



INFORMATION

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Life-long Formation for Living in Right-Relationship:

"...only this: Act justly, love kindness,

and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6)

Luisa M. Saffiotti, PhD

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

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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

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.

Web-links for your information

- 1) **The Canadian Religious Conference** website www.crc-canada.org features several articles. Some are listed below:

Religious Poverty: A Prophetic Challenge to First World Economics

By Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM

The Future of Religious Life

By Timothy Radcliffe, OP

Leadership’s Role and Challenges

By Timothy Radcliffe, OP

**Authority and Obedience in Religious Life
On the Instruction “Faciem Tuam”**

By Father J. Rovira, CMF

- 2) **Sacred Space**, the prayer site hosted by the Irish Jesuits <http://sacredspace.ie/>

- 3) **The Office of Social Justice of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis** <http://www.osjspm.org> offers many wonderful resources. Check out their Catholic Social Teaching page

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 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, 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** (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.⁸ “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” —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 pro-

found 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.

Endnotes

- 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.
- 4 Diarmuid O’Murchu, *The Transformation of Desire*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007, 130.
- 5 Ibid, 179.
- 6 Daniel G. Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 245.
- 7 Ibid, 245.
- 8 O’Murchu, op.cit., 125.
- 9 Ibid, 157.