

2022 Lent 2 C: Consecrated life and pathfinding in the time of crisis
Congregation Chapter of the Brigidine Sisters. March 12th 2022
Readings: Gen 15:5-12; Phil 3:17-4:1; Luke 9:28-36

Dear Sisters,

It is an honour for me to join you for this time of reflection where you seek to renew, reimagine and reinvigorate your way of life going forward.

I don't have to remind you that consecrated life in Australia and most Western societies is in transition, to put it very mildly. Judging by many measures or at least looking at the appearances, some would even conclude that our best days are behind us. They are ready to write obituaries for a life so esteemed in the past but now hopelessly riddled with crisis. Let's make no qualms about it. We feel it too in our bones. Every day, we struggle to come to terms with an acute sense of loss: our numbers, our resources, our status and our prestige. Our identity is in question our visibility diminished and our morale fragmented.

I understand that the Brigidines arrived in Australia in the late 19th century. Only a handful of Irish sisters settled originally in Coonamble, NSW and Echuca, Victoria. But as they say "from little things, big things grow". From the two Australian Provinces, the sisters went to Hohola, Erima and Kiunga in Papua New Guinea. Brigidine mission outreach also extended to Zambia, Kenya and Mexico.

All those signs of vitality seem to have disappeared or diminished here in Australia and across much of the developed world. We find ourselves shrinking in a manner of speaking.

We are aged, diminished even dying and the fresh reinforcements are thin on the ground. Some might have questioned our relevance, especially as our apostolate is predominantly with young people. Why is it that the young we teach and nurture in our colleges and institutions aren't attracted to our way of life? Why have they not joined us? Are our best days in the past? Have we done something wrong? Are we heading towards extinction?

These are the existential questions facing you and us as Franciscans. I suspect many other congregations are in the same boat. We have a sinking feeling of Titanic proportions. Pardon the pun!

But is that the only narrative we can tell about ourselves? We are just like Kodak or Sony Walkman. Remember those? Perhaps, we are going out of business because the aura of consecrated life just doesn't cut the mustard with young people. Perhaps we are victims of evolution by natural selection. We've failed to adapt and that is our fate. Is that the narrative we want to be told about us?

Or perhaps there is another way to understand and live religious life today. This alternative way is not by looking into our rear vision and longing in nostalgia for some bygone era. Rather, it lies in the consciousness that religious life is not about being the infantry troops for the institutional Church. It is not about the capacity to staff hospitals, schools, orphanages and the like. Religious life is the art of scanning the horizons above and exploring the terrain below for signs of a new life and a new future. These reconnaissance specialists or the Delta Force, if you like, does not require a cast of thousands.

Religious are pathfinders who venture into the untrodden. We are not settlers but pilgrims; not guardians of status quo but explorers of what is possible. Religious are like the aboriginal pioneers who refused to sit on the edges of the shrinking billabong. It's in our DNA to **go to where the river flows** in order to explore new frontiers of engagement and new possibilities of solidarity.

Religious are like the scouting party sent to reconnoitre the land (Numbers 13). They were the avant-garde who went ahead of the people in order to map out the path ahead and ensure a safe passage for those who followed. They took enormous risks and led the People of God to a new future. It is an apt image for religious, I suggest. We are the avant-garde who are entrusted with the prophetic task of pioneering and trailblazing. The Church and the world depend on us to lead them to new thresholds and crossroads where the God of the journey beckons.

But instead of exploring new pathways to the future, we often spend our energy on maintaining the infrastructure of the past. We find it hard to uproot and replant. In Italy, some of my confreres wanted to keep custody of our shrines to the last man standing. Some of us would rather turn into pillars of salt, that is, to die heroically like Lot's wife than to go into the unknown land. Some of us cannot even think and act outside the paradigm that has shaped us, let alone seeing with fresh insights the lofty vision that requires inter-congregational, ecumenical, interfaith, ecological and indeed cosmological reimagination.

So dear sisters,

This chapter is an opportunity for us to pause and give gratitude to the past, to live the present with passion, embrace the future with audacity. Our conscientization of our current state of the religious life is a privileged threshold for the future. The insight we have into who we are as the avant-garde and the pathfinders will facilitate a paradigm shift not only for us but also for the People of God.

Where are the thresholds, peripheries and crossroads that we are called to venture into today? Where are the spaces where we can be the catalysts for the Kingdom and the yeast for the leavening of God's people?

Where are we in the intersection between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor? If there is an issue with absolute currency and urgency in the world today, it is the ecological crisis and the disproportionate impact on the poor. Who else but those who are supposed to be attuned to their cry?

Where are we in the bigger picture of the Church embodying the vision of what I call the alternative relational paradigm? It is an alternative conscience and practice that is rooted in Jesus's downward mobility, solidarity and preferential option for the disadvantaged.

Where are we in respect of the enabling of women and lay people to reclaim their agency in the life of the Church given that the old wineskins of patriarchalism, triumphalism, power and privilege are bursting before our eyes?

We need to think and act for the reign of God even if it means joining forces with other congregations, other denominations, other faiths, other traditions. The survival of our institute is not paramount. It is the Gospel and the reign of God that we are utterly committed to. Ron Rolheiser says wisely we need to give up our death. He challenges us to live in such a way that our death is a blessing to others.

Speaking of death, this is the theme of the Gospel tonight. I must confess I struggled to read the story through a female perspective. It's all about men, all 7 of them if you count the one who spoke from heaven! But these patriarchal vestiges aside, the message of the Gospel is clear: Jesus revealed himself –contrary to their expectations- to be a God of love and suffering. The transfiguration is a moment of theophany even for the disciples as they learned to let go of power and glory. It empowered them to follow the suffering and vulnerable Servant just as Abraham was empowered to walk into the unknown after the covenant made with Yahweh.

I pray that this chapter experience be like the experience of the disciples. May you see with clarity and conviction the call of yours to chart the way for others. This is possible because you have followed closely and modelled creatively the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. May we learn to become servants of the Kingdom, visible signs of hope and sacraments of God's light in the world of chaos, change and evolution.

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