Our witness to communion

By Sister Mary Pellegrino C.S.J.

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Photo by Sister Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M.

I'D LIKE TO START WITH A STORY that goes to the heart of my theme. After the civil war in the Sudan ended several years ago, the international leadership organizations for both men's and women's religious communities felt compelled to form an organization to help rebuild the country. They called it Solidarity for South Sudan, and their vision was to work with the people of the area, a people who were very divided by tribe, which had contributed to the war.

To get the project underway the international unions of religious superiors put a call out to their worldwide membership asking for missioners. Missioners for this new project in South Sudan could be men or women of any community or charism as long as they were experienced missioners who had served in a foreign country.

The way Sister Pat Murray, I.B.V.M. tells this story is that as the weeks and months wore on the missioners didn't feel they were getting anywhere. Some were thinking maybe it was a mistake, that it was not possible to make any headway in their goal of helping rebuild the country. One day the tribal elders and the missioners got together to talk about what was happening. And during that meeting, what the missioners heard from the elders of the different tribes was this question: How do you, from different tribes live so well together?

Among a people fractured by tribal loyalties, the way to healing, recovery, and restoration was through *community*. It was the only way to transcend their differences. There are many answers to the question the elders asked—perhaps these missioners were especially mature; maybe their personalities meshed well, and so on. But I like to think the reason that these people of "different tribes" could live so well together was that there is an innate call to community at the heart of religious life.

Communion is central to our vocation

No matter our community, our charism, or our mission, communion—union with God, one another, and with all of creation—is at the heart of our vocation, which means that really all of our vocations are one.

Bernard of Clairvaux recognized this in the 12th century when addressing a group of religious from different communities. He greeted them with these words: "I belong to one by obedience, and I belong to all by charity."

We belong to one another and to the church and the world in an essential way, and because of that we're particularly poised to witness to, inspire, and effect deeper, more authentic and loving relationships across the "tribes" of culture, religion, race, ethnicity, political ideology and religious affiliation.

In his 2014 Apostolic Letter to Consecrated Persons Pope Francis echoed a somewhat forgotten and obscure 1978 document produced by the plenary session of the Sacred Congregation for Religious Institutes and for Secular Institutes (now known as CICLSAL). Francis reminded us (or perhaps surprised us for the first time) that our church considers us to be: "experts in communion" called to be an ecclesial community in the church and in the world, "witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design."

Through the profession and expression of our vows and freed for the fervor of charity, we are communally a prophetic sign of intimate union with God whom we love above all. Through the daily experience of our communal life, prayer, and apostolate we are recognized as a sign of fraternal (and sororal) fellowship. "In fact, in a world frequently very deeply divided and before our brothers and sisters in faith we give witness to the possibility of a community of goods, of communal love, and a way of life and living given wholly and fully to the following of Christ." That was written in 1978, prescient then and even more apropos today.

So how do we do this "communion" thing? How do we become the architects and witnesses to God's own plan and longing for union? I'd like to focus these reflections on communion as vocation in this time when our common humanity is fractured and broken, when many institutions are declining, crumbling, and ineffectual, when our youth and young people are clamoring for a voice, when the voices of our Latino brothers and sisters are emerging with new fervor, when we allow our politics to define our truth, I suggest that we need first to remind ourselves that it doesn't all depend on us. We do well to remember that while everything in our world and in our experience may mitigate against it or work against it, communion—union in and with God—already exists. It already is. All of creation lives and moves and has its being in God. And we are merely a part of a magnificent, stunningly beautiful and vibrant universe.

For better or for worse everything is connected. Everything from our economy, to our climate, to our culture, to our politics, to our consciousness—everything is already related.

Despite that ultimate reality, of which we are not always conscious, we live in the midst of brokenness. So what is the expertise that we're to bring to all of this? What can we as religious bring to this particular moment of brokenness? How do vocation ministers enter into it in order to be transformed and to transform it?

Another way that vocation directors might ask the question is: what capacities do you need to see in the men and women with whom you're discerning in order to have confidence that they can contribute to and be capable of the kind of unifying presence we are to bring to the world, a presence that the world desperately needs?

Separation is a myth

I believe one of the ways we can be honest about those realities and enter into them in order to bring healing is to first remind ourselves of what poets and mystics have known all along, of what science is revealing to us in new and stunning ways: that separation is a myth, and union or unity is the organizing principle of the universe.

Not long ago the image that probably most influenced our human consciousness was "Earth Rise," a view of Earth from outer space. Now images of a universe far more enormous, expansive, and alive shape our understanding of creation, and if theologized about freshly, will allow these stunning learnings to shape our understanding and relationship with the God who is the source of all. We know that it's from that experience of beauty, or original union that we begin.

Teilhard de Chardin spoke of this: "Driven by the forces of love, the fragments of the world seek each other so that the world may come into being."

The poet Wordsworth wrote of this original union in "The Prelude": "There is a deep invisible workmanship that reconciles discordant elements and makes them move in one society."

Julian of Norwich's deep union with God described in her "Showings" reveals that everything that is made is in everything that is made and that everything that is made exists in and because God loves it into existence.

On the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky Thomas Merton had an experience of profound communion with every other person. The experience as he describes it was for him "like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation."

Each of these describe human experiences of God, our ultimate reality, by piercing through the shroud of ultimate illusion that is typical of our consciousness. And in some way the recipient was never again the same.

I'd like to invite readers to also do a bit of reflection on their own experience. Call to mind a time, a moment, an experience of your own when God, ultimate reality, pierced your own human experience of ultimate illusion. An experience through which you came to know in a mystical way what you may have only known intellectually before. An experience before which nothing was different and after which nothing has ever been the same.

Return to that experience in your mind's eye, in your heart, in the deepest place within you. You may not have eloquent or poetic words; you may have no words at all but bring the experience to life again in your memory and touch base into the grace that that experience was and is for you. Bathe yourself in that experience.

alienation. How can we be and become the experts in communion that we're supposed to be?

The tragic gap

The Quaker spiritual writer Parker Palmer offers a way forward for us by describing what he calls the tragic gap, the space that exists between what is (reality) and what we know could or should be. It is the gap between the reality of a given situation and an alternative reality we know to be possible because we've experienced it. He writes:

> That alternative reality is not a wish-dream or a fantasy, but a possibility that we have seen with our own eyes.... I can hold the tension between reality and possibility in a life-giving way standing in the gap and witnessing with my own life to another way of living, slowly and patiently calling myself and my part of the world toward something better.

Standing in that gap, between what is real and what we hope for and through our presence to bring the two closer together, that is the architecture of union and unity. We stand in the gap, holding the tension of both/and, relinquishing our attachments to either one or the other side.

Palmer goes on to observe:

> If I cannot abide that tension, I will try to resolve it by collapsing into one pole or the other.... When I collapse into the reality of what is, I am likely to sink into corrosive cynicism ... when I collapse into pure possibility, I am likely to float off into irrelevant idealism.

Corrosive cynicism and irrelevant idealism may sound as if they are poles apart, but they take us to the same place: out of the gap and out of the action, out of those places we might make a life-giving contribution if we knew how to hold the tension.

Outside the gap ultimately is not life-giving, sustainable, real, or honest. I'd like to offer an example of a tragic gap created by the October 2018 massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh. You may have read or heard that the site of the shooting is just three blocks away from where Fred Rogers grew up. This massacre literally took place in Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. We're left with trying to make sense of this tragedy rooted in hate, irrational fear, xenophobia—all attitudes that are the antithesis of the kindness, good will, respect, nonviolence, and dignity, that Mr. Rogers taught and for which his neighborhood stands.

Our job, as architects and witnesses to God's plan for unity, is to be present in that space. Sometimes it's a physical space; sometimes it's an emotional space; sometimes it's an intellectual space. Our vocation is to enter those spaces and to bring a presence of neither corrosive cynicism nor irrelevant idealism. But rather to bring a presence of truth, healing, courage, and compassion for all those hardened on either side of the gap.

Invitation to reflection

Consider the tragic gaps that you see and experience in the church, the world, your community at this time. Choose one (knowing that they are all related), name it or describe it as best you can. Name where you lean— toward corrosive cynicism or toward irrelevant idealism and why. Name one thing that you can do to keep you in the tension of the gap.

How do we bridge these tragic gaps and, particularly, how does our prophetic vocation as consecrated men and women living in community contribute to the healing of the tragic gaps that are all around us?

For this I'd like to turn to the brilliant biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman who identifies three urgent prophetic tasks for the church. And I'd like to use these tasks as a framework for how we as religious (the prophetic presence of the church) might assume our responsibility as architects and witnesses of communion in the church and in the world.

In his book *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks,* Brueggeman boldly juxtaposes the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD with the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States and likens those two events as realities precipitated by parallel theological crises within the first century Hebrew culture and 21st century American culture.

There's not enough time to go into the richness of Brueggeman's thought in this regard so I highly recommend this book not only for its biblical scholarship, but for the keen social analysis of our American culture and its application to our ecclesial culture.

According to Brueggeman each of these events was precipitated by cultural ideologies of exceptionalism that created false narratives of security and invulnerability. For the 1st century Jews it was the narrative of their chosen-ness as God's people. For 21st century Americans it was the narrative of American exceptionalism and moral authority. Each of these narratives resulted in a deep cultural denial of the unsustainability of the false ideology. Once the denial was shattered and reality faced, deep cultural despair followed.

Brueggeman goes on to explore the prophetic tradition as a response and remedy to unsustainable ideologies that create rigid polarizations and their accompanying false narratives. He challenges the church to take up the task of our prophetic tradition. A prophetic church or a prophetic people, according to Brueggeman, tells the truth in a society that lives in illusion, expresses grief in a society that practices denial, and expresses hope in a society that lives in despair.

This is our vocation, the nature of our presence that's needed in the tragic gaps in which we find ourselves—speaking truth and articulating reality, creating spaces and places for the grief that follows when reality is faced, and expressing and articulating hope in the midst of despair.

Hope in the call of vowed life

I'd like to close with some final observations about the prophetic dimension of religious life and the hope I see. We are meant to live lives counter to the culture in which we find ourselves. Our vowed life calls us to counter a culture of greed and accumulation with our free relinquishment of our right to secure ourselves through private ownership, personal gain, and possession of resources.

Our vowed life and vocation to communion calls us to counter a culture of objectification and abusive control with an inclusive embrace of love, deep respect, and dignity.

Our vowed life and vocation to communion calls us to counter a culture of individualism, privatism and self-centeredness by placing our personal power, authority, and preferences in service to the following of Christ through the efforts of our institutes.

Our vocation of communion calls us to counter a culture of alienation, isolation, loneliness, violence, and hatred of the "other" with inclusive, loving, compassionate, and forgiving community.

To the degree that our lives flourish and are not diminished by the consequences of all that we've relinquished, then we can say that our communal life is prophetic and that each of us contributes to the vision of what the kingdom of God will be in its perfection: where everyone has enough. Everyone is loved. Everyone is free. And everyone belongs.

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