on the shoulders of the past, of your founders’ visions and legacies, while looking into a vast horizon and moving toward the future with freedom and availability.

Memories remain, but they no longer mean what we thought they did. It is no longer the past that weaves the thread of memory through present lived experience into the future. Past, present, and future still fit together, but now in a significantly different way—so that our experi-

... The task of the prophetic community is not only giving language to people’s pain and grief in times of impasse like ours, but also focusing on the coming of God, the reign of God, and the rekindling of hope....

...
The posture of hope brings us to a new sense of relatedness and ultimate assurance, a place of conversion that releases creativity and freedom for the limitless possibilities of God.

Obstacles to “making space” for the future

As you read, please reflect on actions you and your community might consider to address the obstacles you encounter in your own context.

- We are in an age of crisis and, for many, of “despair.”
  The current situation in the world, the Church, and religious life can be discouraging, even paralyzing, if we read it from the perspective of old paradigms, which tell us that the center is not holding, that reality as we have known it
is unraveling, and that woe is upon us. Alternatively, if we consider the present situation from the perspective of the future, God's future, we can see God working through the crisis to bring about a new reality. This perspective does not negate the real problems and suffering of this time, but it does not lose sight of the call to be hopeful, even as we join the labor pains of our human community trying to birth a new consciousness, a new way of being a human family, in God's world. Be aware of what your perspective is on this time in society and in your congregation and how that perspective can either shut down your availability to the future or can open you to the future with hope.

For example, how are you reading diminishing numbers in your congregation? As a sign of “dying” and of “we’re doing something wrong” or perhaps also as a sign of purification and of old realities giving way and making space for something profoundly new? What does your perspective tell you about your relationship to God and your understanding of how God works? Are you giving space to ask these questions, personally and communally?

- Not allowing “purification of memory” to unfold. Do you or your community encounter fears, anxieties, and other resistances to embracing the process of purification? Is there an inability to stay with that process when it begins to happen to you individually and communally? When we do not realize what is happening and we experience the painful stripping away of purification, we can conclude that something is terribly wrong, that we have failed in some way, and so we cannot really stay with the process, through the necessary turmoil. More communal conversation to share the experience of purification could significantly support people’s going through the experience with greater availability. It is one thing to go through this dark night alone, quite another to go through it together, recognizing it as a willingly embraced communal journey of purification and transition into a new reality. Moreover, when we cannot yet conceive of the possibility of new realities, it can be difficult to be available to the future, so most of our energies go to resisting purification and maintaining old forms.

- “Nesting” or embeddedness of religious life within the institutional Church system. Consider the fact that religious life exists within an institutional Church, which, like most institutions, is averse to change. Institutions tend to maintain themselves as they are. Faced with social change and pressures from within and without, we see the institutional Church imploding on one hand (especially as a result of the sexual abuse crisis), and rigidifying on the other. Given that religious life is embedded in a change-averse institutional reality, you will inevitably encounter parts of your own communities and of your own selves that also resist change. Where are these parts in you? Being available to the future requires welcoming and listening to all the parts, including those who fear isolation and loss of identity in the face of change, those who hope for deeper relatedness as well as those full of hope in something new. Be curious about the parts of you and your community that might be resisting “uncluttering the cavern of memory” and openness to the future. It does not work to try to silence the voices among you that resist change, ending up with a polarization between those and the voices eager to go forward. The possibility of meaningful, robust transformation for the future will flow from allowing all voices to be present and be heard.

- “Nesting” or embeddedness in United States culture. U.S. culture is currently dominated by strong forces intent on maintaining people’s attachment to comfort and perceived security and averse to prophetic critique suggesting the possibility of alternative ways of relating and organizing. It is important to become aware of the impact of these forces on you and your communities and of the extent to which being embedded in this culture affects your availability to transformation.

- Multicultural reality within religious life in North America. The growing diversity of members in religious communities is a blessing and a challenge. It offers the opportunity to expand consciousness and horizons of identity, to experience other perspectives and ways of thinking, and to welcome individuals who can be quite free from attach-
ment to comfort and security and naturally model the letting go required for moving forward.

Diverse membership can also present challenges, with some members bringing more traditional paradigms and expectations, especially in terms of relating to peers and to authority. Some cultures tend to discourage taking initiative, speaking up, promoting change, and place high value on submissiveness and honoring those with greater seniority without engaging or challenging them. The presence of members from these cultures could become an obstacle to moving forward, unless leaders themselves model taking initiative and encouraging change, so that this becomes the stance to follow.

Also, in some cases, members from other cultures are focused on perceived advantages to joining religious life in the U.S., including status, education, financial support for their families. These individuals may not be inclined to support letting go of forms and structures that allow for these advantages and moving into an unknown future where structures may be redefined in ways that no longer support these advantages.

- **Interpersonal and systemic dynamics**
  
  **a. Lack of effective communication and relatedness in community.** In certain groups, it is difficult to really connect and communicate in depth and thus to discover a shared desire for movement into the future. It helps to assess when and in what ways your community communicates best, and where it experiences challenges in communication and relating. Embracing a communal process of purification and availability to the future will require effective communication. Consider engaging in some basic skill-building around communication if your group struggles in this area.

  **b. Focus on personal comfort, attachment to personal ministries or projects.** Some members are highly focused on their personal ministries or projects, especially when these are their primary source of affirmation and support, as can happen for those who find their ministry setting more nourishing than their communities. When members are so focused on their personal reality, they will likely not be very invested in communal processes that might challenge their focus.

  **c. Loss of focus on a communal call into future.** When there is a weak sense of the communal nature of the process of purification, it will be harder for the group to gather from its members the commitment and energy necessary to sustain the challenges of collective purification and letting go.

  **d. Lack of individual and or communal focus on “desire” and on “future.”** Do you think much about desire? What do you desire passionately right now? What do you desire for the future? If there is little desire, where will the energy come from to engage the journey into the future? Promote conversation on “desire” and the “future” in your communities.

  **e. Lack of shared energy in group in general.** When a community has energy flowing within it as a group, it is more likely that individuals will channel their own energies into that group energy, helping to move the community forward. Many ask how to build collective energy in the group. It helps to begin making time to talk together about the shared desire for energy. Leaders have said to me, “If we harness our energy and start living from there, people will come and join us.”

  **f. Lack of ability to move desire and initiatives forward into action.** In many groups, desire and initiatives are in place, but it is difficult to get anything implemented. This dynamic often suggests the presence of resistance to moving forward. Being curious about the resistance, listening to it, can gradually begin to open the way for movement.

  **g. Leaders are too occupied by many tasks and responsibilities to engage visioning.** Leaders can be so caught up in maintenance, administration, and other practical responsibilities that it is difficult for them to be available for the work of visioning, which is crucial for the group’s movement forward. Visioning includes naming for the group the concept of necessary purification and opening space for the future. An important action for leaders is to create language and space so that their communities can begin to have shared conversation about vision and transformation.

  **h. Dynamics around power and control.** These are present in all groups and are about relational energy and the ways it is channeled. Depending on how these dynamics are handled, they can become obstacles to moving forward or can be channeled to support movement.

- **Lack of shared spirituality and of “reading” congregational realities together.** There is a real hunger among religious for honest, deep conversation with other members and with community about the experience of God, of God’s call, of where people are in their journey with God. Members often comment that communal energy would increase significantly if these conversations, this faith sharing, could begin to really happen among them.

- **Not asking the question, “What does it mean to be faithful now?”** What does fidelity to God’s call to be present look like, in 2012, when the urgent need is to be agents of transformation of consciousness, of a different quality of relatedness at all levels? What does it mean to be faithful to the present call in the spirit of your founders? What does obedience mean in this context? How do you respond to a discerned call into the future when members of your community do not want to move forward and hold you back?

  Mary Daniel Turner, SNDdeN often referred to the metaphor of the mountain in speaking about the future of religious life. The future is a mountain to be climbed, and in every group there will be individuals with different energy, stamina, and equipment; some will climb all the way up to the summit of the mountain, others will make it halfway
up, others will hike to the base of the mountain, and others will stay at the base camp. All members are called to respond fully based on their resources and to bless others wherever they are, without expectation that all be in the same place and without holding others up or expecting all to move beyond where they can go. It is important for leaders, formators, members to see where they and others are and to frame the journey into the future so that there is a valued place for every member, not everyone is expected to be in the same place, and some members’ resistance does not keep the whole group from moving forward.

What enhances the ability to move forward (especially communally)?

- Making time to vision and dream together (leaders and members), and to promote a shared availability to transformation for the future. Holding together the questions that emerge: What are God’s urgent calls to us? What are the implications for us if we start to live radical availability? How do we need to prepare ourselves? Who do we want to be as we move into the future together?

- Flexibility, which allows change and movement to be less arduous. Notice in yourself and your community where the places of flexibility and of rigidity might be. Old systems that are breaking down and disintegrating in their current form lose flexibility; new systems that are growing show flexibility and creativity. What would it mean to realize you are at a cusp where something is disintegrating naturally (not because you did something wrong, but because a phase is logically ending) and the possibility of something new is already present, in the bud? Encourage flexibility relationally, emotionally, and spiritually in your community, while realizing not all members will be equally available to it.

- Ability to ask yourself and your community, “Where am I personally? How open/available am I to really letting go and to radical availability? What are my hesitations, fears?” Holding these questions and listening personally and together for the answers, realizing what kind of instrument you are and what keeps that instrument in working order; helps take up responsibility for helping move the group forward.

- Awareness that different members in community will be able to accept and participate in movement toward the future to different degrees. The image of the mountain of the future described above highlighted the importance of honoring wherever people are, with a gentle inclusiveness of different realities that does not compel all to be at the same level of readiness, while also offering “training” and opportunities for those who wish to get further up the mountain, but cannot do so only with their present resources. It is important for leaders to promote a consciousness that not all members will be at the same place, but that this will not keep the community from moving up the mountain.

- “Disponibilidad”—radical availability. A readiness to be engaged, present, and available to the future is essential, but can be a challenge in a society (and, increasingly, religious life) that is highly focused on individual goals and projects. Ask yourselves how you can foster radical availability, to God’s spirit, God’s work, and to the community.

- Ability and willingness to be in line with the action of God’s Spirit making all things new. What does it mean for you, personally and communally, to be in line with the action of the Spirit? Consider whether there is a discrepancy between your discourse, your literature, and what is happening at a deep level. Consider also the language and images you use and what they tell you about how you are thinking and what you are communicating. This is challenging work, spiritually and psychologically, and it is necessary.

- Stay with your restlessness. Don’t let it fizzle! The busyness and endless demands will tend to silence the restlessness. As part of your fidelity to personal and communal movement into the future, don’t silence the restlessness. Keep the conversations alive, the questions simmering.

In conclusion, I encourage you to read Constance FitzGerald’s article in full. Remember that the loss of cherished realities and the experience of discouragement and confusion are part of the dark night and of the process of purification necessary to really opening the way into God’s future. God calls to a future full of hope. May your shared availability to that hope nourish and support you on your journey forward.

Endnotes

2. Ibid, 228.
3. Ibid, 236.
5. Mary Catherine Hilkert, on the prophetic task, as referenced in FitzGerald, op. cit., 42.
Adventure and Transformation

ANTHONY GITTINS, CSSP

‘As life is action and passion, it is required of a person that he/she should share the passion and action of his/her time, at peril of being judged not to have lived.’

CARL JUNG (1875-1961) said ‘there can be no transforming darkness into light or apathy into movement without emotion’, and added that ‘emotion is the wellspring of personal maturity’. He also said that when two people meet, both will be transformed if there is any true relationship. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) said that ‘the future enters into us in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens.’

So we begin this reflection with thoughts and images from two thinkers. From Jung, that as we move into the future we must transform our self and each other; and from Rilke, that the future will actually transform itself or will be transformed, through each of us (or perhaps not).

Here is a challenge that is particularly acute for those in religious life today, and let us be very clear about it: individually and collectively we have the ability and the duty, furthermore, to be transformed; and if we take this seriously we will be instrumental in changing the world! But there is a corollary that is no less important. Jesus says that whoever fails to encounter others and be mutually transformed, and whoever fails to transform the future due to laziness or lack of passionate faith, hope, and love, will have failed to be who they were created to be and to do what they were created for. Furthermore, God’s plan (which by God’s Providence includes and involves each of you who read this) would then in some measure be thwarted or even undermined.

So now we have three voices to listen to! Jung, the Swiss Christian, says that transformation requires an emotional investment. Rilke, the German Nature poet, says that our transformation can change the world. And Jesus, the Jewish preacher from Galilee, says that the transformation or conversion entailed in being a disciple of his actually allows God’s Mission to be continually pursued and applied on earth as it is in heaven! But how is this to happen?

PURPOSE OF MY SPEAKING NOW

The Hebrew word for conversion (teshuvah) literally means ‘to go back home’, and is nowhere better illustrated than in the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15). But conversion implies first that a person remembers where home is, and then deliberately chooses to return. Jewish tradition is very clear: the will of God may change; we do not believe in blind, inexorable Fate but in a loving Providence, an attentive God; and each person has been empowered to begin, again and again, so that neither failure nor despair has the last word. Thus understood, conversion is the only hope for us and for religious life itself.

What follows is a reflection on religious life as God’s dream for us and our communities. God’s deepest desire is that we remember where our true home is and choose to return. My starting-point is transformation and mission, involving the harnessing of emotion, the fostering of hope, and a spirit of adventure. Without emotion (Jung says) there will be neither maturity nor movement; without hope, you have either false optimism or growing despair; and without a spirit of adventure you will become immobilised by being over-cautious or by the fear of taking appropriate risks. Your transformation implies continuous conversion, lest you first become predictable, then

1. This article is an edited form of a talk originally given to the Presentation Sisters of Esopus, New York. The author of this opening quotation is Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841-1935) – inclusive language added.
inflexible, and finally paralysed or passive. Furthermore, continuous conversion entails commitment to God’s Mission, without which you will become overwhelmed by your responsibilities or failures and by the demands or criticisms of others. Or, and let’s admitted this danger too, if you don’t simply stop trying – you will finish up ‘doing your own thing.’

Without a spirit of adventure you will become immobilised... Your transformation implies continuous conversion, lest you first become predictable, then inflexible, and finally paralysed or passive.

**RECOMMENDED LIFE AS TRANSFORMATION**

Heraclitus said that nothing endures except change; but transformation is not merely change. Given time, change occurs naturally in the form of a gradual slowing down, entropy, or decay. Transformation, on the other hand, is a totally different process, and we are called, not simply to change, much less to deteriorate or decline, but rather to become transformed. St Paul told the Romans not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed (Rom 12:2). He also promised the Corinthians that, if they stayed faithful, they would all be transformed at the sound of the last trumpet (1 Cor 15:52). So how can we recognise transformation and commit ourselves to it?

Transformation is the most radical kind of change possible. It does not happen by chance but is generated by immensely powerful processes that develop according to laws that are identifiable. An original reality is then converted into something quite new. But, critically, the new reality is always traceable to the original (which is why we speak of the transformation of one into the other). The outcome is quite dramatic, though the process may be gradual or cumulative. For example, at 211 degrees Fahrenheit (99.3 Celsius), water is very hot indeed; but at 212°F (100°C) it actually boils and is transformed into steam. Steam can power a heavy locomotive to very high speeds; hot water can do no such thing! That one extra degree marks a huge difference. Likewise, a fragile, baby boy was transformed into the towering genius who painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo. Again: a self-confessed lazy religious called Teresa de Jesús was transformed by grace and good works into the great Spanish mystic and reformer, St Teresa of Ávila. And permit me a final example here: the element plutonium was, by nuclear fission, transformed into the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima. Transformation can change the world – literally.

Two things worth noticing, I suggest. In the first place, if we only look at the initial reality – water, a baby boy, a baby girl, or a chemical element – it is not apparent exactly how it will be transformed or what it will in fact become. And, secondly, if we start with a transformed reality – Francis of Assisi or Adolf Hitler – it can always be tracked back to its original form and its ‘transformation’ traced. Thus we can understand how a particular baby grew up to become Osama bin Laden or Barack Obama. But we can also see clearly that no stone will ever be transformed into bread, no lie can ever give birth to truth, and, furthermore, no violence will ever produce peace. Similarly, no religious community without profound faith, abiding hope, and enduring love can ever be transformed into the abundant crop that becomes the harvest of the Realm of God. It is a challenge: if we hope to be transformed, we need to know our potential and our limitations, and identify what would be nothing more than dangerous daydreams. Looking carefully, we can get some general idea of what we might become, and also get some idea of what is utterly impossible. Then we can set ourselves to become the best possible people, the best possible community, the best possible instruments of God’s mission for the world’s transformation.
Transformation is not random, it is governed by rules. So, in order to understand not only our own personal and collective potential but also our utter limitations, we need to scrutinise the reality as it is at present: our institutional foundations, community wisdom, numerical strength, and current practices. No wishful thinking can transform institutions or individuals into zealous religious with a spirit of adventure and a hunger and thirst for God’s justice. None of us can give what we do not first possess, and nobody can become what is not consistent with their nature. Yet transformation is mandatory if dry bones are to live and if God’s will is to be done on earth. If there is to be authentic transformation, it will only come by the power of God’s own Spirit, and only if we allow God to be in charge (Ezek 37), as we so willingly and wholeheartedly did on the day of our religious profession.

RELIGIOUS LIFE AS A SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE

Sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) claimed that adventure was for the young. He was in his early fifties then, and apparently settled into a comfortable middle age from which he did not want to be disturbed! I think he was quite wrong: adventure is for those who do want, or are willing, to be disturbed, irrespective of age. Disciples of Jesus actually seek to be disturbed. J.G. Dunn said: ‘There is a disturbing quality about the urgency of Jesus’ call, a shaking of the foundations, that those who want a quiet life are bound to resent and resist.’

There can be no adventure without disturbance, but adventure is not limited to the young. As Betty Friedan was approaching her seventieth birthday, she wrote The Fountain of Age, truly a wonderful book. Familiar with the mythic ‘fountain of youth’ (the obsessive cult of youth, and intolerance of grey hairs and advancing age) she wanted to celebrate the wisdom that can come with age and the extraordinary contributions older people can make and share. Life expectancy in many countries has risen by 70% in the past century. Could this unprecedented social fact have an evolutionary significance? Might it contribute, not just to personal wellbeing but to the greatest good of the greatest number, to the furtherance of social justice, and to the ushering in of the Realm of God? Today’s religious should seriously ponder these questions. But, as I say, the best answers will only come to those with a true spirit of adventure.

If we are not attracting new life, is it because we are simply not attractive, and precisely because we are not adventurous enough?

Has the bold energy vanished from religious life? Has the spirit of adventure — so characteristic of our founders, of our own youth, and of some (young and not so young) religious today — been sapped by a spirit of frustration or helplessness? If caution and prudence are more evident than risk and trust; if the art of the possible has become more practised than the virtue of hope; and if some of the most adventurous religious have long since left their communities (feeling stifled or sensing futility); what right do we have, to expect the Holy Spirit to renew the face of the earth? Many communities spend obscene amounts of money on projections for the future and maps for the journey, and some religious have been so seduced as to be compromised by their own trendy electronic gizmos or designer gadgets. Some are able to save so much time they are hardly mobile any more, and this has nothing to do with sickness or age. Meanwhile, what is happening to faith, trust and imagination? The very qualities that drew us to religious life and the features we so passionately sought, seem scarce commodities in some communities. If we are not attracting

new life, is it because we are simply not attractive, and precisely because we are not adventurous enough?

The spirit of adventure is surely not the exclusive property of the young, but many young people are still as idealistic, generous and committed as any of us have ever been. But if the adventure has left religious life, why would the young seek to enter there? Unless religious life continues to be an adventure, we are not being led by the Spirit of God but have become tame, domesticated and predictable, and no longer marked with the risk-taking wildness and unpredictability of our founders.

A spirit of adventure and a sense of mystery are not mutually exclusive! People of faith and recipients of God’s revelation should have a double portion of both. But a selfish spirit and the Holy Spirit are indeed mutually exclusive; and the Holy Spirit is indeed the Spirit of adventure. We dare not forget that the initiative belongs to God’s Spirit, and we must not muzzle the Spirit who is responsible for renewing the face of the earth and transforming each of us. But sometimes – in the heat of the moment, the grip of fear, or the shadow of death (or perhaps when personal or administrative mandates are to be renewed and evaluations loom, when the pressure of other people’s expectations builds or when we hunger for people’s approval or the quiet life) – we can effectively muzzle the Spirit. And then we worry about what has happened to our joie de vivre and spontaneity, and we anxiously wonder why death seems to be getting ever closer!

RELIGIOUS LIFE AS MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY

The word ‘spirituality’ has had a chequered history. The Latin root is spirare, to breathe, suggesting perhaps that spirituality is as much part of life as breathing. But ‘spirituality’ has frequently been defined in opposition to something else, and Christianity has not been much help. Yet humanity is both/and rather than either/or: we are both spirit and body, both mind and matter, both elevated and debased, both graced and sinful.

Spirituality has often been opposed to the body, or sought at the body’s expense. But we are all embodied, and it is impossible to separate what God joined: body and spirit. In fact Christianity is, par excellence, the religion of the body, of embodiment, of incarnation – of the Word made flesh. Tragically, this has often been overlooked.

SPIRITUALITY: INCARNATION WITH THE SPIRIT

For people of the Abrahamic faiths, the word ‘spirituality’ should immediately evoke the Spirit: the Spirit that is Holy, God’s Spirit. But ask around, or consult a dictionary, and you are unlikely to corroborate that. At the Baptism of Jesus, the crowd witnessed the heavens torn apart, the Spirit of God hovering like a dove, and God’s word: ‘You are my beloved son’ (Mk 1:9). This Spirit was manifest, and known by Jesus and the early community as the one who inspired [the ‘in-spir(it)er’] or animated [the ‘one who gives spirit to’] him. In other words, the ‘spirituality’ of Jesus was, precisely, the Holy Spirit. At the very beginning of his public life, Jesus himself had said it clearly: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; and he has sent me’ (Lk 4:18). Clearly, the Spirit is the initiator, the legitimator and enabler; and each one of us has been baptised by, and into, that very same Spirit. This fact should be foundational to our own understanding and experience of spirituality.

Only when we realise that ‘spirituality’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ have everything in common will we begin to glimpse a God’s-eye view of ourselves and our lives. Regrettably it seems doubtful that many of us truly believe in the promise of our own Baptism, supposedly ‘firmed-up’ or ‘confirmed’ in the sacrament of Confirmation.

Authentic Christian spirituality then, is nothing less than our participation in God’s new creation, expressed in a renewed and transformed life, and made possible by Christ’s initiative,
through his call to us, and by his cross and resurrection. For believers, this is stupendous; for unbelievers, sheer fantasy. But Jesus promised that, by sending the Spirit, his abba would forge an intimate relationship with all who love God and remain faithful (Jn 14:23-26). The Spirit activates God’s transforming love in all who respond to the call to discipleship. This same Spirit gathers you into community, dedicated, as Jesus was, to the reconciliation of humanity. And you — individually and corporately — are charged, by your call as religious, to be transformed in order to transform; your lives are not simply for your own perfection but — critically — to be generative and life-bearing for others.

It seems doubtful that many of us truly believe in the promise of our own Baptism, supposedly ‘firmed-up’ ... in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

You are the seed destined to be grounded and earthed, softened and opened up, in order to germinate and bring forth new life (Jn 12:24-25). You are the modest mustard seed, designed to be transformed into a tree that becomes a nesting place for the birds of the air (Lk 13:18-19). And the agent of this transformation is God’s own Spirit. So the authenticity of your spirituality and your apostolic life is measured both by your intimacy with God’s Spirit and by your willingness to lay down your life for others (Jn 15:13). Whoever does not remain in Christ and with the Spirit of Christ, is like a branch that grows, not as a nesting place for others, but as an ugly shoot to be cut off, discarded, and left to wither (Jn 15:6). These are hard words indeed, and a shocking image.

Your transformation by God’s Spirit will move you out of your inner, private world(s) and into the marketplace, the public square, to witness to (indeed, to embody, to incarnate and articulate in your own lives) the redeeming and healing love of God. Therefore your spirituality must incorporate a centrifugal or missionary dimension, without which it is not yet fully Christian, not fully Christ-like.

SPIRITUALITY: EMPOWERMENT FOR MISSION

Like Jesus, the early disciples understood themselves to be inspired by and subject to the Holy Spirit: this was their ‘spirituality.’ Inagrace Dietterich pursues this theme with remarkable insight: ‘Spirituality shaped by the [biblical] Spirit is radically different [from contemporary or New Age spirituality]’ she says. ‘Its purpose is empowerment for mission: for witness to God’s mighty acts.’ This is direct, wonderfully — even startlingly — so, challenging, and deeply encouraging: we are called and sent by God; our lives have a much greater and more noble purpose than either self-interest or even survival; our call is to be witnesses (the Greek for witness is martur, c.f. our martyr) to God’s great and compassionate works; and the way we respond to the call to collaborate with God’s purposes is as disciples of Jesus, committed to continuous conversion — by transformation.

Mission is, first and foremost, God’s initiative, God’s activity. It is the very life of the Trinity. The subject of mission is neither ourselves nor our own communities, and not even the Church; the subject of mission is God: Mission is God’s (work). Thus we speak of the missio Dei. And we ought not to say that the Church, or your community, has a mission, but that God’s Mission has the Church, has the community, which are the servants of God’s mission, and derivative of it. The responsibility of the Church, and of your community, is essentially this: to serve God’s Mission faithfully day by day. It differs only in scope and focus, not in levels of dedication or integrity.

Mission then, is God’s own eternal work. And Christian spirituality should be shaping the lives of all who are charged with participation in this mission by virtue of God’s own call. The call comes through Jesus, who transforms disciples’ lives through love, and sends them in his name as he himself was sent in God’s name. The divine mission, eternal and cosmic, was brought to earth by Jesus, and is continued in his name by faithful, hopeful, and loving disciples who carry out his mandate. Mission is neither our own initiative nor the Church’s; nor is it a programme or task we undertake on God’s behalf. Mission is a way of naming the work of God’s own Spirit who is renewing the face of the earth. But, by God’s grace and foolishness, you are called and commissioned to participate in God’s own design. God’s mission has you, individually and collectively, and you must not look back or falter.

Fortunately, you are not required to live forever, to remain youthful, or even to grow numerous: but you are asked, each and all, to remain faithful until you die, and thereby to glorify God. The God who chose you will surely call others, for God’s work does not depend entirely on you: it started long before you were called, and will continue long after you pass on.

You were not created to be turned inward (inverted) but rather outward (everted). Authentic conversion or transformation is accomplished through processes that effectively turn your lives inside out! Jesus poured out his life for the life of the world, and called his disciples to emulate his dedication to his abba and to all his sisters and brothers: “The love, freedom and joy of Christian spirituality is overflowing, contagious, and intrinsically seeks to embrace the whole of created reality.”

Everted (or exocentric!) living should describe our basic disposition and/or current state of being: it can never be a thing of the past.

Too many Christians, for too many reasons, have failed to ensure continuity between what Jesus planted and what he intended should grow. This is partly due to a catastrophic failure of the collective imagination of Christians: we have failed to link in with the divine dream, to imagine what Jesus imagined, and therefore to be sufficiently committed for it to become a reality. After two thousand years, we still have so much to learn and then to practise and teach, about authentic, Spirit-led spirituality and discipleship.

And we ought not say that the Church, or your community, has a mission, but that God’s Mission has the Church and indeed your community, which are servants of God’s mission, and derivative of it.

RELIGIOUS LIFE AS COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

To live is to change; to be perfect is to change often, said John Henry Newman, at a time when such a statement was highly contentious. Indeed many of us grew up in a Church solidly opposed to change, and were taught to persevere with dogged and undeviating determination. That Church produced some rather inflexible people, whose imagination and sensitivity to changing circumstances were severely impaired. Newman was exploring his theme on the development of doctrine, and suggesting that, far from being inflexible, we must always read and respond to the signs of the times and people’s needs. A spirituality that concentrates on personal performance, competence, and control, is not only limited but can often be quite joyless and is certainly not fully Christian. We can identify three trajectories that should mark the progress of our lives (as Spirit-led, hope-filled people) from our current situation to

4. Imgrace Dieterich, loc. cit.

5. Imagination and its potential is addressed in my A Presence That Disturbs (2002), Ch 3.
where God is calling us. We must move, becoming transformed
from perfectionists into prophets, from managers to martyrs,
and from a ‘maintenance mode’ to a commitment to (God’s)
mission.

FROM PERFECTIONISTS TO PROPHETS

‘Be perfect as your abba in heaven is perfect,’ said Jesus
(Mt 5:48). This has caused confusion and enormous frustration
for those Christians whose focus is on themselves and their
own efforts: perfectionism is a kind of sickness found in those
who aspire to what is utterly impossible. Jesus asks that we
aspire to what is possible, with God, and not through our efforts
alone: holiness, wholeness, wholesomeness and full
development. In this way we reach our potential as human
beings. We are not God; but we are called to marked by a sense
of integrity, as God is. This means not looking to ourselves,
but looking outward and beyond, and for God’s sake, for God’s
glory, not our own. The prophets exhibited this attitude. They
were not focused on themselves or their own truth, much less
on foretelling the future! Rather their focus was on God and
God’s truth, and their lives were dedicated to articulating God’s
message which was always calling for (our) change and always
promising (God’s) faithfulness.

Unlike the priest, a sacred figure who enjoyed the
protection of the religious establishment and operated within
the sanctuary, purified and dressed in special robes, the
prophet had no such protection and was not a sacred but a
‘profane’ figure. ‘Profane’ means literally ‘standing outside
or in front of the temple’ (pro-fanum). Prophets, clothed not
in brocaded robes but very ordinary garb, or rags, even, stand
in the public square, speak God’s truth. They are not
protected but, rather, often vilified, pilloried, or even killed
for their pains. You are called to know God, to speak God’s
truth in public, and to be willing to pay the price.

FROM MANAGERS TO MARTYRS

What do managers do? They manage! They strategise,
decide, and execute. But martyrs witness: they discern, trust
and remain faithful. They put their understanding and insight
on the line, accepting the possibility these may need to change,
they run great risks of personal safety, and constantly witness
to God’s mighty deeds, God’s justice and will. The heart of
Christian living is martyria/martyrdom, implying the radical
witness of a lifetime. It is not wanton risk, but it will always
require a willingness to gamble with our current and provisional
(or limited) understanding of the faith, of God, and of others.

Whoever is ready to gamble – not with God, but with
their understanding of God, God’s creation and all
God’s people – is willing to allow God to shake and
modify that understanding: to change and deepen it.

Martyrs must submit their current understanding – of faith,
of God, and of people – submit it all to the test of life. This is
necessary for a maturing of faith and a developing relationship
with God and neighbour. Not to risk in this way would be to
cling too tightly to our partial understanding and thus to resist
our very own conversion. Whoever is ready to gamble – not
with God, but with their understanding of God, of God’s
creation and of all God’s people – is willing to allow God to
shake and modify that understanding: to permit God to change
and deepen it. Such personal transformation by ongoing
conversion always involves God, other people, and the martyr’s
risk-taking and trusting spirituality.

FROM MAINTENANCE TO MISSION

Maintenance is care for current concerns and projects;
maintenance focuses not only on what is but what is yet to be.
Maintenance is rational stewardship; mission is faith-filled
service, not defined independently by the rational but rather by trust in God’s grace and faithfulness. Whoever answers the call is led by faith, hope, and love: these are not limited by reason or logic, by budget or personnel. From the birth of the Church, maintenance and mission have lived in tension. The disciples locked in the Upper Room would never have emerged into the light of day until they were literally inspired: the Spirit breathed new life into them and drove them out, into encounter with God’s people. The crowds were amazed to see them gambling with their understanding of the God of universal mission, and palpably inspired.

You believe in the same Spirit, and you have already dedicated your lives to God’s mission. And all religious today should be asking to be restored, inspired, and sent out (‘commissioned’) once again. There is no turning back, and this is no time to retreat. This is the time to risk everything in faith. How can we possibly be faithful unless we are missionary? Only renewal of mission can renew the Church and the face of the earth; because mission is another name for the very Spirit of God, and we, like Jesus, were baptised with that very Spirit and sent to embody good news.

RELIGIOUS LIFE AS GENERATOR OF COMMUNITAS

The missionary commitment required of religious communities is demanding; it costs (in T.S. Eliot’s words) ‘not less than everything’. Without our creative – and sustained – energy, the Spirit of mission will be unable to animate our communities. Examining this ‘energy’, we note that it is not a necessary by-product of religious life; rather, it needs to be generated, deliberately. Institutions, including religious ones, are inherently conservative: maintenance – of resources, projects and personnel – tends to absorb virtually all their energy. But before our religious congregations were ‘institutionalised’ – before Rules and Constitutions were approved, before vocations, buildings, and commitments multiplied, before the community became stable and also numerous, something extraordinary happened. Like the explosion that produces new planets and galaxies, there was raw, concentrated, creative power, called communitas-energy.

Communitas exists when the founding inspiration of a fragile few, who are united in passion, imagination and hope, generates a creative burst of energy. Like a bolt of lightning whose incandescent light briefly turns night into day, so communitas-energy cuts through the dark, flashes against the horizon, and illuminates a vision of what God is asking. Numbers are invariably few and money scarce, and the vision itself appears totally unrealistic, even wildly extravagant. But common commitment and utter dedication can generate communitas-energy that defies all rational understanding. Such is the founding moment of religious communities and congregations.

But communitas-energy is also short lived. As incandescent light fades and white heat abates, so communitas almost imperceptibly but quite certainly turns into the natural daylight or room-temperature ambience of community. ‘Community’ (the domestication of communitas) can handle large numbers of people and manage a range of rational programmes; it can execute long-term plans and general maintenance.

Community is the institutionalisation of communitas. Where communitas is pathbreaking, risk-taking, and flexible, community becomes predictable, prudent and routine. If communitas is combustion, community is a steady burn, and both are necessary if religious life is to retain its missionary dimension. But unless the spark of communitas still burns within, a community will gradually lose momentum, run out of ideas, become creatively bankrupt, and ultimately betray its initial promise.

Communitas is to community as flame is to coal, as a spark is to the flint, or fuel is to a rocket: both elements are necessary, but the active agent is communitas. When the flame flickers, the spark
fails, the fuel is depleted, no coal can ever produce heat, no flint flame, and no rocket lift-off.

Communitas is a measure of your capacity for refounding and for mission. Not every religious is animated by communitas and not every congregation has sufficient. It is marked by radical generosity and utter commitment to the ‘dangerous memory’ of Jesus, to the spirit of our founders, and to the adventure of our lives. Communitas is not dependent on youth or strength but on commitment and the sustaining of a vision. Religious communities do not lose communitas because they decline and die; they decline and die because they lose communitas. The future of religious life is communitas-energy. It may only need a few to generate this energy, but it must be endorsed and fostered by many more, lest it flicker and die.

‘HOLD FAST TO THE HOPE WE PROFESS’ (Heb 10:23)

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) said: ‘Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; so we must be saved by hope’. God is the Initiator, the Caller, and the one who saves those who live in hope. Our hope is, after all, in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Religious communities do not lose communitas because they decline and die; they decline and die because they lose communitas.

If we remember where our true home is, and if we constantly direct our steps towards our loving God, we will be converted and transformed. If we cultivate a generous spirit of communitas, our communities will be refounded and God will be praised and glorified. If we live faithfully in hope, God will surely continue to be our strength. If our hope-filled lives inspire other people to hope as well, we will remain instruments of God’s mission and will enable God – through our ministry – to offer others an alternative to frustration and meaninglessness. And if, with faithful courage and courageous faithfulness, we remain focused on our God, God will surely and certainly hold us in the palm of God’s hand. This is enough.

Pincher Martin is sometimes taken to be a novel about hell, but it is really a story about purgatory. Purgatory is not an ante-room in which morally mediocre types sit around performing various degrading penances until their number is called and they shuffle shamefacedly forward into paradise. For Christian theology, it is the moment of death itself, when you discover whether you have enough love inside you to be able to give yourself away with only a tolerable amount of struggle. This is why martyrs – those who actively embrace their deaths in the service of others – traditionally go straight to heaven.

Terry Eagleton

On Evil