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Religious Formation Conference
8820 Cameron Street
Silver Spring, MD 20910-4152

301.588.4938 phone
301.585.7649 fax

rfc@relforcon.org
www.relforcon.org

Editor: Violet Grennan, mfc

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Beth Ponticello, CEDC
www.cedc.org

www.relforcon.org

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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

This is Part II of Dr. Saffiotti's article. Part I (sections I-III) can be found in the Spring 2010 issue of *InFormation*.

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?

Goody 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

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 midwiving. 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 midwiving 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

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”

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.

Many religious **move at such a frenetic pace that they don’t know how to integrate** into their normal ways of work-

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

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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 com-

munities 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. 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 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 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!”

ENDNOTES:

10 Groody, op.cit., 252.

11 Senge, Op.Cit., 24.

12 Ibid., 35.

13 Ibid., 37.

14 O’Murchu, Op. Cit., 127.

15 Ibid., 148.