

***Life-long Formation for Living in Right-Relationship:
“...only this: Act justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6)***

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I. Introduction.

The world, the Church, and religious life are in a time of real crisis, great need, and transformation trying to happen. Daniel Groody, writing on *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice*, notes that justice and liberation are first and foremost about reordering the hearts of people, and that what the world especially needs now is renewed faith in the invisible heart of a God of life. So, the call for all of us committed to Christian discipleship is to find ways to make God’s invisible heart visible. Christian discipleship is thus essentially about right-relationship. And right-relationship is what religious life is called to be about, to form for, and to transform for.

As we consider formation for right-relationship, I propose to you the following four premises, upon which I base my development of our topic.

PREMISES:

1. The world, the Church, and religious life are in a time of crisis and transformation.
2. The world, the Church, and religious life need people of faith, especially religious, to be people of right-relationship, and thus to be agents of healing and transformation.
3. If religious are truly anchored in right-relationship, then peacebuilding and the work of justice can truly flow into their communities and into religious life generally, and also out to the world.
4. The practice and deep experience of authentic right-relationship will renew (even transform) prayer, community, and mission.

I will develop our topic by addressing the following five questions.

QUESTIONS:

1. What is the current context (in religious life especially, and in the world more generally....)?
2. What is “right-relationship”?
3. How does the practice/experience of right-relationship renew and transform prayer, community, and mission?
4. What are obstacles to right-relationship?
5. How does one promote lifelong formation for right-relationship?

II. What is the current context?

In the world, the Church, and religious life, there is a growing awareness of what is not well, as institutions and structures are no longer viable in their old/present forms, and as at every level of local and global life we see the urgent need for paradigm shifts, including within the context of Church and of religious life. There is also awareness among a growing number of people of a transforming consciousness clearly starting to be afoot. We are in a liminal space of in-breaking, of transformation beginning but not yet fully underway, of shifts starting to emerge, engendering unsettledness and uneasiness, as well as hope and energy.

I would like to identify a few dimensions of the present context in religious life, then in the Church and world more broadly, and then consider an invitation to the world, the Church, and religious life and its implications.

The present context in religious life:

(a) Among a number of religious there is some (often vague) **sense of a problem, of something missing in the lived reality of religious life**, but exactly what the problem or missing elements are is **not always recognized or articulated**, and often not seen at all in one's own community. Many religious don't think there is a problem at all; they think they are already "there"—at a place that has already "been renewed" and has already "done transformation," often a few decades ago. In reality, these individuals (and often their communities) are not "there," and are not making efforts to get "there" because they think they've already arrived "there." Many are not aware that there's anything missing with how they are living religious life—often a condition of denial. There is a clear possibility of a bright future ahead for religious life, but realizing that possibility requires going through necessary transformation, which inevitably includes struggle, even stretches of darkness, and which, thus, often elicits resistance and a predictable falling back to the stance of "we don't need to do this, we're doing fine as we are." There is a clear need to promote awareness that, by and large, the current "status quo" of religious life is not "it"! Is not yet the transformed reality.

(b) Many religious are "seeing" at least some of problems, are talking about them, but little concrete action is resulting. There is a **disconnect between the discourse and the reality** of what gets addressed and accomplished. This is a generally widespread dynamic, one I've observed frequently working with religious communities. An example shared by a Latin America provincial leader and formation minister provides an illustration. The CLAR (Latin American Conference of Religious), recognized for decades for its prophetic voice on issues of liberation, justice, commitment to equality and freedom from oppression, continues to talk a compelling talk about the equality of women in the Church and world, and yet the President of the organization is always a male and the Secretary is always a female. As my Latin American colleague observed, for all its being perceived as forward-looking and progressive, the CLAR (nested as it is within a cultural context and an ecclesial context in which women continue to be oppressed) also includes a misogynist reality which undermines the credibility of its

conversations about the equality of women, especially women in the Church. This is one example of how difficult it can be, in a community, or a group of religious, or a Church institution, to see beyond one's own discourse to what the reality of one's choices and behavior is actually saying.

(c) There are some **inherent dynamics working against transformation** in many contexts within religious life. I consider another example from Latin America as it illustrates a dynamic increasingly relevant to U.S. religious life, especially regarding initial formation. Individuals serving in leadership in Latin America have pointed out to me that, in Latin America, 20 to 40 percent of religious come from the second-poorest segment of the population. Think of the implications of having nearly a quarter to a half of congregational members from this background. These would tend to be individuals who, whatever the strength or not of their religious vocation, would typically carry profound unmet needs. Often, these individuals enter religious life lacking education, lacking the experience of having voice, having endured many kinds of oppression; they can show remarkable resilience, and also deep *carencias* or unmet needs, materially, psychologically, and relationally. This context raises the question of how to engage these profound needs in initial (and ongoing) formation. How does one begin to speak about embracing "poverty" to individuals whose entry into comfortably middle-class religious life (such as it is in most contexts in Latin America, and even more so in the U.S.) improves their condition so vastly over what they were accustomed to? The deprivations individuals carry naturally lead to an experience of "I want to be comfortable, especially since I never had any of this before" and, subsequently, to the previously unmet needs becoming a source of "gain" (*carencias se hacen ganancias*). If individuals are not exceptionally well-integrated psychologically and spiritually and inspired vocationally, these dynamics can easily lead to an attitude (conscious or unconscious) of using the institution/community to "get what I need/want and change as little as possible." This attitude can end up permeating large swaths of the fabric of religious life, and of institutional Church reality, and, inevitably, even of ministry settings at times. And it clearly works against transformation at both personal and systemic levels.

The present context in the Church and world more broadly:

As one looks around, it is clear that many institutions are in major flux, or simply not viable any more in their present forms. Institutions are living systems, and all living systems evolve and change. There is a widespread resistance to seeing institutions as living systems, because to do so means coming to terms with fact that they are not static, and thus are not fully controllable and will not forever confer power on those currently in control.

In their work on *Presence*, Peter Senge and his colleagues point out that, as long as our thinking is governed by "habit," especially when our thinking remains governed by industrial machine-age concepts such as control, predictability, standardization, we will continue to recreate institutions as they have been, despite their disharmony with and

failure to respond to the needs of the larger world. It is worth noting that concepts like control, standardization, uniformity increasingly seem to dominate the discourse of those sectors of Church wielding a lot of power, rather than “Spirit” discourse being dominant there. An important piece of the work of transformation (especially for those entrusted with leadership and formation) is to be well aware of the nature of one’s thinking and language, and to engage the movement necessary to shift out of the “habitual.” Such movement is essential to the transformation of religious life and to lifelong formation of agents of transformation.

Consider this invitation to move beyond “habit” juxtaposed to what is happening in much of the institutional Church at this time, in terms of increasing emphasis on “traditional” forms (including an increasingly circumscribed understanding of sacraments and of ministry and the ministerial relationship) and on vertical structures of authority and power, and see why a profound shift is needed—for the sake of the Gospel and of the in-breaking of the reign of God.¹ Not an adjustment, not a modification still defined by and grounded in “habitual” thinking, but a real phase-shift. Fintan Sheeran has argued that what religious life needs now is a shift of the magnitude of the shifts that took place at the founding of your congregations. The world needs a religious life transformed by nothing less than such a shift. Sheeran explains that this kind of shift requires two dimensions: a contemplative dimension of readiness for change, and an active dimension of surrendering to the action of God’s Spirit. In order for the shift to happen, it is necessary to cultivate these two dimensions in ourselves and necessary to form others for the dispositions of readiness and surrender.

This context opens up an important invitation to the world, the Church and religious life: **Do what is necessary to make it possible for the field to shift, so that “the forces shaping a situation can move from recreating the past to manifesting or realizing [the promise of] an emerging future.”**²

What does it mean to make it possible for the field to shift? At least part of what this means is that if the field of future is going to be different, if God’s reign is going to be allowed to break in—in the world, in the Church, in religious life—then we all have to go beyond the piecemeal gestures, modifications, partial restructurings, and begin to see the larger systems in which we are embedded and the ways those need to shift. When we are able and willing to see the larger systems (and we have to form people for seeing this way), the question then becomes, “Do you want to change the whole way you live?” Nothing less than this is necessary for systemic shifts to occur.³

¹ While we root our understanding of ourselves as Church in our history and sacred tradition, it is essential at this time to become aware of the extent to which our attachment to our past—especially past forms, structures, even metaphysics—can block openness to and experience of a God who is “constantly arriving and renewing” and “always alluring us forward from a future that comes to meet us.” (John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000, 88-89, quoted in Constance FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory”, *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009): 33.)

² Peter Senge et al., *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, New York: Currency Doubleday, 2005, 14.

³ *Ibid*, 24.

Understandably, this question evokes significant fear (especially in the context of an institution like the Church, and even in the context of religious life to large extent). That fear is at least one reason many prefer not to think or talk about (or even see, be aware of) these matters, choosing instead to remain in the habitual ways of thinking, tinkering with smaller renewals and readjustments, and avoiding larger seeing, questioning... and transforming.

Senge points out that an important difference between a healthy group and an unhealthy one lies in members' awareness and ability to acknowledge their felt need to conform (to the status quo). Individuals definitely need some capacity to conform in order to survive in religious life. But when the need to conform is excessive, it works against the possibility of transformation in a group, and against members of the group being and becoming agents of transformation. Of course, for the many individuals who enter religious life seeking a place to belong and fit in it will be much harder to acknowledge and appreciate the way that their need to conform impacts the possibility of transformation. Similarly, there are other individuals whose being overwhelmed with all the necessary "doing" (especially of mission and of "maintenance") keeps them from stepping back long enough to recognize their own "conforming" to the well-worn grooves of the system and thus contributing to preserving the status quo.

In the broader world, many patriarchal systems are already starting to undergo some degree of transformation, mostly not by their own choice. As these initial changes unfold, they include breakdowns in old forms, as well as tremendous clinging to those forms, leaving a "landscape that is at times fearful, reactionary, chaotic, bewildering for some."⁴

As Diarmuid O'Murchu points out, transformation at this time requires us to befriend the breakdown, not escape it, fix it, or try to rescue dying realities and institutions. We have to let die what needs to die, and with gratitude and respect, bury the dead. There is no rebirth, no transformation, without parting, grieving, and laying to rest.

One sees that embracing this need to "let die" is unsettling and disorienting for some, especially those who need security, predictability, and familiarity of structures, and can also be challenging for those in roles that entrust to them the maintenance of the organization/community/congregation, and who understand their charge as keeping everything "as it has always been" (to the extent possible). For other people, "letting die", while difficult, can actually be energizing and hopeful, even with the huge unknowns it opens up. Often the individuals who experience energy and hope around the letting go are younger members – or much-older members. Inevitably, there will be a tension experienced as people respond in different ways to the needing-to-let-die. Name the tension in yourselves and in your communities. Form for awareness of this tension, of the ways it can play out, of the ways it can be an obstacle to transformation, and of the ways it is part of current reality, of the present phase of transformation. If

⁴ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *The Transformation of Desire*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007, 130.

one can name the tension, this releases a great deal of energy to then work with it. Not naming the tension drains energy, making it difficult to do the necessary work. This tension can be especially evident among newer/younger members, some of whom perceive religious life as a refuge from chaos, uncertainty, instability, as they seek clarity, structure, and even, at times, a familiar dose of “patriarchal” power and governance (whether exercised by women or by men), while others seek, even yearn to give life to an experience of community, mission, and Gospel-living that will honor their deep desire for right-relationship, for non-patriarchal reality, for networks of Gospel living within which to give life to their charisms. Sometimes, the greatest tension occurs between newer members and the generation of members in their 60s, and not so much between the newer members and the real elders.

III. Definitions of Right-Relationship:

God’s definition of right-relationship in the Old Testament:

There are a number of definitions of right-relationship in Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament. The following one from Micah is, for me, particularly clear in defining what is essential in “making God’s invisible heart visible” and “reordering the hearts of people,” the core of right-relationship.

“What is it Yahweh asks? Only this:
To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”
(Micah 6)

There is a profound invitation and profound challenge in this definition and understanding of right-relationship, especially considering our significant limitations and brokenness, individually and communally. To consistently live from that “only” that God asks for is hard for many, impossible for some (and in any case always requires significant conversion of heart...). We all know how often this “only” is not lived out in community, nor at times in ministry and in leadership, and we realize how costly this failure can be. Still, despite our limitations and brokenness, individually and collectively, God continues to ask us to live into and out of the “only” that is held out to us. Striving to get relationships right at every level of life (with God, others, self, the Earth, the cosmos) is the heart and soul of the new reign of God—and is the only way we will survive as a species, the only way the planet will survive.⁵

The question for us becomes: How do we understand and live into this right-relationship into which God calls us?

Reflecting on our gathering here in Denver, in the mountains, I thought a lot about movement up and down the mountain. I would suggest that living in right-relationship involves a continual movement up the mountain, seeing what we see from/at the top,

⁵ Ibid, 179.

and moving down again into the valley (cf Mark 9). It is about walking humbly with God—walking on God’s terms—up and down the mountain; about loving in and as community, up and down the mountain; about doing justice by being willing to trek up into the mountain and then, at least somewhat transformed in heart, trek down again into the valley to take up the doing.

As Groody has noted, the mountain journey in Mark 9 is preceded and followed by two episodes of Jesus healing a blind man. As I reflected on this, it struck me that in order to continue moving into and out from right-relationship, we need to keep recognizing where our blindnesses are, asking God to heal them so we can see rightly and see more, and receiving the healing in whatever forms God gives it. And we need to stay aware that our journeying up and down the mountain will require our asking God to help us see with the heart of Christ at every step of the way—individually and communally.

As the disciples prepare to go down the mountain with Jesus, he tells them that following him on road to Jerusalem (which we are on all the time, and most certainly now!) and trusting God as they descend into valley of injustice requires them to surrender everything and relearn almost all they have known. Unless they surrender, they will neither perceive nor understand [correctly]; they will be neither informed nor transformed.⁶ The same invitation is issued to us.

So following Jesus today, in religious life, means putting your lives fully into the hands of God (individually, collectively, and corporately), who promises to uphold, guide, protect; it also means letting go of everything (including old forms and old structures for responding) as you descend down the mountain into the valley of injustice. Into a world waiting for a transformed and life-giving response. This is a call to freely embracing a costly-but-life-giving *kenosis*, an emptying of everything except open-hearted, clear-seeing, grounded love.⁷ A big challenge and a big invitation.

Senge’s definition of right-relationship:

For Senge, right-relationship is primarily about **presence**. It is about a quality of being present fully, deeply, truthfully, that opens a way forward for living into and from right-relationship. This quality of presence includes

(a) Awareness and Seeing clearly : This involves going up the mountain and thus stepping back, removing ourselves from our habitual stream of thought, so we can see more clearly, can look down at our little village in the valley and see it as we cannot see it from below, asking ourselves what our attitudes and preconceptions are, and coming to see what our mental models are, so we can “see how we see.” This broadened awareness leads to

(b) Being mindful of our “correct” place, responses, relation to all levels of life

⁶ Daniel G. Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 245.

⁷ *Ibid*, 245.

(God, self, community, friends, others, Nature), and of the impact of our choices on future generations, and then *acting* from that understanding.

Living into this R-R requires a change of heart:

The only change that will make a difference in this process is the transformation of the heart. (Otherwise, we will walk up and down mountains with no awareness, and not much will really change, no right-relationship will be able to flourish.) Change of heart involves conversion, both personal and collective. “Conversion as a Christian concept—*metanoia*—is about removing the obstacles, the blocks and barriers that undermine our ability to engage with life, with the fullness of the gifts and resources with which we are all blessed”⁸—for the purpose of making way for God’s reign to break in.

The major obstacles needing to be noticed and removed are systemic/structural ones, though of course there are also personal (psychological, emotional) obstacles.

Homecoming:

O’Murchu proposes “homecoming” as a new metaphor for transformation into right-relationship. This is about coming/going home from the experience one has had of right-relationship on the mountain journey in order to live from right-relationship and be an agent of justice, healing and profound transformation. We are invited to think of this time of real crisis and of transformation not as a time to be dreaded but as a homecoming, rather than as an exile.

The mystic and right-relationship:

Movement into authentic right-relationship calls forth (even requires) the mystic within. “The mystic struggles internally, discerning how best to respond to the complex picture of reality one encounters in the world. It is the persistent faithfulness to this discernment

that equips the mystic to promote and model the work of transformation... [The] mystic sees more clearly than anybody else how to reframe desire in the direction of transformation [and of true homecoming into right-relationship]...This unique wisdom is both the blessing and the heartache of the mystical calling. All of which leaves the mystic with basically one choice: opt in, not out. Co-creating a world for a more just and sustainable way of living becomes the life-long goal. And for all of us called to this quality of presence and ministry, we need frequent reminders that without something of

the mystic’s zeal and passion, none of us is likely to survive in trying to bring about the right relating that is at the heart of Christian faith [and integral to all faiths]”⁹ and that is the only way through transformation and into the new realities ahead to which God calls

us.

⁸ O’Murchu, op.cit., 125.

⁹ Ibid, 157.

IV. How does the practice and deep experience of authentic right-relationship renew and transform prayer, community, and mission?

Micah 6: *What does Yahweh ask of you... ? Only this: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*"

I would like to consider these three mandates for right-relationship in reverse order to how they appear in the verse.

1. **"walk humbly with your God"**: This invites us to enter deeply into the practice/experience of right-relationship with God (with the immensity of God, of God's power, God's love, God's beyond-comprehensibility...). How often do we pause, and really reflect on God as God and ourselves as God's creatures? What does it mean to take up a stance of humility with God? Reflect deeply on these questions, and on what it means to be able to "walk with God," at God's pace (not pulling ahead, or lagging behind...)? A deep experience of this humble walking with God cannot but **transform prayer**—and thus relationship with God. (A caveat: There are many situations in which psychological problems, including personality difficulties and unhealed trauma, can get in the way of this kind of transformation in the relationship with God. It is so important to do the work of healing to the extent possible, since so much of non-right-relating in religious life [especially in community life] is at least partly due to psychological difficulties. When the possibility of right-relating is compromised, so will be the possibility of engaging in the work of real transformation.)

When we can enter deeply into this experience of transformed relating with God (prayer), this leads naturally to

2. **"love kindness..."**, as deep right-relatedness with God in prayer overflows into right-relatedness with others. Entering deeply into the practice/experience of this allows for moving into real right-relatedness with others. Particularly with the others close at hand, those with a name, a story, quirks and challenges of personality. Reflect on kindness and on loving kindness. A deep experience of loving kindness toward all Creation, from a heart opened by right-relationship with God (through walking humbly with God, in the midst of God's Creation), **transforms community and the experience of community** (i.e., relationship with immediate others) into a true Christian community, able to love with the mind and heart of Christ.

And this transformed community is naturally able to...

3. **"do justice"**...by entering deeply into right-relationship with all others (including society and institutions) and with all Creation, and seeing clearly (from an open heart and from right-relationship with God and with community) what is

not in right-relationship, what is not life-giving. My favorite definition of justice is “fidelity to the responsibilities of my relationships.” So, “doing justice” that flows from a deep experience of right-relationship with God and others allows me to see clearly what my responsibilities are and to remain faithful to them. This deep experience of “doing justice” **transforms mission** (one’s understanding of it, approach to it, and its effectiveness).

This practice of right-relationship at each of these three levels allows us to become “friends of God and prophets”—what the world needs most right now!

V. **What are some obstacles to right-relationship?**

Groody reminds us that “[b]ecause love grounds our existence, the bigger the heart, the clearer the vision.”¹⁰ The problem is that, often, obstacles so clog and constrain the heart that the vision gets blurry. What are some of these obstacles?

- Psychological difficulties.
- Power issues.
- Resistance to transformation.
- Societal forces acting on Catholic pastoral, educational, health care institutions.
- Difficulty sustaining a vision for transformation back in home communities.
- Frenetic pace, difficulty integrating new ways of thinking and working.
- Leaders caught up in maintenance/sustainability of communities, unable to move forward despite value of this for them and desire to do so.
- Denial.
- Fear.

The first two major obstacles are **psychological problems** and **power issues**. These two alone account for much of what interferes with right-relationship. Psychological problems include personality difficulties, mood and anxiety disorders, trauma-related issues, and addictions. Issues around power include abuses of power and failure to take up power appropriately. These obstacles contribute greatly to a third major obstacle, **resistance to transformation** (to conversion, to change of heart).

Strong **societal forces acting on Catholic pastoral, health care, and educational institutions** (especially Catholic colleges), also work against transformation. For example, the strong tie-in of many Catholic educational institutions with U.S. society’s economic forces often becomes a real constraint in the institutions’ being able to freely act for justice, equality, and right-relationship.

Another obstacle is the fact that **many individuals and communities experience real difficulty sustaining a vision for transformation** when they return to their home settings after being inspired at an assembly or workshop. It is common for individuals to get all “fired up” with new ideas and hopes, only to find themselves so caught up in busyness and routine that they struggle to hold on to the vision.

¹⁰ Groody, op.cit., 252.

Many religious **move at such a frenetic pace that they don't know how to integrate** into their normal ways of working and living together **periods of "suspension"—of stopping, examining their assumptions**, realizing what keeps the old realities in place. When people learn to take the time to stop and examine their assumptions, breakthroughs can and do happen, new ways of thinking and working in can emerge, and it becomes possible to create a new culture of right-relationship in the group. It is necessary, individually and collectively, to pause in this way, and to form for a consciousness of what happens to us and whose interests we are really serving when we get onto the treadmill...

Many **leaders are so caught up by the "maintenance" and "sustainability" of their communities that they are unable to move forward through transition and transformation**, though doing so would be in keeping with their values and desires. Given how truly overburdened most leaders are, it could be helpful for them to name and hold in awareness the metaphors for the two central tasks of leaders in time of transition—undertaking and midwifing. Consciousness of these distinct tasks might clarify the value of distinguishing between two equally important responsibilities and of designating different individuals to attend primarily to each of the two tasks. If a leader is fully absorbed with the work of "undertaking" (as is true for so many leaders), she cannot be as present to the midwifing as is necessary if new life is to be welcomed into the community and allowed to grow.

Denial as an obstacle to right-relationship is most clearly evident in the perception and insistence that "We're ok [as we are]." It is important, individually and collectively, to challenge the "We're ok" stance at a deep level. OK for what? Called to what? Responding in what ways to current realities, needs, signs? But we need to realize that if individuals or communities are comfortable enough (are actually too comfortable for their own good...), then all the challenges will fall flat.

Reflecting on this problem of the denial that comes from being too comfortable to want to see whatever might "threaten" that comfort, Fintan Sheeran considers the story of the Babylonian exile as a particularly apt metaphor for the current situation of U.S. religious life. The story tells us that when Jerusalem fell, the Babylonians took as captives primarily the merchants, the artists, the skilled craftsmen, the intellectuals, the well-to-do, not the poor and unskilled workers. These Jews eventually settled into their life in Babylon quite comfortably and, for the most part, did quite well. In fact, they did so well that, when they were liberated and told they could return to Jerusalem (where there was much work and rebuilding to be done), many of them refused to leave, preferring to stay in their comfortable lives in Babylon. Sheeran suggests that something similar is happening with religious life here in the U.S., and, I would add, with the institutional Church more broadly. It is too comfortable. Who wants to move out of the "comfort zone" and lead others out of it? It is easier to let the next generation worry about being more "prophetic" and doing the actual work of transformation. When we are too comfortable, our first order of business becomes fulfilling our own needs and furthering our own agenda as institutions, not focusing on what is necessary for those in greatest need. That will come later; but first we have to maintain our own current comfort level. So, if there is too much comfort, any challenge to the insistence

that “we are ok” will fall flat. It is thus very important to form for a consciousness of what our comfort level is, what it’s about (material comfort, other types of comfort/security...), and how it can contribute to denial of the need for transformation and become an obstacle to living in more authentic right-relationship. Denial often takes the form of not seeing what God wants us to see. Forming for right-relationship at all levels opens the way to seeing rightly (including becoming aware of our “habitual” thinking and the ways it perpetuates old forms), and responding accordingly (including moving to shift out of the “habitual” patterns into new forms).

“Do you want to change the way you live? The way you relate? Do you really want to live in right-relationship?” These fundamental questions sit on top of immense **fear** for many, and that fear is at least one reason many prefer not to think about, talk about, or even be aware at a deep level (beyond the surface talk about change) of what is no longer viable, what needs to be let go, what the future might look like.¹¹ **Fear** can be a major obstacle. We need to be aware of it, honor where people are with it, and also name it, engage it, let it tell you about itself, in order then to work with and through it and forward.

Can we start being aware at a deep level of what that fear is? Speak to that fear, is a part of your reality, is not all of your reality. Let it tell you what it’s about, don’t push it away or hide it, it has a message for you, and if you sit with it it might just relax its grip on you, individually and as a group. Senge writes about the ways that, in a group, **fear** (around a perceived unknown that could be threatening in some way) can easily lead to activation of the “organizational immune system,” which triggers a response that is “toxic to innovation and innovators (perceived as intruders in the system), a response that is often quite strong and thus likely to overcome most attempts at innovation/transformation from within.”¹² The working of fear in a group may be likened to an organizational immune system, which, when it perceives a threat to its equilibrium, unleashes antibodies that fight against whatever is new, so that those trying to give voice to innovation, to the possibility of change, get “zapped” in some way—ignored, silenced, ostracized, sometimes dismissed. It is worth reflecting on the ways fear is an obstacle for you and for your community.

VI. How does one promote lifelong formation for right-relationship?

In light of all we have considered thus far regarding the current context for religious life, the meaning and transformative power of and obstacles to right-relationship, I propose to you several formation tasks important for preparing individuals and communities capable of living in right-relationship and of being agents of transformation. As with all formative enterprises, model in your own selves that which you wish others to learn.

***Form for seeing clearly.** This is the most crucial piece of all! Without it, all other efforts will fall flat, or will simply allow the continuation of the status quo.

¹¹ Senge, Op.Cit., 24.

¹² Ibid., 35.

Seeing clearly is extremely important. It can also be very threatening, especially in some contexts, because it will lead some to start questioning and to the possibility of change. Hence, we are currently witnessing remarkably intense and concerted efforts at “not-seeing”, particularly in those parts of Church most invested in the status quo, especially the status quo around power structures. Individuals and communities can have great vision and great intentions, but if they cannot or will not see the entire reality being faced with all its dimensions and implications, change initiatives will fail.

***Form for full consciousness of all the obstacles to right-relationship** we just reviewed—so members can recognize them, address them, mindfully begin moving through them and releasing them where possible, and working with /around them when not possible. Support members in the challenging work and even discomfort at times of addressing these obstacles: this work is too hard to be taken on alone.

***Form for the capacity to do the inner work of stepping back from habitual ways of thinking**, so individuals and groups can become aware of their assumptions, maybe suspend their assumptions, and see a bigger picture. You need to form people to do this, and to name that this is a value for them. Having the capacity to step back this way is vitally important. The Spirit can only get through to us when we step back and see what’s going on. Please commit to forming members and leaders for this stance. This includes forming for a willingness to be in many moments of significant disorientation in which our most taken-for-granted ways of seeing and making sense of the world can come unglued, as part of the process of transitioning into something new.¹³

***Form everyone for facing the dyings that need to be faced**, and for the mortality of all our human institutions in their present form (including your congregations, communities, missions...), and for telling the truth about that mortality and about the fear

around it rather than avoiding it. As you name the fears, you release the energy that is bound up in them and that opens the way for something to begin shifting and for us to hold the fear together, grieve what needs to be grieved, and discover that we’re all together in this and together can move through it.

***Form for mindful stillness.** Mindfulness allows us to see connections that may not have been visible before. Seeing connections that point to new ways forward does not come from trying, it comes out of stillness. Stillness allows opening of our hearts and eyes. It is important to form for the mindful stillness necessary to do the inner work of seeing in a new way.

***Form for the willingness and courage to listen and speak from the heart, from deep right-relatedness.** This kind of courageous listening and speaking would go a long way toward creating the changes we seek. Be mindful of the ways in which current

¹³ Ibid., 37.

structures—in formation, in religious life, in the Church—can interfere with this kind of courageous communication.

***Form for serious spiritual practice rather than simply religious ritual and observance,** for seeing and valuing the connection between internal and external work. Religious ritual and observance are very important, especially when they are well done, but they are different from a deep spiritual practice. It is important to encourage people to do the deep inner spiritual work, as it is foundational for becoming instruments of right-relationship and transformation.

***Form for a renewed, refreshed spirituality and spiritual fidelity** that encourages a new outlook of wisdom and discernment, and brings increasing depth, as individuals become able to follow the Spirit, who blows where she wills.¹⁴

***Form members to work with complexity.** We live in a time of sound bytes, nanoseconds, and we think we're going to solve problems with a quick word here and a quick thought there, but it won't happen that way. We need people willing to grapple with all the complexity that must be confronted in order to make the necessary phase shift.

***Form for awareness that “Most change processes are superficial [and never get beyond that level] because they do not generate the depth of understanding and commitment required for sustaining change in truly demanding circumstances.”¹⁵** And these are demanding circumstances. Form for awareness of the urgent invitation to depth, to working with complexity, and consider the implications of this for which people you should (and should not) be welcoming into your communities. Are you bringing in people who are capable of the complex thinking and depth of understanding that will be required in the years ahead to make the necessary transformations?

***Form for seeing and going beyond the piecemeal adjustments and small modifications** into a willingness to see the larger systems and the larger shifts that are needed.

***Form for awareness that simply modifying the existing structures is not sufficient to being about needed transformation,** and for awareness that old forms and systems need to be allowed to die and to die well.

***Form for a spirituality, a stance, and a leadership style rooted in the Paschal Mystery.** The Paschal Mystery is a basic model for change, illustrating the reality that living organisms either change or die. The same is true of religious life and of our world as a whole. Miriam Ukeritis describes five movements in the life of Jesus: Good Friday (the

¹⁴ O'Murchu, Op. Cit., 127.

¹⁵ Ibid., 148.

loss of his actual human life, a real death), Resurrection (reception of new life), the forty days after Easter (a time of painful, disorienting readjustment), Ascension (the crucial moment of letting go of the old, letting it ascend), and Pentecost (receiving the new Spirit). She suggests that leaders and community members in a time of transition are called to apply these five movements—naming the deaths personally and communally; claiming the births, what is new and what is growing; grieving for what has been lost and adapting to a new reality; not clinging to what was before, letting it ascend and become a blessing on the way forward; accepting the Spirit of new life that one is living now.

***Form people for awareness of the gap between current reality and the transformed reality that is calling from the future.** Be aware that often the newer members most strongly feel the pull toward that as yet unknown transformed reality and give voice to the questioning that arises from feeling they are in the “gap.” So, also form people to begin understanding what is causing the “gap,” and to have skills for crossing over to the other side of the “gap.” A spirituality of letting go, letting ascend, and opening to the new is needed now as the core of being in right-relationship.

Senge writes about the “container” as a transformative vessel (consider a womb, a cocoon, healing relationships...), a “holding” space within which new life can come into being, wherein something changes form and or grows into a new form. We often need such containers, especially for new life, because the larger system will frequently produce “antibodies” to change and try to kill off the new that is trying to be born. Can formation become that “container” that gives the new a chance to grow in your communities, to grow for the sake of transformation?

In conclusion, I quote a friend in leadership in Latin America who says that “The work of God in the human person is freedom.” The kind of lifelong formation for right-relationship that I have proposed here has the potential to promote freedom, the freedom to embrace the challenging invitation to live in right-relationship and thus more fully become God’ instruments for healing and transformation. There is urgent need for this at this time! As Carol Zinn said in her address to the RFC Congress in 2007, “The world needs you, the Church needs you, religious life needs!” And I would say to you, “The world, the Church, and religious life need you to become those instruments of right-relatedness and transformation!”