

2024 assumpta

N°2- Create a culture of communication
Assumption

Contents

Editorial.....	5
Create a culture of communication Assumption	5
A culture of communication in a constantly changing world	6
A culture of communication to take care of the Common Home ..	8
A communication culture which feeds and manifests our RA Being	10
Education.....	13
Our Assumption DNA: History and Current Realities	13
I. Sisters and Laypersons	15
II. Contemplation and Action	17
III. Seriousness and Joy	20
IV. Community and Character	22
V. Conclusion	24
Archives.....	27
An invitation to fraternity - Contemplative reading of the first two letters of Anne Eugenie Milleret to Josephine de Commarque	27
I. "Destined by Providence to work together...": the Sister of the first hour.....	28
II. To make Christ loved "with a solid love": the thought of the work	31
Theology.....	39
Abbé Combalot and the Blessed Virgin Mary	39
I. Les grandeurs de la Ste Vierge	41

II. The twenty-eight sermons	44
III. Mary and the Old Testament	45
IV. Closing thoughts.....	47
V. Postscript	48
AMA	51
From its Origins to Today	51
I. A fresh breath of missionary air among the Sisters of the Assumption	53
II. The AMA facing today's challenges.....	59
III. Opening up to Internationality.....	63
Assumption Together	67
I. Where is our horizon?.....	71
II. Two groups meet on the road.....	75
III. The long process of communion.....	84
IV. 10 SIMPLE KEYS TO ADVANCE IN SHARED MISSION	86
JPICS	91
An Ecological and Social Emergency.....	91
I. Revisiting the diagnosis: for a deep transformation.....	94
II. The Frame of Reference: Deepening Universal Fraternity.....	96
III. Levers for Action: Transformative Education as a Preferred Lever, at all Levels of Action	103
Biblical reflection.....	107
Towards a Synodal Leadership Paradigm: Johannine Perspectives	107
I. The Johannine Ecclesiology	108
II. The Johannine Jesus and Leadership Paradigms.....	110

III. The Synodal Leadership Paradigm and the Johannine Christians	119
IV. Synodal Leadership Paradigm and Its Challenges for Today ..	121
Conclusion	124

Editorial

Mercedes Méndez
Responsible for Communication

Create a culture of communication Assumption

As indicated by the UNESCO CDIS (Culture for Development Indicators) methodology, culture and communication are closely linked: "Communication is the exchange of thoughts, knowledge, messages or information. [...] Culture requires diverse forms of communication in order to flourish, create, be re-created and shared. At the same time, culture shapes a large part of the content and the forms of communication. Together, culture and communication have the potential to produce and disseminate a rich wealth of information, knowledge, ideas and contents, contributing to the expansion of individuals' options, thus creating enabling environments for inclusive people-centered development".¹ This all happens in the provision of education and through education². That is why it is more than necessary to create a "culture of edu-communication". As exhorted by our Pope, it will foster the development of a "culture of encounter" and a "culture of attention" for the "Common Home". He considers this to be possible if

¹<https://fr.unesco.org/creativity/indicateurs-de-d%C3%A9veloppement/dimensions/communication-0> UNESCO, "Communication", in *Indicateurs de la culture pour le développement de l'UNESCO. Manuel méthodologique (Indicators of culture for development UNESCO. Methodology manual)* (Paris : ONU, 2014), 117-129.

² As developed in the methodology manual in the « Education » section, 46-61.

it is nourished by spirituality³. This is why it is desirable and relevant to create a culture of edu-communication of the Assumption. The Assumpta Review has this objective, as indicated in its first edition. We pursue it by delving into different themes from the perspective of Assumption spirituality. Before moving on to the different articles of this second edition, it seems important to us to clearly define the concept of "culture of communication".

A culture of communication in a constantly changing world

The use of the term "culture of communication" emerged in the 1970s to refer to the need to establish common values, norms and practices in a context of dizzying changes in what was called the "communications revolution"⁴. In 1989, American anthropologist and communicologist James Carey argued that communication is a cultural process that goes beyond the transmission of information, and that it is necessary to analyse this phenomenon within the social and cultural context in which it occurs. At that time, little foretold the advances that would take place in the 1990s, with the popularisation of the World Wide Web (www), a network which connects a large number of web pages through which it is possible to access information or exchange it⁵. A "digital continent" was born, free of national borders, but leaving many left out; without government laws, but capable of directing the masses; without a pre-established value system, but with a significant impact on how we

³ Culture, education, communication, and spirituality are perfectly articulated in the sixth chapter of the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*: Encyclical Letter on Care for our Common Home (Rome: Vatican Edition, 2015), pp. 202-245.

⁴ Cf. James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture : Essays on Media and Society*, 2e éd.

⁵ Cf. Tim Berners-Lee, "The World Wide Web-past, present and future", (1997) : <https://jodi-ojs-tdl.tdl.org/jodi/article/view/jodi-4> (last accessed in April 2023). In this article, Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the term "World Wide Web", describes how in 1989 he designed this system of information exchange between scientists from different parts of the world working or collaborating with the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). This is how the WWW was born. The WWW is based on the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), which allows users to navigate the web and access websites through hyperlinks. Websites are written in programming languages such as HTML, CSS, JavaScript, among others, which allow for creating interactive and dynamic pages.

perceive the world and how we relate to each other; a continent capable of gathering humanity, but which is polarising it into opposing positions⁶. The media creates various social and cultural environments, depending on the websites we visit, on which we read, listen to or watch information, or where we interact with other people who also connect to them.

The use of information and communication technologies has seen a significant increase after the emergence of COVID-19, as many people had to adapt to work, study, socialise and celebrate their faith from their home due to health restrictions. And the figures continue to rise. Without trying to overwhelm you with scientific data, reports from global marketing agencies⁷ reveal that global Internet usage has increased by 7% between January 2020 and 2021, reaching 4.66 billion active users worldwide, or 59.5% of humanity. The report states that the average time a person spends on social networks has increased globally, with an average of 2 hours and 25 minutes per day. In Spain, according to a study carried out by the Digital Company *Fundación Telefónica* in 2021, 79% of the Spanish population uses the Internet daily and spends on average, 1 hour and 40 minutes per day on social networks⁸.

Although the main Internet users are in metropolitan regions of developed countries and are between 14 and 35 years old, the rise in the number of users from other groups and geographical regions challenges the development of a global culture of communication due to the required adaptation of processes and content to the people to whom they are addressed (audiences) and the different channels they use (media). For this reason, in the economic sphere, the horizon has

⁶ Cf. Jean Baudrillard, "Marshall MacLuhan, Understanding Media : the Extensions of Man, Mc Graw-Hill Book company, cop. 1964", *L'Homme Et La Société* 5, no. 1 (1967) : 227-230 ; Mark Bauerlein, *The Digital Divide : Arguments for and Against Facebook, Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Network Networking* (New York : Penguin, 2011).

⁷ *Digital 2021 : Global Overview Report*" published by Hootsuite and We Are Social in January 2021 : <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report> (last accessed in April 2023).

⁸ *Fundación Telefónica, Société numérique en Espagne 2020-2021 : L'année où tout a changé : Fundación Telefónica, 2021*. (Digital Society in Spain 2020-2021: The Year Everything Changed)

been narrowed down: the "culture of communication" is seen as the understanding and development of communication practices in companies that seek to ensure effective and successful communication, both internally and externally, in order to sell their products, retain their customers and increase the sense of belonging and efficiency of their employees⁹. To that end, they invest considerable resources, due to the high number of communication channels that exist and continue to be created, even if the group they target and focus all their efforts on is specific and therefore relatively small.

A culture of communication to take care of the Common Home

As previously mentioned in the introduction, according to the United Nations, the culture of communication plays a fundamental role in the implementation of the Millennium Agenda. It informs, educates and denounces in order to generate a common awareness of the challenges we face at the global level, to promote collective engagement and to promote effective international collaboration between governments and organisations. To create this inclusive and accessible culture of communication, it is necessary to involve the greatest number, promote citizen participation, use traditional and digital media, promote media education, use clear and accessible messages, and measure and evaluate the impact in order to continuously improve, hence the importance of planning.

Pope Francis¹⁰ has also played a leading role in promoting effective communication as a tool for building bridges between different cultures

⁹ Cf. Kovács Réka et Anca Borza, " Internal and External Communication within Cultural Organizations ", *Management & Marketing* 7, n° 4 (2012) : 613-630 ; Madhu Bala et Deepak Verma, " A critical review of digital marketing ", *M.Bala, D.Verma (2018).A Critical Review of Digital Marketing.International Journal of Management, IT & Engineering* 8, n° 10 (2018) : 321-339. Let us simply note that internal communication consists of establishing processes that guarantee: the exchange of information and ideas within the organisation at all levels, mechanisms to identify talents and collaborate, as well as strengthen the sense of belonging.

¹⁰ The teaching of Pope Francis in this field being immense, we will only cite the messages for the World Communication Day which, like his predecessors, are usually

and communities and for promoting collaboration, solidarity and collective action. In his magisterium, he has highlighted the importance of collaboration between governments, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, civil society and individuals to address global challenges related to the protection of our common home. The Pope has emphasised the importance of effective and respectful communication in all areas of his spiritual leadership: his homilies, his messages on social media and his meetings with political and religious leaders from around the world. He has testified and taught how to use the different means of communication to promote the culture of encounter and care. He also highlighted the importance of communication based on the ethical principles of truth and charity, which is able to build bridges and overcome divisions. He has been able to adapt his message to different audiences and channels.

Pope Francis often reiterates the importance of a culture of communication in the education and formation of young church and lay leaders. He has urged educators to teach effective, respectful communication techniques in order to foster a culture of dialogue, encounter, and shared responsibility. He advocates for an education that encourages intercultural understanding and the inclusion of marginalised communities in order to overcome the "throwaway culture". He emphasises the importance of intercultural and interreligious communication in order to promote understanding and dialogue between cultures and religions. Pope Francis also stresses the importance of a culture of communication in evangelisation. He promotes a message that is to be communicated with authenticity and respect, that is capable of reaching people in their context and in their concrete reality, and that encourages personal processes of discovery or deepening of faith. Convinced that the Christian message leads to joy, breaks the vicious cycle of anxiety, and stops the spiral of fear, he

published on the feast day of Saint Francis de Sales, patron of journalists (January 24th). Cf.

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/messages/communications.index.html> (last accessed in April 2023). The World Communication Social Day was instituted by the express will of the Vatican II Council and is usually celebrated on the day of the Ascension, recalling the Lord's command to go to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel. The development of the culture of communication can be understood through the various themes addressed by the successive popes since 1967.

insists on the need to use all means to disseminate different content on the web.

A communication culture which feeds and manifests our RA Being

Our General Chapter of 2018 in Lourdes has already laid the foundations for the construction of an Assumption communication culture with its call to put "communication at the service of communion and mission"¹¹. The implementation of the different decisions has allowed the creation of teams at different levels - Congregation, Province/Region and Community - which have improved or introduced communication processes internally and externally. However, even though in the Congregation digital media communication dates back in many cases to the beginning of the millennium, we can assert that at international, local and personal levels, we are still far from the construction of a culture of Assumption communication. As with other types of missions¹², responsibility is delegated to teams, but the mission requires the interest and involvement of all. We cannot develop on this matter, as it must undoubtedly continue to be deepened and elaborated by all of us. We will simply provide brief overviews, which are all inter-connected:

- The communication culture **creates and strengthens a sense of belonging**, or, in other words, creates communion. To do this, it is necessary to establish and feed internal communication channels for the exchange of information on our life and mission, but also to generate thought and sense on our Assumption Being. If we consider the diversity of cultures, ages and vocations of the people that make up our Congregation, we understand that this is a mission for everyone. The message must be adapted to audiences and channels, so that communication can be a place of collaborative ministry, involving as

¹¹ Religieuses de l'Assomption, Document capitulaire (Religious of the Assumption, Capitular Document) (Lourdes: RA 2018), 15, 22-23.

¹² To only cite one domain which concerns everyone, but which occupies a small sector: youth ministry must involve sisters and laypeople, because only a fraternal, prayerful and mission-oriented community will be able to attract new generations, or in other words, only a vocational culture will ensure the effectiveness of the projects and actions that are planned and undertaken.

many people as possible. For example, who better than a child can explain to other children how they understand and live their Assumption Being?

- The communication culture is **what pushes us to communicate what we live, do, create, think...** at the personal, community, provincial and international level. A clear indicator of the integration of this culture will be when encouraging people to communicate, to access what is published or to interact with the content (share, leave comments, follow...) will no longer be needed, as it will have become "second nature" to people. The culture of communication will be real when communication will surge as a desire and a need, since the members of the Assumption understand that communication helps build the Congregational Body. Communication is also a way to make ourselves known by offering informative or formative resources to the Church and to the digital world that is free of boundaries: "Woe unto me if I preach not the gospel!" said St Paul¹³.

- The communication culture contributes to building bridges, to creating encounter, dialogue and collective commitment. At the Assumption, we would say that it is an extension of the Kingdom, a "philosophy that orients and a passion that animates" our presence on the internet. We have developed it at length in the previous paragraph.

- The communication culture implies values, standards and practices shared by the organisation. At the Assumption, communicating the Truth, letting ourselves be guided by Charity and trying to do it with Beauty, could be one of these common characteristics. The natural virtues that arise from these great principles and that would mark the difference between the Assumption communication culture and other forms of communication are: honesty and nobility instead of concealment and falsehood, wise and benevolent goodness instead of

¹³ Cf. 1 Cor 9:16-19,22-23.

the "anything goes" that discredits, modesty and humility instead of extravagance and the spectacular¹⁴.

- The communication culture helps to move from "I" to "we", to devote time and resources to facilitate access for the greatest number to the media. It is essential to train and build solidarity between generations and social groups to share knowledge and technologies. "I don't have time" or "it's too expensive" are often daily excuses to invest time and money in the pursuit of some objectives rather than others. Discernment is essential to set common priorities. In an individualist culture, personal channels are privileged over institutional channels. We could affirm that a true culture of global communication is developed through synodal processes, and not through *influential people*.

This is an unfinished theme that must be built with others, and as stated in the introduction, this magazine is a privileged channel in which religious and lay people from different places and different ages present their thoughts on different themes in the spirit of the Assumption. By communicating their thoughts and experiences, they generate meaning and build the Communication Culture of the Assumption.

¹⁴ The texts that we could cite from Mother Marie Eugénie are countless, to name but one, the Chapter of May 26th 1878 on the spirit of the Assumption - XII. "Natural virtues as the foundation of supernatural virtues": "Those in the world who are not Christians would like to see in Christians at least a noble character". Similarly, in our presence on the Internet we must show that "honesty, straightforwardness, delicacy, simplicity, honour, kindness, courage" and other virtues which, according to our Founder, characterise the Assumption. In a culture of misinformation and fake news, our Founder affirms that "honesty and uprightness, are characteristics without which it seems one cannot live in the Assumption". In the era of "filters", we are encouraged to "show the world the natural uprightness of man as created by God".

01

Education

Our Assumption DNA: History and Current Realities

This text reproduces the two-voice conference given on the 1st of April 2022 at the opening of the Forum of Educational Communities of Assumption France.

Anthony Odin,
Provincial delegate for the *Tutelle*

Sister Hélène Bureau, Assumption Orléans

Our objective in this Forum Assumption France 2022 is to affirm our Assumption identity with audacity and humility, to boldly look at the village that we in Assumption form together, and to remind ourselves of what the DNA of the Assumption constitutes.

First and foremost, let's take a closer look at the scientific definition of DNA: It is present in every living cell and contains all the genetic information that enables living beings to develop, function, and reproduce. DNA molecules are made up of two intertwined antiparallel strands forming a double helix. Within these strands, sequences follow one another and constitute the genetic information of each living being.

This somewhat scientific definition can now help us to look at our Assumption identity through the prism of DNA, like a game of correspondences and crossed glances through the windows of the village houses. Our Assumption history, both that of the congregation and that of the network of establishments, is reflected in our "genetic information". At the same time, this history allows us to "develop and function", as the scientific definition describes. In other words, it says something about our reality today within the network, about our daily habits.

Thus, to consider the DNA of the Assumption is to show sequences of history, by listening to the charism of Saint Marie-Eugénie. It is to show sequences of information and functioning, by observing our establishments. It means unfolding these anti-parallel strands, without ever considering one without the other, to see the genetic information unfold.

We propose to highlight four of these strands: Sisters and Laypeople, Contemplation and Action, Seriousness and Joy, Community, and Character.

I. Sisters and Laypersons

Genetic information (history)

It is true to say that a partnership was established from the early days of the congregation with lay people, who were associated with Marie-Eugénie's thinking: their experience and vision of the world fed and nourished her thinking about the foundation.

When the congregation was suppressed by the French government at the beginning of the 20th century, our "educational works" continued, sometimes secretly (as in Paris-Lübeck) thanks to lay people (at the time mainly women). Amid a painful episode in our history, the grace of sharing the Spirit of the Assumption began to alter our mindsets.

But at the time, we were still marked by a pyramidal vision of the Church, to the extent that the term "vocation" remained, in the minds of many, reserved for priests and religious. A turning point came in the middle of the 20th century with the Second Vatican Council, thanks to the work of theologians. The Church began to define itself, more in the manner of the first Christians, as a body whose construction was entrusted to everyone. At the Assumption, the idea of a true complementarity of roles and vocations started to be explored. The General Chapter of 1965 affirmed: *"When there is an atmosphere of great openness and mutual support in the community [educators, sisters and lay people], with at the same time, a certain amount of freedom when it is felt that what binds them together is a profound life in God... then the community offers a very powerful witness, that of people coming together in the joy of Christ which our time so badly needs"*.

It was within this new mindset that 30 years ago the concept of *Tutelle*¹⁵ was established in France at the call of a layman (Robert Brun), thanks

15 'Tutelle' is a system whereby a Catholic school receives its mission from the Church on which its foundation is based. It is through the supervisory authority that it is given an ecclesial existence. Therefore, all Catholic educational establishments are subject to a supervisory authority, mandated or approved by the local bishop. For the Assumption France network, the supervisory authority is exercised by the Provincial Superior and her lay delegate, who is responsible for accompanying each establishment.

to a layman-sister team (Robert and Sister Thérèse-Agnès). It is thanks to them that we are here!

Development and Functioning of the Living Being - Today's Reality

In reality, the Sisters/Laity connection can be seen in all the bodies of the network, both in the more canonical ones (Supervisory Board presided over by the Provincial) and in the more economic ones (Assumption Property Association, where the Provincial is a member by right). Since 2000, laypersons have been invited to the Provincial and General Chapters; the sisters take part in the Tutelle supervision visits to schools every three years. Since the 1970s, the schools have been run by laypersons, which was somewhat peculiar, even avant-garde for the time within the Congregation's structures! In 1990, our Assumption France network was founded, following the insight of a layman and a nun. So, it's clear that our reality is that the Church is made up of complementary vocations. Each person lives his or her specific vocation and the other is a gift that enriches us.

It is in this same logic that several groups of *Assumption-Ensemble* (Assumption Together) live today. Initially called the "*Friends of the Assumption*", we now speak of Assumption Together International.

This combination of sisters and laity, together with the complementarity of vocations, is today at the service of the charism. The charism is the founding intuition, like the laying of the first stone. In the DNA of the Assumption, the charism is given "*for the good of the whole body*"; it is a shared responsibility. As Sister Véronique, the Congregation's archivist, writes, "*the charism is no longer a framework: it is a breath of air, an experience that will lead to transformation*".¹⁶ Moreover, the Assumption France formation centre - a pillar of our network - in each of the training courses it offers, is concerned, with forming people in the charism of the Assumption. The charism is a gift; the more we transmit it, the better we share it! This is indeed one of the calls following the international education meeting held in Manila in March 2018: "*Strengthen the*

16 Sœur Véronique Thiébaud, In the communion and complementarity of vocations at the Assumption: an intervention for the CPAE, Conseil Permanent Assomption Ensemble (Assumption Together Permanent Council), 23 August 2019.

common formation of lay people and the religious around the spirituality of the Assumption, the charism and the values so that they carry out the mission of Transformative Education in their respective contexts."¹⁷

This call serves as a transition for me to announce our second strand: "Contemplation and Action". Contemplation of the charism and Action for transformation!

II. Contemplation and Action

Genetic information (history)

From the time the community was founded in 1839, Marie-Eugénie had a hopeful outlook about her time and, unlike certain spiritual and religious currents of that period, she saw the world as a place of revelation and glory for God. This contemplative outlook, far from removing her from the world, led her to love it as God loved her. *"For me, I find it hard to hear the earth called a place of exile; I see it as a place of glory for God, since He can receive from our free and suffering wills the only homage He does not find in Himself..."*.¹⁸ In 1842, she wrote: *"Our business is faith in action"*, which is another way of saying Contemplation/Action.

Everyone knows Marie-Eugénie's phrase *"Each of us..."*. Here it is in its entirety: *"I believe that each one of us has a mission on earth; we must make souls understand that the essence of Christianity is to devote ourselves to finding out how God can use us to spread his Gospel and make it a reality"*.¹⁹

If a work is alive, it must grow and expand, just as contemplation must become action. As she said: *"The world is not big enough for my love"*.²⁰ It was not long before Marie-Eugénie soon expanded her foundation internationally. Even before their perpetual vows, the first sisters made a missionary union of prayer with priests leaving for Madagascar and

17 Transformative education at the Assumption: international education meeting, Manila, March 2018, appeal no. 4.

18 Marie-Eugénie, Letter to Father Lacordaire, Origins I, Part 2, Chapter XI, undated.

19 idem

20 Marie-Eugénie, Notes intimes (Private notes), No. 160/01, May 1837

China! Then 1849: South Africa - 1850: England - 1865: Spain - 1873: New Caledonia - 1888: Italy... In all, some thirty foundations in 9 countries (including France) and in 5 continents.

From the outset, in keeping with the spirit of the foundation, each school and boarding school was complemented by social work: attention to the poor, openness, and a presence for those who suffer. More than that, education must above all bring about a "fundamental revolution" in people's hearts and commit them to transforming society. To want to transform, or to work modestly with one's small means towards transformation, is first and foremost to take a contemplative, loving look at the world, at our humanity today. Point 6 of the PAEA,²¹ "Act with audacity and humility", tells us to *"help people realise that a humble heart relies on God, trusts others, and is aware of its own value. To help each person embrace his or her dimension of responsibility in order to gain freedom and place him/herself at the service of others"*.²²

So wanting to transform is:

- first and foremost, to contemplate and love
- in order to act and act with others.

Development and Functioning of the Living Being - Today's Reality

Today, this call to weave together contemplation and action is expressed through the search for an education in interiority. It doesn't matter if this may be a fashionable term; it reveals to us how much we feel is at stake for today's children and young people (and for ourselves too!). In the digital age, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are no longer sure whether this enormous change is a danger or an opportunity. What is certain is that it is profoundly transforming our relationships and our ways of learning and working. And the challenge is to remain authentically human throughout these changes, never forgetting what lies at the heart of our being: a heart, a conscience capable of dialogue with others.

21 PAEA Projet Apostolique et Éducatif de l'Assomption (Assumption Apostolic and Educational Project) <https://assomption-france.org/nos-valeurs/paea/>

22 Assumption Apostolic and Educational Project, Assumption-France, March 2012

Education for interiority is the 1st call of the international education meeting in Manila: *"Encourage experiences of interiority to enable each person to drink from the wellspring, to encounter God, others, themselves and creation, discovering that they are a creature loved by God, realising their full potential and committing themselves"*.²³

I'd like you to understand the three dimensions that are expressed here, because for us, education in interiority is not a fad, or because doing a bit of meditation would improve our daily well-being. It's much more than that!

1. Inwardness helps us to enter into a dialogue with ourselves and with the God who dwells within us. We can talk about our conscience, the place of inner freedom, but for believers, the encounter with God is expressed and realised in this "inner sanctuary".

2. Interiority is a way of becoming aware of our inner resources and our frailties: self-knowledge in truth and humility, to get away from vain feelings of guilt (I'm no good!), and swollen self-esteem (look how good I am!). A whole way of living with oneself, a great challenge for our young people who, because of the loneliness caused by the pandemic, are sometimes dramatically confronted with a great inner emptiness.

3. Interiority allows us to move freely towards as much fulfilment as possible, committing ourselves to building a more humane and just world, according to God's plan.

4. As we are disciples of Christ, our first contemplation is to look regularly at the person of Jesus: how he acted, prayed, what he said, and what he refused to say or do. Jesus was not a hermit, nor a monk, nor a religious. Looking at him and trying to adopt his "way of being" is possible for everyone.

²³ Transformative education at Assumption: international education meeting, Manila, March 2018, appeal no. 1

III. Seriousness and Joy

Genetic Information (history)

Now we come to our third strand of DNA: Seriousness and joy. A pairing that is only contradictory in appearance, since evidently, our quest for happiness is the most serious aspect of our lives.

At the Assumption, this conviction has always been reflected in the two colours of the habit: violet, the sign of conversion, effort, and a bit of austerity; and white, the sign of joy and life. This seriousness is also reflected in the austere, elegant architecture of the neo-Romanesque style that Marie-Eugénie favoured (see the buildings in Bordeaux, Bellevue, Lübeck...).

And let's not forget that when Marie-Eugénie founded the Assumption, she was just emerging from a difficult personal period. The trials of her family, especially the premature death of her mother, and the loneliness that followed, led her to look with astonishing lucidity at the social environment in which she had grown up. It was her observation of the society of the time that led her to dedicate herself to an educational project. Faced with the superficiality, even frivolity, of the women in her environment, which could go "as far as to baseness", she wanted "children to think very seriously"²⁴. Seriousness rhymes with a sense of responsibility. For her, it's a question of training women capable of deploying their abilities, passing on to their children the virtues of uprightness and simplicity, a sense of commitment and justice.

This seriousness does not prevent joy, on the contrary. The alliance of seriousness and joy even becomes the principal characteristic of the spirituality of the Assumption: "*The spirit of the Assumption tends towards joyful detachment. This attitude leads the sisters to see everything "in the light of God's goodness", in his love, and to welcome trustfully all that*

24 Notes from conversations, quoted in L'Education à l'Assomption : texte de référence / Education at Assumption : reference text, July 1998, p. 25

comes from him. They face the troubles and contradictions inherent in life, knowing that nothing can separate them from him."²⁵

Development and Functioning of the Living Being - Today's Reality

Who hasn't heard parents enrolling their child in an Assumption school say: "I've come here so that my child can develop and benefit from a quality education". This quality of teaching goes hand in hand with seriousness in studies; fulfilment is another way of expressing the joy that our young people embody so well.

- Seriousness and joy.
- Demanding and fulfilling.
- Rules and freedom.

These are the anti-parallel strands of our DNA. Words that may seem like opposites, and yet...

Let's quote from the 1998 reference text:

The only effective pedagogy is that of love and example. The educator is an agent of unity and a joyful witness to love. The fullness of being is the sign of a fulfilled vocation. It engenders joy. Marie-Eugénie wrote: *"To fulfill my vocation, I need to be sovereignly expansive, loving, and even joyful... Joy is the happy, secret light that comes from within. The educator is joyful in his or her thoughts and actions so that this joy permeates the atmosphere and the educational environment"*.²⁶

This is a reality in our network: Welcoming and supporting projects and innovations in education and pedagogy; aiming for the fulfillment of pupils while keeping a close eye on their academic performance (today, continuous assessment and the ParcoursSup²⁷ application file carry a great deal of weight); recognising each person's individual

25 Marie-Eugénie, Chapter Instruction, Spirit of the Assumption-XI, On joyful release from earthly things, 19 May 1878

26 L'Education à l'Assomption : texte de référence / Education at Assumption : reference text, July 1998, p.33

27 ParcoursSup is the digital platform on which French students have to register to be admitted to higher education institutions.

identity, allowing them to reveal their talents, in a spirit of a caring and sincere relationship.

Seriousness on the part of adults is reflected in their ability to understand the context and culture of their students and to assess their needs, desires, and aspirations. Reality is the starting point for all educational action. *"We must feel and listen to the calls of our peoples and our societies, love and know our history, our cultures and our times"*²⁸. Furthermore, in the Advice on Education, Marie-Eugénie wrote that *"no teacher can teach without knowledge and reflection"* in order to give them a *"stronger education"*. As the Reference Text continues: *"Education is a continual learning process, and the educator is a professional in what he has to pass on. He or she knows how to use discernment and creativity to adapt, research, and improve methods so that each person can reach their own level of excellence"*.²⁹

And it is also through others that this excellence is spread: teamwork, and listening in depth to classes, parents, and colleagues.

Now we come to our fourth and final strand: Community and Character.

IV. Community and Character

Genetic Information (history)

We'll talk briefly about the strength of community in the case of Marie-Eugénie. She told Abbé Combalot: *"Father, you have to help me, I can't do anything on my own"*. She continued: *"I am parched now by not having any outpouring of fraternal charity. (...) With the sisters you will give me, I will be able to speak of the marvels that delight the mind and the mercies that touch the heart"*. It's a bit like talking about personal weakness and the strength of the community. From the very beginning,

28 L'Éducation à l'Assomption : texte de référence / Education at Assumption : reference text, July 1998, p. 29

29 Idem p.37

the community was present in Marie-Eugénie's thinking, as an essential condition for the work to come, as a richness she could not do without.

It is in the chapter on natural virtues that we begin to hear about character: "*Simplicity of heart and mind, gentleness, benevolence, goodness, equality of character, patience, modesty*"³⁰. And on the subject of education, she says: "*To know a little more about one subject or another ... this, I consider, is not what makes one mind superior to another; it is rather the turn of mind, its particular stamp or character given to the person... What is needful is that the children should have serious ideas and be purposeful about them.*"³¹ By seeking to develop each person's particular character, Assumption education aims to serve a world of diversity, difference, and complementarities. Each person is called upon to share his or her skills, to take on responsibility, and to enrich the community with his or her personality.

This is made possible by what links "community" and "distinctiveness", namely the notion of freedom. Indeed, the Assumption recognises in every person a freedom that allows each soul its own particular form and the character of its own grace. This spirit of freedom is essential and constitutes the point of balance between the strength of the community and the development of one's own character.

It is the same in every part and its whole: the network and each school; the teacher and their subject team, and so on.

Development and Functioning of the Living Being - Today's Reality

Yes, at the Assumption we like to allow each person their own particular grace, which can sometimes give rise - let's face it - to explosive mixtures in our communities!

30 Marie-Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, Esprit de l'Assomption-XII, Les vertus naturelle bases des vertus surnaturelles, 26 mai 1878 / Chapter Instruction, Spirit of the Assumption-XII, The natural virtues as a basis for the supernatural virtues.

31 Notes de conversations, citées dans L'Education à l'Assomption : texte de référence, juillet 1998, p. 25 / Notes from conversations, quoted in L'Education à l'Assomption : reference text, July 1998, p. 25

But we also live by the inspiration of the Rule of Saint Augustine: "*Here is what we prescribe for you to observe in the monastery. First and foremost, live as one in the house, with one soul and one heart, turned towards God. Isn't that the very reason you've come together?*"

This is the great challenge and paradox of today's world, which is becoming increasingly globalised, but which still has difficulty accepting differences, which are always perceived as a threat, both personally and socially.

Our educational communities are urged not to shy away from this question of difference. The increasingly multicultural world is inexorably pushing us to do so. We are convinced that the other is a source of enrichment. But let's face it, it comes at the price of letting go something of ourselves!

In Marie-Eugénie's eyes, achieving this unity in an educational team was "*the most important, and the most difficult thing, and it would be given to us neither by study nor by intelligence. Without this unity, no good can be done, and this unity is founded on the spirit of humility*".³² Humility in accepting the other person's limitations and my own, without becoming discouraged at the prospect of being able to build something together, with a single heart and soul. Being able to learn from others, giving priority to teamwork and the search for community agreement, for effective educational action. Be attentive to what each member of the team can contribute. "*It would be better for education to adopt a worse way ... but one that was uniform among all the teachers*"³³ ... Self-assertion, which sometimes means keeping quiet to ensure overall coherence.

V. Conclusion

Let us reread the quotation from Pope Francis that we have chosen to put at the head of our network project: "*It is important for the future to form open identities capable of overcoming the temptation to turn in*

32 Marie-Eugénie, *Conseils sur l'éducation*, 1842 in *Textes fondateurs I – Advice on education*, 1842 in *Founding Texts*

33 *idem*

on oneself and become rigid" (speech at the Abu Dhabi interfaith meeting, 4th of February 2019).

If, in our network project, we wish to affirm our Assumption identity, it is certainly not so that we may participate in a general movement to withdraw into our own identity; on the contrary, it is to remain capable of being open to all. It is because we are convinced that by knowing ourselves, we become more capable of meeting others. And because, humbly, we have experienced the spirit that inspired Saint Marie-Eugénie as powerful enough to inspire us even today, and to give us the pluck to respond to the needs of our time, based on the DNA that can become our own - if we want it to - when we set foot in an Assumption establishment.

We've shared eight key words with you: even if they seem to be in contradiction with each other; we like to intertwine them, and it's this happy marriage that defines the profile of our Assumption village. They can resonate with the seven pillars of the global educational pact called for in 2019 by Pope Francis.³⁴

³⁴<https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/resources/Risorse/vademecum-francais.pdf>

02

Archives

An invitation to
fraternity -
Contemplative
reading of the first
two letters of Anne
Eugenie Milleret to
Josephine de
Commarque

Sister Veronique Thiebaut, RA
General Archivist

“God has given me an infinite attraction to speak to you with an open heart”

In the fall of 1838, Anne Eugenie was at the Convent of the Visitation, on the Côte Saint André. There she was formed in religious life and experienced Community life which attracted her. At the same time, she formed a more lasting community with Josephine de Commarque, future Mother Marie Thérèse of the Annunciation. Josephine is the first young woman whom Father Combalot called, after Anne Eugenie. She was born on September 2, 1811, in the South-West of France, in the Dordogne (region thus called according to the name of the river which crosses it). A little wink of the eye regarding Marie Eugenie's childhood, she too has a brother named Louis for whom she feels great affection... From October 1838, an epistolary correspondence was established between the two future foundresses. In the Archives, we have 9 letters from Anne Eugenie to Josephine before the foundation (from n°1175 to 1183), two letters before Josephine joined the Community (n°1184 and 1185) as well as many letters during their religious life (no. 1186 to 1366). Today, we invite you to discover the first two letters of this series.



I. “Destined by Providence to work together...”: the Sister of the first hour

A first important element is the relationship that Anne Eugenie establishes from the outset with Josephine: a “Sisterly” relationship. She never tires of repeating this name given to her first future companion. She associates it with other terms: “sweet name of Sister”, “first Sister”, “only Sister”. Marie Thérèse is “my dear Sister”, “my very dear Sister”, “my beloved Sister”. “I bless him...in that he was good enough to give you to me for my first Sister...”, writes Marie Eugenie to explain her desire to establish a relationship without delay with Josephine, whom she only knows through Father Combalot who told her about her. This way of celebrating the gift of a sister, received from God, invites us to give thanks for the life of each of our Sisters, for the priceless gift of Community Life.

Eugenie, who feels "foreign" in a community where she is not destined to stay, even if she feels at ease there, does not envisage her future religious commitment (still lived in the intimacy of her heart at that moment) than as a communitarian act: *"I need to consecrate in some way this desire of my heart, by coming to unite it with yours and make you its custodian"*. It is also in Community that she dreams of being able to develop her apostolic life which will make Jesus Christ known and loved Who, she wrote to Josephine, wants *"to unite us so strongly to work together for the aggrandizement of His glory and the reign of His love"*. This fraternity, if it is well embodied in multiple human relationships, has a taste of heaven: *"the kiss of peace and of an eternal fraternity"*, *"to unite us forever"*. By creating a bond that draws on the love of Christ, this fraternity brings together people who have everything to be "strangers". If Marie Eugenie will say later to the Religious of the Assumption: *"there are no strangers among us: all are daughters of the Congregation... our Sisters and our Mothers"*³⁵, she already understood, even before the foundation, that the bonds which unite the Sisters are stronger than all that can separate them if we follow human ways of seeing. She feels a sympathy which is not born from feelings but from the love of Christ: *"United with the sisters whom God gives them, they try to accept each other as different, because they know that the love of Him who brings them together is stronger what separates them"*³⁶. Josephine de Commarque is the illustration of the unknown who becomes the Sister, of the "distant" who becomes close. Through her, the young Eugenie concretely experienced this love of which she speaks in n°160/01 of the Notes Intimes, dated May 1837: *"Instead of growing cold, my heart has widened, I love you as much, perhaps more, but certainly much better, since it is in Jesus Christ and I love all my unknown brothers with a love that God deigns to increase every day in my heart."*

How does she define this fraternity which is still in embryonic form in these letters? It is first and foremost a gift of Providence and, as such, deserves our full commitment. It is based on "family life", with "holy and intimate" relationships. Marie Eugenie also dares to consolidate this relationship by a frank openness of her heart (a characteristic that she always

35 Marie Eugenie, Chapter, 29 August 1886

36 Religious of the Assumption, Rule of Life, n°55

places in the first line of the conditions for a relationship of trust): "God gave me an infinite attraction to you speak to you with an open heart". One could say, simplicity and depth, in current language.

This fraternal life is built on a shared passion: this "dedication to the same thoughts", of which Anne Eugenie speaks, could be the shared passion for the project of the Kingdom. This is indeed what occupies her thoughts and her heart. A passion that translates concretely into service and self-sacrifice. Together, the Sisters will be able to work for "the creation of these worlds of graces" that the Lord "would like to create in souls". In other words, they will be able to contribute to the coming of the Kingdom in this world, in themselves and in the hearts of their brothers and sisters in humanity. For Christ wants "to unite them so strongly to work together for the aggrandizement of his glory and the reign of his love".

This relationship of Sisters introduces a form of dependence expressed by Marie Eugenie using quite strong expressions: "one thing all yours", "which you can dispose of in everything and always". It is not a question of a hold that the other exerts on her, but of a free act by which she puts, at least in desire, her Sister before herself. Marie Eugenie will consider herself, throughout her life, as the servant of her Sisters, in dedication and a form of obedience that nuances the energy and firmness she sometimes shows so as to advance the affairs of the Community.

In fact, these two letters exude a scent of great sweetness. Through the words of the young foundress, we discover a great delicacy and the touching ability to recognize the graces and qualities of her companion, whom she has not yet met. She underlines the "long perseverance in the vocation" of Josephine (in fact, Josephine's parents opposed her entry into Carmel, but this did not deter her from her desire to give herself to God in religious life), her "courageous soul", her "promptness to leave everything to follow the path of God"; she recognizes in Josephine a possible example of faith and prayer. At the same time, Anne Eugenie recognizes her own limitations, flaws and imperfections. She says of her own heart that it is filled with a thousand miseries and "weak in action" but she speaks of "its good will, its courage". Above all, she knows that

she is still very young, "still a child" and that she will only be able to move forward on the path that God has traced for her by relying on Him and on the other members of the Community. We can say that she sees in Josephine, her eldest by seven years, the experienced person who will be able to give more stability to the Community which is for her a place of mutual aid to live the common desire to... *live for the love of Christ*. It is therefore on a realistic and humble word that she lays the foundations of the fraternity which unites her to Josephine, a word by which, in a way, she recognizes the other in all her dimensions.

Finally, common prayer is the base on which fraternity can flourish: "*let us be in unity in our prayers, in our communions, in our rosary*", "*let us find ourselves, let us unite in this Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin*". It is at the source of the love of Christ, more than in human forces and speeches, that the Community becomes stable. One could read the chapter of the Rule of Life on Community Life echoing these two letters and marvel at what Marie Eugenie already carried within her, like a gift from God, for the Congregation.

II. To make Christ loved "with a solid love": the thought of the work

In these two letters, a third person is present - "*my 'Father' and yours*": Father Combalot. He is the earthly link between the two young women: he called Eugenie; he called Josephine; he established contact between them, as he will establish contact between Eugenie, Kate O'Neill (future Mother Thérèse Emmanuel) and Anastasie Bevier (future Mother Marie Augustine), during a first meeting in Paris, at the Carmelite chapel of the rue de Vaugirard, in the spring of 1839. On several occasions in these two letters, Eugenie evokes "our 'Father'" or the conversations with him. It is always Father Combalot whose affection she acknowledges. She speaks of her joy in meeting him. We know that she loves his ardent word, his word of faith, which strengthens her own faith. It is about the work of Father Combalot – "*the thought of his work*". This is indeed the way of speaking of Marie Eugenie until around 1840. She does not see herself as foundress. She attributes to Father Combalot alone the paternity of the nascent project. In subsequent letters, in 1839-1840-1841, this will be an important marker. She will gradually go from

speaking to Father Combalot of "your work", to "*this work*", then "*our work*". It is a long road that will lead Marie Eugenie to agree to become foundress, Mother of the work of which, for the moment, she only considers herself as one element among others.

While not coveting the position of foundress, the young woman still has an astonishing spirit of initiative. It was she who insisted with Father Combalot on making a real novitiate. It was she who, a few months later, when she had not yet left the Monastery of the Visitation, asked Father Combalot to write an introduction to the Constitutions. It was she, with her Sisters, who insisted on making the explicit mention of the service of the poor appear in this same introduction. If we know that the violet color of the habit of the Assumption was already in Father Combalot's intuition, we discover here, thanks to letter n°1176, that it is Marie Eugenie herself who highlighted this motto that the Assumption has sung with one heart over the centuries: "*Maria assumpta est!*". It was in this letter that the young novice used this expression for the first time in the header of what she was going to write, happy to take Josephine as an accomplice in this novelty. "*It will be my standard,*" she insists. Josephine herself, having become Mother Marie-Thérèse, would take up again this practice. In the letters sent to her family, which were published by one of her descendants, we see that it was in 1843 that a new letterhead appeared: "God alone".

Beyond the slogan, it is the meaning that she puts in it that is especially interesting. We find there, in germ, all the understanding of the Assumption that it will develop over the years. Through this mystery, it is a matter of "*reviving our courage and our hopes*". Working to practice the virtues is a way to elevate oneself. We rise above all through humility. How many times will Marie Eugenie return to humility in her Chapters for the Sisters! It is about rising and helping others rise "above pettiness, fickleness, weakness and vanity." Here we find the importance of fighting against what is superficial so as to enter into an authentic and concrete, committed way of loving. These are also the first milestones of the link between the joyful detachment (disentanglement) and the mystery of the Assumption that Marie Eugenie will develop later, as a sign of her spiritual and human maturity.

We have already underlined how much we already feel in these letters the Passion for the Reign of Christ: to make Jesus Christ known and loved with a solid love. As we can read at the end of the letter n°1176, it is really the project of Anne Eugenie when she agrees to enter into the views of Father Combalot. And this work is deeply linked, as this letter also indicates, to the work of truth and justice. The love of Christ that seizes the hearts of these young women is therefore not a reserved, protected love that would draw them back into a closed relationship with Christ. It is, on the contrary, a love that they want to spread. It is a question of transmitting and sharing with others the "treasures of His love" which they experience in their personal relationship with Christ.



After a year of epistolary communion, Josephine de Commarque will finally arrive in the Community on October 9, 1839, before moving to rue de Vaugirard. Anastasie Bevier and Kate O'Neill preceded her there, but Marie Eugenie has been waiting for the arrival of the one she considers the first of her Sisters for a long time: *"...I will be waiting for you, my dear Sister, and may my heart therefore feel affection for this thought of having you soon and of beginning to live together our one life which is Jesus Christ."*³⁷

The growth of the Congregation and the crises experienced will always be, for Marie Eugenie, the opportunity to feel the assured fidelity of Mother Marie-Thérèse, discreet but strong. On the death of the latter, on April 18, 1882, it was still the treasures of this love that Marie Eugenie would like to contemplate, stripping herself more and more as she saw her first-time friends leave: *"We can be put in one place or another, having to deal with such a Sister or another; in all things, what brings peace and joy to the soul is a great detachment and an entire abandonment to the will of God. I am inclined to tell you about it, because that is what struck me in the last days of the good Mother*

37 Marie Eugenie, Letter to Josephine de Commarque, n°1180, 16 March 1839

4 Marie Eugenie, Chapter, 21 April 1882

*Marie-Thérèse. Before dying, one enters the depths of the soul. It is the most intimate background that manifests itself in the last moments. For her, the will of God was the center in which everything had taken refuge."*³⁸

It is always astonishing to note how, very early, the Lord formed in the heart and thoughts of Marie Eugenie what will be the foundation of the Assumption. Later, she will find more definite expressions, more elaborate formulas, but she already sees, despite her youth, the important elements: the centrality of Christ, the Assumption as a mystery that invites disentanglement/detachment, the force of life fraternity, the source of the contemplative life and the gaze turned towards the Reign of Christ. These letters show us that all of this only has taste when we share it, in fraternal life, and when we welcome it, written in the life of each of the Sisters "who can speak to us of God".



Letter from Anne Eugenie Milleret (future Marie Eugenie of Jesus) to Josephine de Commarque (future Mother Marie Therese) – n°1175 – La Côte Saint André, October 19, 1838

I need, my dear Sister, to come and tell you myself the immense consolation that I already feel in thinking of you, in having my 'Father' and yours repeat to me all the words, all the details, of these short interviews which were enough to attach you to him so generously.

Destined by Providence to work together, to strive together to glorify the name of our God, and to make His love reign forever in our hearts, we can no longer remain strangers to each other. This sweet name of "Sister" that I dare to give you here, moves my whole soul because here is the anticipated expression of these holy and intimate relations that the grace of J.C. [=Jesus Christ] wants to establish between us, of this family life which must unite us, of this devotion to the same thoughts, of this sisterhood finally, that you are willing to accept in the future. My dear Sister, I bless our good 'Master' for this. I bless him above all that he was good enough to give you to me for my first Sister. I feel so much attraction for you, and our 'Father' finds so much sympathy between us, that I cannot fear that you will ever find any disappointment in my heart, however bad it may be. But, my dear Sister, let me tell you not to count too much on a poor girl who is still only a child, and who can offer to God and to you, my dear Sister, only her good will, her courage, sometimes very feeble in action, and then a thousand and a thousand miseries. I will give only what I have with a very good heart, and if you regard me in O.L. [= Our Lord] as something entirely yours, and which you can dispose of in everything and always, you will make me very happy.

I know then that you are a courageous soul. I see in your readiness to leave everything to follow the way of God and come to serve Him in a work which can extend His empire in souls so widely, I see that His divine love has been well strengthened, I still see it in the long perseverance of your vocation; and don't say no, my dear Sister, our heavenly Spouse does not want to be denied the glory of His gifts; it is much better to give

Him thanks than to deny them. I therefore console myself, my dear Sister, for all my imperfections, for all my faults, hoping that the charity of J.C. [= Jesus Christ] will prevent you from being scandalized by them, at the same time as it will urge you to help destroy them, which is truly my heart's deepest desire. We would both like to live only for his celestial love and although this is not at all what I have done up to now, I find myself hoping for what is better from the time when you will help me by your examples and your prayers; therefore, begin now, my dear Sister. Pray a little for me, let us be united in our communions, in our prayers, in our rosary. Let us put ourselves together under the protection of St. Thérèse whom you love and whom I love too, although I do not feel, like you, to have the courage to follow her to Carmel.

This great Saint wore the habit of the Blessed Virgin, we will also be her daughters, we will do nothing but for her glory, and when the Queen of all Saints becomes our Mother, how could not one of her most devoted servants not love us? Ah! my dear Sr. [= Sister] let us meet again, let us unite in this Immaculate Heart of the Most Blessed Virgin whom we may be happy enough to serve greatly. May this Mother of Mercy unite us forever in the grace of her Beloved Son N.S.J.C. [= Our Lord Jesus Christ] in whom I want to be all yours. Eugenie Milleret.



Letter from Anne Eugenie Milleret (future Marie Eugenie of Jesus) to Josephine de Commarque (future Mother Marie Therese) – n°1176 – La Côte Saint André, November 21, 1838

Maria Assumpta Est! I remained a few days, my very dear Sister, without answering your delightful letter. I would very much blame myself for it, if I did not find a very special sweetness in coming to talk to you today and putting in your heart the emotions of this beautiful feast of the Presentation of Our Lady. This morning, my dear Sister, I saw all the good Religious of this convent, renewing at the feet of their God and ours, the holy commitments which bind them forever to His service; then, renewing a ceremony of the primitive Church, these fervent daughters

of St. Fr. de S. [= Saint Francis de Sales], giving each other the kiss of peace and eternal fraternity. For me, my beloved Sister, a stranger in the midst of them, and having not yet acquired the right to raise my voice to solemnly promise our sweet Savior what my heart so desires to vow to Him, under the auspices of his Holy Mother, I need to consecrate in some way this desire of my heart, by coming to unite it with yours and make you its custodian. I also need to come and wish you, as my only Sister, the grace and peace of N.S.J.C [= Our Lord Jesus Christ] who wants to unite us so strongly to work together for the aggrandizement of His glory and for the reign of His love. How good is this divine Master. It is he who helps us to do everything He asks of us, He has in the treasures of His love enough to conquer the most rebellious souls under the sting of grace, and He still takes victories into account for them, that they hardly consented to let Him win. It is a thought that I always find with new gratitude, when I experience how His divine presence miraculously fortifies me against the tendencies of a nature still so alive in me. I am speaking to you about my interior, my dear Sister, because God has given me an infinite attraction to speak to you with an open heart. It seems to me that you will not be scandalized by it, and I am already so strongly yours, that I believe you to be entirely mine, and that I cannot prevent myself from speaking to you as you and I would do to our 'Father'. This good 'Father' also loves you tenderly. We spoke a little about you this morning, because I had the pleasure of seeing him and hearing him. He came to give a short conference to the Religious of the convent where I am. He works a lot, but he rests pleasantly, he told me, in the thought of his work, which now seems to him more assured than ever. I asked his permission to take as my motto this text from the Office of the Assumption which I had often heard him say summed up the whole idea of his work "Maria assumpta est! - Mary was assumed. - You are the first, my dear Sister, with whom I use it; henceforth it will be my emblem.

In fact, to honor the sublime glories of the Most Blessed Virgin on the day of her Assumption, to revive our courage and our hopes through this mystery in which she one day wants to make us participants, if we are faithful, to learn, by her example, to ascend as she did from virtue to virtue according to the measure of the grace given to us, to lay the foundations of our celestial glory by the imitation above all of that

profound humility which, according to St. Bernard, alone elevated her to the throne of the Universe, finally, to work ourselves to elevate the women entrusted to our care, to elevate them, I say, above the pettiness, the inconstancy, the weaknesses and the vanities which are too often found in our sex, that is our whole destiny.

Isn't she beautiful, my dear Sister? Will we not be very happy if we can contribute to the creation of these worlds of grace that N.S.J.C. [= Our Lord Jesus Christ] would like to create in all souls? - because the soul of a chosen one is a whole world, said our dear St. Therese; and perhaps, God reserves for us this happiness to hear us say one day at the foot of His throne by some of His elect: "it is you who have been our Mother in the order of grace, it was you who introduced us to J.C. [= Jesus Christ] and who made us love Him with a solid love. For me, I believe that this charity is the greatest, that it is elevated above the other more than Heaven is above the earth. And the Beloved of our souls who says to the elect: "Come to my right, you who have clothed and fed Me" , would He not also say to us: "Come, you who fed the little children with the truth and who clothed them with justice?" - Oh, my dear Sister, all for His glory and then courage and trust in His love.

Farewell, this will be my last word, because my supptime is ringing and for a semi-Religious, it is a duty to be exact. All yours in J.C. [= Jesus Christ]

03

Theology

Abbé Combalot and the Blessed Virgin Mary

Sister Cathy Jones
St Mary's University, Twickenham, United Kingdom

Abbé Théodore Combalot's (1797-1873) love for Our Lady and his zeal to promote devotion to her is beyond dispute, as is the fact that the Congregation of the Religious of the Assumption would never have come into being without his determined perseverance to follow the calling he recounted receiving at the pilgrimage shrine of St. Anne d'Auray in Brittany to found a female religious order dedicated to the education of girls and young women under the patronage of Our Lady of the Assumption.³⁹ Outside of the Family of the Assumption, Combalot's love of Mary is mainly known through his impassioned preaching, as preserved in the books containing his sermons, as well as through his book on the Incarnation.⁴⁰ This article will focus on the first volume of Combalot's sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Conférences sur les grandeurs de la S^{te} Vierge*, situating Combalot's preaching about Mary in its historical context, and asking whether this inauspicious text contains anything of relevance to those reading it today.

39 Cf. Combalot, Introduction to the Constitutions (1839-1840), pp. 17-18 in
Foundation Texts, Vol. 1:

"The blessed Virgin, our Mother, prompted me to choose the mystery of the Assumption as your title... My dearest wishes will be satisfied if I see a community of virgins gathered together and worthy to bear this name. It could well be that, in honor of Mary, a religious congregation will be formed to honor each of her mysteries. Providence, in calling sisters to honor Mary has indeed already established some Congregations called after her Conception, Nativity, Presentation, Annunciation and Visitation, her hidden life in Nazareth, etc. and each shows clearly the attributes and characteristics of these events in Our Lady's life. In this showing forth of the glories of Mary the mystery of the Assumption is your special share."

Cf. Marie Eugénie, Chapter, 2nd May 1884, 'On the anniversary of the foundation',
p. 359 in Foundation Texts, Vol. 1:

"All comes from Jesus Christ. Who else, my sisters, outside of Him who called us, had a clear conception of what we were to be? Neither he who at St. Anne d'Auray had what he believed to be the revelation of a desire of the Blessed Virgin to have daughters consecrated to the mystery of the Assumption, nor those of us who were the first sisters."

40 (1841) *La connaissance de Jésus-Christ ou Le dogme de l'Incarnation envisagé comme la raison dernière et suprême de tout ce qui est*, Paris, Gaume frères libraires.
(1845) *Conférences sur les grandeurs de la Ste Vierge Prêchées dans l'Église de Saint-Sulpice*, à Paris, pendant le mois de Marie, Lyon, J.-B. Pélagaud.
(1865) *Le culte de la B. Vierge Marie Mère de Dieu, Nouvelles Conférences, Prêchées à Paris, à Lyon, en Belgique, etc., depuis le décret dogmatique de l'Immaculée Conception*, 2 Volumes, Lyon, Imprimerie Catholique de Perisse Frères

I. Les grandeurs de la Ste Vierge

The first volume of *Les Origines de l'Assomption* contains a remarkable account of the twenty-one-year-old Anne-Eugénie Milleret de Brou's critique of the book Combalot was then writing about the glories of Mary. It reveals both Combalot's unrestrained expression of his devotion and Anne-Eugénie's capacity to make a reasoned judgement and her candour and courage in expressing it.⁴¹ Writing seeking to convince Combalot to allow her to continue editing his book, Anne- Eugénie admits that "the style has necessarily given life and a kind of beauty" but unambiguously expresses her disapproval of Combalot's manner of writing:

But, my dear father, it seems that it is not worth the effort to write a book unless it is for people to read; and, unless one is a Benedictine, who will want to read a book where phrases such as this are found: "The external prolation of the divine thoughts achieved by a substantially existing personal or perceptible term"⁴²

Moreover, she continues by suggesting that it is Combalot's laziness which has led to such phrases, and blatantly asserts that "she is astonished at the lack of value" he gives to expressing his thoughts and entreats him to revise his text:

I think that we discredit the great theological ideas in producing them under barbaric forms; and allow me to tell you that it is usually only because one does not want to bother looking for others. The expression is the necessary form of an idea... an idea cannot be fully understood by the intellect until it has found its clear and complete expression. ... I am therefore often astonished at the lack of value you give to the expression of your thoughts. I am afraid that this is your fault as a writer. The forms of style are rich in your writing, and animated, sometimes too much so. But what is lacking is the sequence of events; brevity; a lack of effort to grasp your ideas in their origin and in their continuation, and to state them in a simple and solid manner. ... Be faithful to the promise

41 *Les Origines*, Vol. 1, pp. 147-150

42 *Les Origines*, Vol. 1, p. 149

you gave me to severely revisit your work, take from it all repetition, and you can write something useful for the glory of Our Lord.⁴³

Combalot's book, *Conférences sur les grandeurs de la S^{te} Vierge prêchées dans l'Église de Saint-Sulpice, à Paris, pendant le mois de Marie*, first published in 1845, leaves the reader in no doubt that Combalot did not make the radical changes Anne-Eugénie had proposed, that his desire to have the book in print as soon as possible took precedence over reassessing its content and style.⁴⁴ It is also clear why the widely read and sharply intelligent Anne-Eugénie had implored Combalot to revise it. However, no doubt due to Combalot's reputation as a preacher, which reached such heights that in 1830 King Charles X summoned him to court to give the Lenten sermons,⁴⁵ the substantial book of 492 pages became so popular that by 1858 not only was an eighth edition being published, but it had already been translated in Spanish, German, and Italian.⁴⁶

Two important factors can help us to understand the text and why it achieved such popularity. Firstly, although seeking to be a work of theology, a treatise on Marian theology, it is what the title so clearly describes: a series of sermons, written to be heard, in the dramatic style Combalot was well known for, and because of which people flocked to hear him preach. The vast majority of sermons are characterised by the digressions so beloved of Combalot, with Abbé Martin describing how Combalot let himself be led by them, "and sometimes developed them so much that it could be believed that he had lost sight of his main subject".⁴⁷ It will therefore come as no surprise that Combalot did not

43 Ibid. pp. 148-149

44 Cf. Les Origines, Vol. 1, pp. 147-148, which recounts how Combalot stopped Anne-Eugénie editing his work because he wanted it to be finished quickly.

45 Cf. Martin, C (1858) *Portraits littéraires des plus célèbres prédicateurs contemporains et Études sur la prédication au XIXe siècle*. Paris, p. 47

46 Combalot's place in the history of Marian theology is demonstrated by the fact that in 2013 a slim paperback version of his hymns in honour of Our Lady was published by Hachette Livre in conjunction with the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which seeks to preserve the heritage of works of French literature. Cf. Combalot, T. (2013) *Cantiques nouveaux à l'honneur de la très-Sainte Vierge*, Paris, Hachette Livre/BNF.

47 Martin, C. (1858) *Portraits littéraires des plus célèbres prédicateurs contemporains et Études sur la prédication au XIXe siècle*, Paris, p. 48

methodically structure his sermons in advance, but, with what Martin described as "his brilliant capacity for improvisation", "whatever subject he treated, he did not prepare his talk, only fixing in his thinking the principle points, then he prayed and full of trust in God he stood boldly before the auditorium."⁴⁸

As the psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist has so expertly demonstrated in his analysis of the working of the human brain, use of the left-brain, such as in reading, is an activity which pays attention to detail and uses reason, while entering into the drama created by an accomplished preacher uses the right-brain, with its tendency for broad thinking, entering into metaphor and finding implicit meanings.⁴⁹ Those who heard Combalot preach would therefore be engaging in a different activity and using a different part of their brain to do so, than those who later read his book. With the exceptions of the sixth and twelfth sermons, on the Immaculate Conception and Mary, Mother of God, large parts of which are basically compilations of texts from a wide range of theologians,⁵⁰ these sermons are not intended to be read and they have not been modified to suit the printed version. Significantly, *Les Origines* recounts how Anne-Eugénie declared she was satisfied with the (atypical) chapter on the Immaculate Conception.⁵¹

To understand Combalot's sermons, it is important not only to situate them in their original context, as intended to be heard rather than read, but also to locate them within the writings about Mary of the time. The preponderance of what would later be assessed as badly written books about Mary in the mid-nineteenth century is one of the regrettable features of what is often called 'the Marian movement', a privilege-centred approach to Mary which sought to promote her glories, broadly

48 Ibid. p. 47. Cf. *Les Origines*, Vol. 1, p. 224, which recounts Combalot's description of preparing his sermons: "I meditate at length on my subject, then I pray a lot, and when I have prayed, I place myself resolutely before those listening to me, and I throw my soul at them."

49 Cf. McGilchrist, I. (2009) *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, New Haven; Yale University Press.

50 The chapter on the Immaculate Conception (pp. 87-103) includes quotations from Bossuet, Salazar, Denys, Origen, Cyprian, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, Bernard, Bonaventure, and the Council of Trent.

51 Cf. *Les Origines*, Vol. 1, p. 147

lasting from the early decades of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. This was marked by what Abbé René Laurentin described as "Marian enthusiasm". He described how the problem was "not just simple over-abundance", but also a "qualitative excess", with, in some cases, "the intensity of Marian zeal" being "not without a certain feverishness, nor its results without exaggeration, and indeed real deviations";⁵² a description which clearly matches Anne-Eugénies assessment of Combalot's *Conférences sur les grandeurs de la S^{te} Vierge*. Writing in a similar vein, Louis Veillot's scathing assessment of books about the Blessed Virgin Mary a few decades later in 1860, highlights that some texts had a lack of warmth rather than an excess:

...of the immense number of volumes (...) produced each year, scarcely any are found which do not leave everything to be desired: cold and clumsy declarations, texts badly put together, lessons without doctrine, without love, too often without grammar. It is astonishing that the zeal which makes these works read inspires so badly those who write them.⁵³

II. The twenty-eight sermons

What then do the twenty-eight lengthy sermons contained within *Conférences sur les grandeurs de la S^{te} Vierge* consist of? After an opening, untitled sermon, ambitiously connecting the fall, the covenant with Noah, May as the month of Mary and the Divine Motherhood, the rest of the sermons have clearly articulated titles, covering many of the attributes, virtues and traditions associated with Our Lady. As would be expected in the years leading up to the popularly desired proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX in 1854, this is a prominent theme, two sermons are devoted to it, and it is referred to in many others. Interestingly, however, there is no chapter devoted to the Assumption, which although not proclaimed as a

52 Laurentin, R. (1965) *Mary's Place in the Church*, London, Burns & Oates, p. 17. However, as Laurentin generously notes, the "source of these exaggerations is, however, perfectly honourable" for it "is surely a law in all love as in all enthusiasm to be always, in intention, a little beyond itself." (Ibid. p. 18)

53 (1860) *Mélanges, deuxième série*, Paris, Gaume, Vol. 5, pp. 605-606, quoted in Laurentin, R. (1984) *Marie Mère du Seigneur : Les beaux textes de 2 millénaires*, Paris, Desclée, p. 7.

dogma of the Church until 1950 with Pius XII's *Munificentissimus Deus*, was very much part of Catholic devotion, as its presence in the Rosary attests, as well as the innumerable churches under the patronage of Mary assumed into heaven, and the wealth of sacred images portraying this scene.⁵⁴

There are a number of sermons which focus on Mary's connection to the Old Testament: "The hatred of the ancient serpent for the dogma of the divine maternity", "The figures of the Old Testament which relate to the most holy Virgin", and "Prophecies of the Bible which have Mary for their subject". Other sermons are based upon non-Biblical traditions found in the highly influential second century *Protoevangelium of James*, such as that on the presentation of Mary in the temple, and much of the particularly verbose sermon on Mary's nativity, with descriptions of Saints Anne and Joachim taken from the *Protoevangelium of James*. Naturally, there are sermons on the role of Mary in the work of the incarnation and as Mother of God, and more surprisingly if Combalot's zeal for the re-Christianisation of society through the education of girls and young women is forgotten, two sermons on the education of girls. The text concludes with a dozen sermons centred upon the Visitation and the Magnificat, with the ten lines of the Magnificat each being the focus of a sermon. Given such an array of sermons it seems unlikely that the content was systematically planned, but a collection of what had struck Combalot as being of import as he prepared his preaching.

III. Mary and the Old Testament

Having outlined the central problematics of Combalot's *Conférences sur les grandeurs de la S^{te} Vierge*, a way in which this text can enrich our approach to Marian devotion will be proposed. One of the most notable features of Combalot's sermons is his frequent recourse to Old Testament characters and imagery to describe Mary, with Combalot himself recounting how, "God, for whom the centuries have neither past

54 Cf. *Munificentissimus Deus* 15, which, referring to the Religious of the Assumption and the other congregations which are part of the spiritual family of the Assumption, describes how "religious institutes, with the approval of the Church, have been founded and have taken their name from this privilege."

nor future, sketched in the Old Testament all the features of the life of his divine mother".⁵⁵ The array of characters in whom Mary is understood to be prefigured include many of the female characters of the Old Testament, such as Eve, Judith, Esther, Rebecca, Rachel, Miriam and Sarah, and there are also prominent references to the Song of Songs, the Ark of the Covenant, Daughter Zion and Lady Wisdom.

While we might marvel that Combalot found so much to say about Mary in the Old Testament, there are some important truths underlying his approach. As *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II, states "God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New."⁵⁶ While a good number of what Combalot sees as Old Testament 'prefigurings' of Mary are part of Catholic devotion today, others strike the modern reader as decidedly unusual. For example, Combalot repeatedly connects Mary and Noah's ark,⁵⁷ a connection rarely made today, but one which was present in patristic writings, and which Pius IX used in *Ineffabilis Deus* to describe Mary's Immaculate Conception, her "most excellent innocence, purity, holiness and freedom from every stain of sin" being seen in the "ark of Noah, which was built by divine command and escaped entirely safe and sound from the common shipwreck of the whole world."⁵⁸ Such imagery has the capacity to take the reader out of a systematic (left-brain) reading of the text to a (right-brain) entering into the metaphor, extending the comprehension and deepening our capacity to ponder upon the mystery, in imitation of Mary herself (cf. Luke 2:19, 2:51). Moreover, as Ratzinger stressed, if Mary is not sought in the Old Testament, there is something fundamentally awry in our understanding of both Mary and her Divine Son: "She is the New Covenant in the Old Covenant; she is the New Covenant as the Old

55 Conférences sur les grandeurs de la Ste Vierge p. 56

56 *Dei Verbum* No. 16

57 Cf. p. 59 "The Catholic tradition saw in Noah's ark a mysterious shadow of the Blessed Virgin. Original sin covered the generations with its foaming waves; but the spotless Virgin will not be submerged in its waves." (cf. also, pp. 1-2)

58 *Ineffabilis Deus* Paragraph 13

Covenant, as Israel: thus no one can comprehend her mission or her son if the unity of the Old and New Testaments collapses".⁵⁹

IV. Closing thoughts

Other insights could be gained from Combalot's sermons, including taking time to reflect on the instance that occasioned them, honouring the month of May: Mary's month. This devotion is no longer prominent in Europe, yet devotions such as preaching during the month of May, as Combalot poured so much energy into doing, or children taking part in May processions culminating with crowning Mary 'Queen of the May' significantly marked European devotion to Mary, from the early eighteenth-century to recently, with a decline being seen from the years following Vatican II.⁶⁰ As in the twenty-first century we become ever more aware of the need to honour and respect mother earth, these beautiful mediations connecting Mary and the natural world have a capacity to speak anew to us. Similarly, Combalot's choice of subject for his homilies including reflection on Mary as teacher, serves as a reminder how Christian pedagogy can be enriched by incorporating Mary as an exemplary educator.

Although Combalot's sermons themselves are highly unlikely to speak to contemporary readers, taking time to examine their content, albeit briefly, has shown that they contain a helpful reminder of the significance of the Old Testament for Marian doctrine and devotion, and suggest fruitful areas of exploration, such as Mary as educator and the potential of reviving the connections between Mary and nature

59 Ratzinger, J. (1983) *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church's Marian belief*. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, p. 65. Cf. *Ibid.* p. 31: "in a certain respect Mariology ties the knot joining Old and New. Mariology cannot be found apart from its union with the prophetic theology of the bridal people of God."

60 Cf. Laurentin, R. (1984) *Marie Mère du Seigneur: Les beaux textes de 2 millénaires*, Paris, Desclée, p. 200.

Two time-honoured mediations on the connection between Mary and May in the English language from the second half of the nineteenth century are worth highlighting: Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'The May Magnificat' (cf. <https://allpoetry.com/May-Magnificat>) and John Henry Newman's 'Meditations on the Litany of Loreto, for the month of May' (cf. Newman, J. H. *Blessed Art Thou Among Women: Meditations on Mary*. Denville, NJ: Dimension Books. Undated but written and preached in 1874.)

expressed in May devotions. However, the primary finding of this reflection on Combalot's *Conférences sur les grandeurs de la S^{te} Vierge* is that the young Anne-Eugénies assessment of them stands the test of time: the written form of Combalot's devotion is far from giving worthy honour to Our Lady.

V. Postscript

It is appropriate to mention two lasting monuments in which Combalot's devotion to Mary is embodied: the church he built dedicated to Mary ('Eglise de la Vierge') at Châtenay, his birthplace, in south-eastern France, famed for having the oldest set of bells in the region and listed under 'French historical monuments' in 1991,⁶¹ and the role he played in enabling the creation of the remarkable Statue of Notre-Dame de France in Le Puy-en-Velay, 16 metres high and approximately 4 metres in circumference,⁶² on top of a 132 metre high volcanic spur, the Rocher Corneille.⁶³

An account of the building of Notre-Dame de France is given in a book by Adrien Roselat from 1860, the year in which the stature was completed, which recounts how in July 1850 Combalot preached the ecclesiastical retreat of the diocese and passionately advocated building a colossal statue of Mother and child on the Rocher Corneille. Roselat describes how, although the famous Jesuit preacher Fr Xavier Ravigan had discussed this idea previously with Combalot, it was from the moment of Combalot's preaching that the cause was won:

"On Friday 26th July, Abbé Combalot ended the retreat with a speech in the cathedral, in the presence of a considerable number of priests of

61 Cf. <https://tourisme-bievrevalloire.com/noesit!/fiche/eglise-de-la-vierge-et-son-carillon-79679>

62 Cf. Courtille, A. (1997) *Marie en Auvergne, Bourbonnais et Velay*, Clement-Ferrant, Editions de Borée, p. 246.

63 Cf. <https://www.travelfranceonline.com/notre-dame-de-france-statue-puy-en-velay/>. This webpage recounts how

"Our Lady's hand is 1,56m long and the Child Jesus' head has a circumference of 4,80m and weighs 1.1 tons. The statue weighs 110 tons and the pedestal 680, so a total of 835 tons; both are hollow. The pedestal's interior is laid out over 3 floors opened with windows that boast spectacular views of the city and the area."

the *département*, and before an enormous crowd of the faithful, who had rushed to listen to the eloquent words of the missionary, still young but already famous. It was in this memorable homily, forever engraved in the spirit of all those who heard him, that he expressed... the desire to see soon erected on the rocher Corneille, an enormous statue of the Virgin Mary, 'who would be shown extending her hand over the city and so to speak covering with her mantle the entire diocese.' He developed his plan and evaluated that it would cost about 150,000 francs."⁶⁴

Roselat later describes how Notre-Dame de France owes its existence to the generosity of the emperor (the statue is made from the metal of 213 Russian cannons captured during the Crimean War and given by the Emperor Napoleon), to the perseverance and dedication of Mgr de Morlhon, and to the words of Abbé Combalot.⁶⁵

64 Roselat, A. (1860) Notre-Dame de France: Statue colossale fondue avec les canons pris à Sébastopol, et érigée sur le rocher Corneille, au Puy, Le Puy, M.-P. Marchessou, p. 22.

65 Ibid. p. 42

04

AMA

From its Origins to
Today

Sister Veronique Thiebaut, Archivist of the Congregation

Sister Marie Valerie Lagarrigue, International Coordinator
of AMA

Sister Isabelle Roux, General Counsellor

The movement Associates of the Mission of the Assumption (AMA) is essentially an opportunity to live in complementarity amidst differences. It springs from encounters and allows everyone to weave together the threads of their personal history to create a communal one. In this perspective, writing this article in three voices is a choice that enables us to account for the richness and development of the AMA movement.

Sr. Véronique, the archivist of the Congregation, has charted the history of the AMA, showing how, rooted in Marie Eugénie's and the missionary passion of the first sisters, the favourable environment it found enabled its revival during the Second Vatican Council. She also observed that this missionary project would take on new accents according to the calls of successive eras.

Indeed, a shift has been gradually taking place: in the conciliar years, the need to strengthen mission sites, the call to proclaim the Gospel, and the desire for a useful life have motivated the volunteers. From this initial experience, the desire to offer young people an international experience where they can also find the meaning of their existence has strengthened in the Congregation. "Life is a gift received which, by nature, tends to become a given good. It is an elementary truth about man and earthly existence."⁶⁶ Sr. Marie Valérie, the international coordinator of the AMA, developed this idea, making specific reference to Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*.

Since the call of the 2018 General Chapter taking risks at the borders, the Congregation has been looking for ways to live interculturality in a renewed mission. Sr. Isabelle, General Counselor, says how the Congregation is also seeking to experience this renewal in Assumption Together, in the complementarity of vocations. The work in an international AMA team of sisters and lay people, the training programme, and the points of attention that facilitate the integration of an international and intercultural experience are milestones that can, in one way or another, shed light on other experiences.

I. A fresh breath of missionary air among the Sisters of the Assumption

A-Entrenching in the experience and Mary Eugenia's thinking

The call to mission was already resonating on the 23rd of August 1844, when Marie Eugénie made, on behalf of the Congregation, a commitment to pray for two missionaries, on the eve of their departure to Madagascar. On the 25th of December 1844, with the first sisters, she made the vow to "extend throughout her whole life the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ in souls".⁶⁷ After an unsuccessful request for a foundation in China, in 1849-1850 some sisters implemented this 4th vow by leaving for the Cape, in South Africa. From that moment on, the texts of the Congregation mentioned "missions" as important elements of life at the Assumption.

In her letters and chapters, Marie Eugénie emphasised that it was not necessary to go very far to participate in the coming of the Kingdom of God. The coherence of life comes before the long journey: "... without going on a mission, do you not have children around you? Do you think a good word, your examples, your prayers will have no effect?"⁶⁸ On the 26th of October 1873, when the sisters were departing for New Caledonia, she emphasised that the departure of the ones must awaken the spirit of disciple of the others.⁶⁹ Extending the Kingdom, having an apostle's heart, and going on missions are like the different facets of a single movement of love.

She mentioned elsewhere that the prayer of adoration is a missionary prayer *par excellence*: "When one is at the foot of the Blessed Sacrament, one must often ask God to reign in souls and hearts. Visit all missions in all corners of the world."⁷⁰

67 This vow became a vow of unconditional availability for the missions in 1866 and was refused by Rome where it was felt that it could introduce differences in the Congregation. Henceforth the expression is integrated into the formula of profession of all the sisters. All the sisters will make profession to extend the Kingdom of Christ.

68 ME, Undated Chapter Instruction - II, Volume 1

69 ME, Chapter Instruction, 26th of October 1873

70 ME, Chapter Instruction, 20th of July 1879

The departure for New Caledonia and the expansion of the Congregation in various countries of Europe preceded the departure to the Philippines and Nicaragua (1895), then to El Salvador (1895). Subsequently, the Congregation expanded further: Belgium, Denmark, Brazil, and the United States during the mandate of Mother Marie-Célestine, during the troubled context of expulsions, then during the 1st World War; Argentina, Japan, and during the mandate of Mother Marie Joanna marked by the 2nd World War.

B- The origin of the AMA

From 1953 to 1970, Mother Marie Denyse showed enormous apostolic zeal expressed through numerous foundations, following the encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Fidei donum* (1957). The foundation of Birambo, in Rwanda, in 1954, initiated this era of remarkable departures: Mexico in 1954, Guatemala in 1956, Tanzania in 1957, Ecuador in 1957, Ivory Coast in 1958, Canada in 1959, Lebanon in 1965, Niger in 1965, Burkina Faso in 1965, Togo in 1966, India in 1968, Colombia in 1970, Benin in 1970.

The AMA emanated from within this context. To explain the founding perception, Mother Marie Denyse spoke of the experience of the sisters, based on the triple movement of Catholic Action:

- "See. It was in Brazil, in the mountains., The whole population on seeing the sisters rushed forward saying, "Are you coming to live with us?" - "No, we are just passing by." - "Oh! You're not coming to teach us catechism?" "And a nine-year-old girl with a dark complexion and an intense look joined her hands saying, " I would like to pray so much, and nobody comes to teach me to pray." (...)

- Judge.⁷¹ "Nobody comes to teach me to pray. Nobody talked to me about God." If all the young people in France heard this! If they knew that thousands of their brothers in the world are waiting for someone to teach them to pray, to talk to them about God. Do they know? Has the call been transmitted to them?

⁷¹ Meaning 'to discern'.

- Act. The first call was launched at the day school of the Assumption of Paris, rue de Lubeck, on the 2nd of February 1960. The Philosophy class⁷² was moved ... "If only our parents allowed it! ..."73

Six young girls responded to the call that year. Encouraged by their parents, they were sent to the Ivory Coast in 1960 to Duékoué. The arrival of the young volunteers gave the bishop of Daloa the idea to ask for a new foundation to be established in his diocese.⁷⁴ The call for lay missionaries to the Assumption thus made it possible to establish new foundations: "Mgr Rouanet asks us for a 3rd foundation in the Ivory Coast, in Danané. It is urgent (...) Thanks to the lay auxiliaries, we can answer his call. " A few years later, in Abidjan, an AMA medical doctor made it possible to establish the dispensary.

We are also trying to awaken the missionary desire of the sisters, and the whole Congregation is involved in this movement, irrespective of the places and forms of the apostolic commitment. The General Chapter of 1965 specifies that in addition to Christian formation and community life, for the school to be missionary, "...it must train young people to engage in apostolic life." The explicit educational objective states, "We will guide them [the students] in the choice of their vocation and their profession, with the concern of this apostolic dimension to give to their life." The work for "social justice" gives a specific colour to the commitment which is enshrined in the practice of the sacraments and prayer.

C- Being an AMA

a) Why become an AMA?

Very quickly, the movement began to take shape. In 1961, a lay director, Miss Demay, supported by a team of nuns, took over the Secretariat in Auteuil. She forged links, reassured parents, and answered all questions. A communication bulletin served as a link.

72 The Philosophy year is the last year of high school in the French education system

73 Mother M. Denyse, excerpt from "Why were the AMA founded?", 1965-1966

74 See also Mother M. Denyse's letter to the final year students in Lübeck in 1966.

In 1962,⁷⁵ the first promotional booklet for AMA commitment motioned young people using captions such as: "After my studies? - Open Doors".⁷⁶ It is a matter of evading selfishness and being passionate for the Lord, captured by an urgency to announce Christ.⁷⁷ He, through the voice of the Church, urgently calls for volunteers because the sisters cannot answer all the needs of the mission alone. Young people are called to use discernment by asking themselves: "What have I done to help Christ? What will I do to help Christ? What should I do to help Christ?"⁷⁸

It initially involves going to distant countries, in Africa, America and Asia. We also mention the possibility of serving in Europe, in the suburbs of the capitals.⁷⁹ Professional skills are required: "Any valid diploma in teaching, nursing, childcare, midwifery, secretarial, home economics, etc."⁸⁰ It is a matter of being concretely useful to the mission and collaborating directly in the daily work of the sisters. AMAs leave with an insurance contract. The mission pays for the return trip and covers their upkeep during the duration of the commitment, in addition to a little pocket money. The young people renounce all paid work.

Many letters testify to the motivations of the AMA:

- Monique C.: "If I go, I would like to be able to be completely at the service of the country I will go to, to be able to teach perhaps, but above all to be with the people, to teach them to live a little better, to take care of their children, of their house, to talk to them about God (...) If I go, it is really to give myself completely to the people with whom I will live... "

- Claude B.: "My ideal was the missions. I've been thinking about it for a long time, but I couldn't see how to realise what I call my vocation (...) I

75 In the Archives, the booklet and autographed draft of Mother Marie Denyse.

76 AMA promotional booklet, 1962, Cover.

77 AMA promotional booklet, 1962, p.1.

78 AMA promotional booklet, 1962, p.5.

79 AMA promotional booklet, 1962, p.6.

80 AMA promotional booklet, 1962.

reached the age of 25, and I was feeling useless, and we don't have the right to stay inactive."

Before the departure, two months of spiritual and missionary training are required at the Paris headquarters. The spiritual and material support reassures families.

b) What do we expect of an AMA?⁸¹

The answer to this question can be found in the many leaflets and brochures of the early years.

- Life of prayer: "Having the concern of a personal contact with the Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament", "Participating in the religious exercises of the Mission", "Taking an active part in the weekly meetings of the AMA and the missionary community: its purpose is to verify fidelity to the commitment in terms of spirituality, mission, and profession and to expand together a spiritual or missionary issue."

- Life of evangelical poverty: "During the duration of the commitment, the AMA must live without concern for any material things (...) they will be careful in not spending money on frivolity."

- Community life: "The life of the first Christians 'one heart and one soul' is the ideal of community life which must unite the AMA and the Mission. The AMAs do not leave the Mission on Sundays and holidays: 'the missionary work is always there'."

- Testimony of life: "It must be positive, authentic, joyful, and serious at the same time. It is a matter of making God known who is Love through words, deeds, aptitude, and dress. This curtails all childishness. The AMA only leaves to reveal God." The scope was strong. In 4 years, 150 young girls departed on missions, so that the Union of the AMA became known and recognised. In June 1964, a score of AMA were sent by Monseigneur Veillot himself.

81 See. AMA Rules.

D- Progressions

a) New focal points

The organisation is evolving with the Church. The apostolate of the lay people has become an important theme: " participation in the salvific mission itself of the Church: to this apostolate, all are destined by the Lord himself by virtue of baptism and confirmation (...) The lay people are especially called to ensure the presence and action of the Church in places and circumstances where it can become nothing else than by them the salt of the earth."⁸² "The Church is not complete without the lay people" because... "they contribute, as living members, with all their strength, to the growth of the Church and its continual sanctification...".

New focal points are becoming visible: the importance of natural virtues and self-abandonment; a change in posture ("The missionary cannot go to the other [other nationality, poor, non-Christian] as the one who is great goes to the one who is small; the one who knows to the one who does not know [...] she will work with, as a brother, by making herself all to all. "); dignity, cultural values, collective qualities of each people and each person; participation in the development of peoples; the thirst for the absolute, generosity, and authenticity.

b) An international model

The model becomes international, with a General Secretariat in Auteuil and National Secretariats. The European Provinces each took charge of one of the distant missions. AMA courses began to be held in different countries.

In Canada, in particular, Mother Adelaide began, in 1962, to give conferences on AMA from Baie Comeau, where the sisters were in charge of a state high school. To get closer to the big cities, an AMA centre was built in Quebec City in 1964, thanks to the support of Archbishop Roy, who was won over by the missionary spirit of the Assumption.

⁸² Lumen Gentium, n°33, 1964.

Under the impetus of Mother Adélaïde and a team, the centre offers young people, boys, and girls, the opportunity to have an experience "in a Christian missionary perspective", in fidelity to the original thinking of the AMA Movement: "to put young people, for two or three years, more directly at the service of evangelisation, and to help them, through this experience, towards a more personal encounter with Christ, enrichment of their faith, a blossoming of their personalities and their Christian life which will mark their whole life. The main axes are discernment (suitability and type of mission), training (by resource persons, former AMAs, readings and an intensive course one month before departure), and choice of the place of mission (the position that best suits each person).

The project also provides for on-site commitments in Canada and support for families during the children's stay overseas. Throughout the year, the Sisters and AMAs collaborate in missionary animation in parishes, and secondary schools, with conferences as far away as the Gaspé and New Brunswick.⁸³ A place of orientation and missionary information, the Centre, which closed in 1970, proposed meetings of former missionaries and conferences to raise awareness.

There is much more to say about the beginning of the AMA association which developed in a slightly different way after Miss Demay died in 1975. The testimonies of the former AMAs speak volumes about the quality of the experience. Beyond the change of scenery, the isolation, and the difficult acclimatisation, the stay was a real lesson of life: "During my training period, I was told something that I experienced to be true: 'To be able to act in Africa, speak little, observe, listen, in short, soak up the African mentality. With this spirit, the adaptation will take care of itself."

II. The AMA facing today's challenges

During the time of Marie Denyse, our educational charism pushed us to respond to the needs of local populations, especially in places where there were not enough sisters. In the heart of a Church then marked by the call to the mission of Pope Paul VI, the AMAs were deployed in

83 cf. Mother Adelaide, working document for an assembly in Miami, 1970.

phase with this movement. For example, in France, the DCC (Catholic Delegation for Cooperation), which is the volunteer service of the Church of France, was founded in 1967, in the same missionary movement.

Sixty years later, we are clearly experiencing that our educational approach has evolved. Today our attention is centred around the young volunteer him/herself who will go to meet an 'otherness'. We can even emphasise that this priority given to the volunteer is quite characteristic of our Assumption way of offering an international volunteer experience. Many volunteer organisations work more with local missions. They have positions to be filled and are looking for competent people who can be available for one or two years to fulfill them. It is not so for us. We want to know the volunteers, their story, and their expectations, before looking with them for the place of a mission.

A- Mission and Accompaniment of Young Volunteers. The Youth Synod.

This shift in our AMA educational project is interesting in the context of the Synod of Young People of 2017 and the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis *Christus Vivit*, which followed this synod. With the Pope, we begin from the observation that many young people today do not know Christ. Many young people (four-fifths of French young people) have not received Christian education in their childhood and have no experience of a personal encounter with Christ. This reality is common to many of our countries.

In Chapter VII of *Christus Vivit*, the Pope speaks of the organisation of pastoral care for young people, noting the urgency of putting in place new styles and new strategies. Francis insists on two major lines of action: on the one hand, research, encouragement, and call that attracts new young people to experience the Lord (209-211), and on the other hand, growth, and the development of a path of maturity for the young.

Even before Chapter Five of *Christus Vivit*, the Pope highlighted the importance of engagement (168-174). For him, "... *social commitment is a specific feature of today's young people*" (170). He denounces the temptations of confinement and bids us to construct social friendship, to work for the common good, to favour the culture of encounter

particularly through "initiatives of volunteering, active citizenship and social solidarity" (170). He adds: " Social engagement and direct contact with the poor remain fundamental ways of finding or deepening one's faith and the discernment of one's vocation." (No. 170). In this social engagement, young people deploy their talents and creativity. *I ask you to build the future, to work for a better world... Don't stand aloof, but immerse yourselves in the reality of life, as Jesus did.*" (174).

He continues in this direction in number 225 "*Christian service represents a unique opportunity for growth and openness to God's gifts of faith and charity. Many young people are attracted by the possibility of helping others, especially children and the poor. Often this service is the first step to a discovery or rediscovery of life in Christ and the Church. Many young people grow weary of our programmes of doctrinal and spiritual formation, and at times demand a chance to be active participants in activities that benefit others..*"

The Pope invites young people to bear witness by life, and to be courageous missionaries (175-178). Not to talk about the truth first but to live it. To bear witness by one's deeds does not mean to silence the Word "*Learn to swim against the tide, learn how to share Jesus.*" This mission is neither easy nor comfortable. And some young people are ready to give their lives in order not to stop their missionary impulse.

B- Listen to young people's third thirst for commitment

All the dimensions of the formation and accompaniment programme of the AMA can be found in this Apostolic Exhortation. During the international session of the AMA in November 2022, we redefined our vision of the project:

"Inspired by Saint Marie-Eugénie and enshrined in Jesus Christ, we want to accompany young people so that they can find the fullness of life by contributing to the transformation of society through joyful service, in the spirit of the Assumption."

The Pope emphasises pedagogies that allow the meeting of Christ and which can favour the maturation of young people. These two points are

particularly stimulating and in tune with our programme with young AMAs today. It is a matter of allowing them to have an experience of Christ, through the meeting of the other, through the sharing of life with the sisters, and insertion in a local Church. The preparation for departure, the accompaniment, and the rereading of their experience will allow the AMA volunteers to understand that they are made to give themselves and that they have been given the talent and abilities for this. "There is more joy in giving than in receiving,"⁸⁴ says Saint Paul, in the spirit of the Gospel. When the experience of the AMA gives young people the opportunity to meet Christ as a Person and not as an idea, they can then discover the Christian dynamic of giving. This law of giving whereby, out of love for humanity, Christ gives his life for each of us. The young person experiencing this received gift will himself feel called upon to give of himself.

In the culture of young people today, experiencing is a great way of knowing. Knowing oneself, and knowing the 'other', a very different 'other'. Where previous generations could commit themselves by conviction and the idea of an ideal life, the new generation needs to experience a pastoral of "small steps"; one that requires a rereading of one's daily life. Therefore one has to learn how to reread as well as how to experience the importance of talking about it with another. The AMA programme develops an integral pedagogy: head, body, and heart. This intensive pedagogy during the volunteer's stay will allow him/her a real transformation of his/her life, a conversion not with ideas but by engaging one's whole being.

Another important point of the culture of young people today is their desire to be actors, to be actively involved in their own history. We must consider each young person as a protagonist, the actor of one's experience, and one's discernment. This can also be deployed in a personalised AMA programme.

This path of meeting with Christ, with others, and with oneself is a vocational path. A path where the young person questions the meaning of life, what direction and what meaning to give to it. " "So

84 Acts of apostles 20,35

often in life, we waste time asking ourselves: 'Who am I?' You can keep asking, 'Who am I?' for the rest of your lives. But the real question is: 'For whom am I?'. Of course, you are for God. But he has decided that you should also be for others, and he has given you many qualities, inclinations, gifts and charisms that are not for you, but to share with those around you. "(286)

Personal encounters with Christ, social commitment, and service are the ingredients necessary today for young people to live a path of maturation and to find their Christian vocation. The AMA programme is a beautiful way to foster this experience.

III. Opening up to Internationality

A- An immersive experience in another culture

Another integral part of the experience is an immersion into a culture other than one's own. Even if the volunteering takes place on one's own continent or country, the experience puts the young person in contact with multicultural realities such as: being in contact with refugees, helping children and parents of migrants with their homework, a peripheral neighbourhood, etc. So, being sent as a volunteer also involves opening oneself up to cultural diversity, discovering other ways of experiencing everyday life, and practicing one's faith. By confronting a different culture from one's own, the young person discovers the humanity in the other and in oneself. He/she welcomes, sometimes with inner struggle, both cultures, without comparing them because they each have their reasons for being, their richness in God's plan, and their limits. Opening up to internationality means opening up to the other and to oneself, as well as to one's own difference. We learn to live together, differently.

This experience of inculturation is necessary if we want to serve with justice and charity. The experience is made up of misunderstandings, impatience, and distress; it prunes but also enlarges the heart and intelligence to universal dimensions. Sr. Martine Tapsoba expressed it this way: "*Internationality implies movements and conversions, to accept that our habits and customs are not spontaneously shared by others,*

and above all to seek to understand the difference in order to recover its richness".⁸⁵ It has a prophetic dimension.

B- Live internationality, sisters and laypeople together

The world we live in is no longer governed by a single dominant power. It is increasingly multipolar with emerging and plural powers. The North-South relationship is bound to disappear, even if inequalities persist and new poverty arises. In this context of a globalised world and international migration, as a Congregation, we feel the challenge of greater reciprocity in our exchanges, equality between peoples, and the valorisation of what each culture brings to the world.

Father Pernia, of the Congregation of the Society of the Divine Word and of Filipino nationality, affirms that we must no longer "*consider the mission as a unidirectional movement (from North to South) but see it as a multidirectional activity*".⁸⁶ More and more missionaries are now from the South. We deeply believe that multiculturalism is an integral part of God's Project for Humanity, something to be welcomed as an opportunity, a chance for our time. We want to live this richness in Assumption Together, Sisters and Laypeople in a spirit of synodality. Pope Francis does well to say that sharing the mission creates a communion of intentions, manifests the complementarity of the various charisms, and thus stirs in all the desire to walk together.⁸⁷

A collaborative mission of Sisters and Laypeople with other congregations or civil associations takes us out of our comfort zones, in a desire to move forward with courage and discernment in missionary sending between countries and continents. The years of experience of AMA in : setting up projects, preparing for missions, formation programmes, engagement of provinces and communities that send

85 Sr Martine Tapsoba, Report for the General Chapter 2018, p.31.

86 MISSION IN THE ERA OF MULTICULTURALITY, Intervention of Father Antonio M. Pernia, SVD Institute of the Divine Word for Missionary Studies during the Plenary General Council of 2020.

87 "Pope Francis "Pastors and Lay Faithful called to walk together" 18th of February 2023

and receive, as well as the richness of its network, can all inspire new initiatives.

The AMA project is a beautiful expression of the identity of the Sisters of the Assumption. Going back to the source of Marie Eugénie's thinking and revisiting the successive stages of the AMA project helps to renew the spirit, pedagogy and aim, without losing these dimensions of Incarnation and quality of self, which are always in its background. For the Holy Spirit always makes something new... a novelty that it is up to us to welcome with confidence and creativity.

The AMA project is based on the bold and humble conviction that our charism is a gift to the world: "We are convinced that our charism can respond to the deepest desires of young people today, with its community dimension, its international character, its strong spirituality and its commitment to transforming society. We believe that every person has a mission in life; we want to journey, in Assumption Together, with the young people we meet, to accompany them in the search for their vocation and to respond to their thirst for spirituality."⁸⁸

By engaging together, we turn our eyes towards the Reign of Christ, which transforms us, surpasses us, and calls us. We discover that "the missionary vocation becomes a grace of being and dreaming with others to build the Kingdom with the richness of intercultural communion. We want to make decisions in favour of a more voluntary and more visible internationality at the level of the congregation."⁸⁹

To read this article, the commission proposes to consult the Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, which can be found at the following address:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html

88 General Chapter 2018 Chapter Document p.15.

89 Final document of the Plenary General Council 2023 in Pune-India.

05

Assumption
Together
Co-responsibility
for the mission
from synodality

Belén Blanco Blonde

Responsible for Pedagogy Network of Marianist Schools

CONFER Shared Mission Team

We could summarize the SHARED MISSION like this:

two calls;

a sending out: evangelize;

an actor: the Spirit;

a horizon: the world.

Shared mission occurs when there is an ecclesial and charismatic missionary project, in which religious and lay people together ensure and promote their identity, and are co-responsible for it before the Church and the society. Shared mission understood in this way needs to be supported by a charismatic core that is its "soul."

Shared mission presupposes, the experience of life as a vocation in each person, and, in the group of religious and lay people a network of positive and enriching personal relationships, a shared faith and spirit, a common vision about the person, society and their needs, and an agreement on the appropriate response to these needs.

An Educational Project and mission are not the same thing. Some of the people who make up an educational community only share the Educational Project. Evangelizing is shared with those "called" to evangelize. How is everyone integrated into the mission?

"Everyone is co-responsible for the life and mission of the Community and everyone is called to act according to the law of mutual solidarity in respect for specific ministries and charisms, as each one of them receives their energy from the one Lord (cf. 1 Cor 15, 45)"

SYNODALITY, a call of the Spirit

A new ecclesial context: from the ecclesiology of communion to synodality. What does this mean?

- That in the Church and in society we are on the same path alongside each other. **We are all fellow travelers.**

- That **listening** is the first step, but it requires having an open mind and heart, without prejudice. **We must listen and listen to each other.**
- That we are all invited to speak with courage, integrating freedom, truth and charity. **We have to speak.**
- That “walking together” is only possible on the basis of communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist. **We must celebrate.**
- That synodality is at the service of the mission of the Church, in which all its members are called to participate. **We are co-responsible for the mission.**
- That dialogue is **a path of perseverance**, which also includes silence and suffering, but is capable of gathering the experience of persons and of peoples. We need to dialogue in the Church and in society...
- That dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by a single Baptism, has a particular place in the synodal path. **Let's journey with the other Christian confessions.**
- That a Synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church. Authority and participation.
- That in a synodal style decisions are the fruit of discernment, based on a consensus that is born from common obedience to the Spirit. **We must discern and decide.**
- That the spirituality of journeying together is intended to be an educational principle for the formation of the human person and the Christian, of families and communities. **We need to form ourselves in synodality.**

What is at stake is **the incorporation of the People of God as active subjects** in the fundamental decision-making processes within the Church. (Santiago Madrigal, sj, SAI Terrae no. 107 pp. 883-884)

It is a path in three phases:

- Participation
- Shared mission
- Charismatic family

Is this path of co-responsibility a priority?

We start from my call, what am I doing here? Vocation is the call to give light to the world. To feel a vocation towards something is to feel called by a valuable reality to fulfil in one's life. It involves not so much doing what we want, but rather discovering what we are called to do. God calls everyone and always calls. The place where God calls you is the place where your greatest joy and need in the world are found. God calls me through others (vocational culture), for others (Mission and way of life).

As it appears in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 273: *"My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an "extra" or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world."*

Cardinal Newman, J.H., in 1875 expressed it this way: *"God has created me to fulfill a certain service for Him. He has assigned me a task that He has not given to any other person. I have my mission (I may never know it in this life, but it will be revealed to me in the future life) therefore, I must trust Him, at any time, in whatever position I am in. I can't back out. If I am sick, my illness can serve you; If I am perplexed, my perplexity can serve you; If I suffer, my suffering can serve you."*

Be aware of BEING MISSION: "I am mission on this earth; and that is the reason why I am here in this world" EG 273.

How can I live this out from the specificity of being a layman and a religious?

Am I, here and now, what God dreams of with me?

I. Where is our horizon?

1.1. From being collaborators to being co-responsible

It is one thing to work together on the mission, and another is to be jointly responsible for the mission. When we talk about "shared mission" we have to make this second context possible: that of sharing the responsibility of the mission, of becoming co-responsible for the mission. It is common that the processes of shared mission begun by Religious Institutions with the laity end in frustration and disenchantment on their part, when everything remains in a supposed intellectual preparation to know the mission, know the charism, know the founders... but The Religious Institution maintains the reins of power at all levels, and the laity remain simple executors of what is ordered by the representatives of the Institution. Even when they assume certain responsibilities, they do so under their strict supervision, without the ability to participate in discernment and decision-making. The laity do not go beyond being collaborators of the Religious, and they do not stop being the protagonists of the mission. Shared mission turns out to be just "collaborated mission." The co-responsibility of the laity in the mission shared with the Religious is a goal, but it will be a very different goal depending on whether we put it in the context of one horizon or another.

1.2. Co-responsibility needs a horizon

What horizon do we have in mind when we talk about the shared mission? And if we say that we have to be co-responsible, in what context do we place it?

I describe three possible horizons below. Let's see to which of them ours is close to:

a) Is it the maintenance of the work? We are concerned about how to keep them standing, how to fill the vacancies left by the shortage of Religious personnel, how to secure management positions with people who faithfully follow the dictates that come from the Religious Institution... At this point we already know that this horizon is as limited in its perspective as it is small in its concept of mission that is handled there,

and how short will be the time that such a project can last. The underlying question on which this approach is based is of this type: how to keep this work standing? And it leaves aside other questions that require more perspective: what new needs must we respond to? What challenges does our charism pose to us? What sense of evangelization is this work based on? What you are looking for are managers. Continuity is not given to either the charism or the mission.

b) Is it the survival of the Institute? This becomes self-referential, possessor of the charism and protagonist of the mission. Lay people are admitted as collaborators; and the Institute's own structures are opened to give them a certain welcome, but there they can only be on loan, without full right, to listen to what the Religious say and decide. The lay people will not be co-responsible, but rather collaborators in the mission of the Institute.

c) Is the development of the family charismatic? In this case, charism and mission are beyond the Institute, they do not belong to it in the same way that the family does not belong to the Institute, but rather the Institute that is integrated into the family as part of it. The laity can participate in different ways in the charism and the mission, and are integrated with the Religious on the same level, in mutual dependence. And the structures that are put in place will have to make this relationship of equivalence and shared responsibility possible.

1.3. The goal needs a path

Every goal involves a path. And the goal that interests us requires a path in which the laity:

- participate and are integrated into relationships of communion and belonging between people and communities;
- identify with the charism, delve into spirituality, participate in joint formation processes with religious;
- feel invited to take responsibility and discern the mission and, together with the religious, they decide the responses and the resources to be used. That is, they become co-responsible for the mission.

Let's imagine this path as the construction of a building that has the shape of a pyramid or cone, and a large column in the center, as a construction axis.

The construction axis that pulls the entire building and makes it rise is formed by three cables, or three dynamic currents, that are braided together. There are three processes that are unified: the process of communion, the process of identification with the charism, and the vocational process of commitment to the mission. The three processes must be present from the beginning, supporting each other.

The building has three levels or parts closely related to each other. From bottom to top:

- **First**, is the one that supports the building, wherein **relationships** are provided ("create links"), and **belongingness** is obtained.
- **Second**, that which gives height and personality to the building, provides **accompaniment** and **formation** is provided, and **identity** is obtained.
- Third, that which guarantees the purpose of the building and its continuity, **involvement in the mission**, and obtains **co-responsibility**.

It is only an approximate image, but it helps us see that, in the shared mission, co-responsibility needs to be supported by the relationship, accompaniment and formation, and requires involvement in the mission. And it forms a body in the same building with the feeling of belonging and identification with the charisma.

"A walker would be stupid if, in the face of an attractive countryside, he forgot his goal."

(St. Gregory the Great)

The path of co-responsibility

A decision "in depth": "being with" and "being for"

Let's start by becoming aware of our internal structures, which are not visible to the naked eye, but which are determining the visible structures. In the same way that we have asked ourselves about the horizon that guides our shared mission, let us now try to reveal those attitudes, that predominant mentality in our Institutions that determine a way of relationship between Religious and lay people, and that can facilitate or torpedo the path of co-responsibility.

In Religious institutions there still are rigid, clerical, self-referential mentalities that relegate the layman, on principle, to being a mere assistant, docile collaborator of the religious personnel. If we do not change that mentality, it will not be possible to move forward on this path.

We can briefly describe the internal structure that we need with the phrase that Pope Francis uses in *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 273, when he invites us to position ourselves in the mission as "those who have thoroughly decided to be with others and for others." It is a "thorough" decision that must mark and guide the religious identity in order to advance in the shared mission, and it is described with the two prepositions that indicate what the relationship between Religious and laity should be like: "with" and "for", "next to" and "in function of".

In the "be with" our will to build the Kingdom and carry out the ecclesial mission in solidarity with other Christians, the Religious alongside the laity, not in their place, and even less over them. Along with them, the Religious will be without unnecessary prominence, but aware at the same time of the specificity they have to contribute to the mission. And that specificity is to be "in view of them", as of all the Christian people, because that is the meaning of the gift or charism of Religious Life, received as a prophetic sign for the entire Ecclesial community.

Let us not assume that this internal structure is already established in our case. In general, it requires a change of attitude in the Religious Institution, a "reversal of poles": because we must move from the attitude of protagonist to that of collaboration. Traditionally, Religious men and women have taken the place of the laity, replacing them in the evangelizing tasks that, in principle, corresponded to all members of

the Church. Then they have had them as collaborators, and that is what they call them in most cases. All that is old. The step that the members of the Congregations must take is to want to become collaborators, and to contribute their prophetic peculiarity to that collaboration.

II. Two groups meet on the road

Educating towards responsibility is a path in which two groups meet: Religious personnel and secular personnel. There is work for both of us.

- The first group must place itself in a new context, of effective communion with the second group, of renouncing its own role and promoting that of the laity until they become its collaborators, without giving up contributing what corresponds to its own Religious and prophetic identity. It is an identity rethinking that must be worked through two channels: the personal relationship and the encounter in formal and informal moments, between Religious and lay people, on the one hand; and on the other, the formation of the Religious in the new context of the Church communion.

- The second group must receive the tools that have helped the Religious to be effective agents in the mission: formation and motivations, which always require long and expensive processes, also financially; and for this reason, they must be programmed and proposed with greater effort and generosity. Formation processes that enable, on the one hand, the formation of people to fulfill the tasks and responsibilities entrusted to them, and on the other, the emotional and intellectual discovery of the charism.

Processes and level changes

We talk about change, a new context, new attitudes... People need time to change: to show solidarity, to enter into communion, to learn, to recognize ourselves as part of a history, to feel integrated into a human group, to become co-responsible in animating the mission ...

Therefore, the decisions that can be most effective in this path of forming towards responsibility are those that launch processes of change in people and institutions. And when the processes are already

underway, decisions are necessary that allow these processes to rise to a higher level and avoid stagnation.

- Thus, a communion process changes level when lay people who occasionally participated in community activities become integrated as members of the community.

- A formation itinerary changes level when, from having only Religious formators, it incorporates lay formators, capable of contributing their own lay perspective in the presentation of the charism and this could not be done without the prior decision to prepare these formators.

- Participation in the responsibility of the mission changes levels in a Province when the Provincial Chapter of Religious, in which some lay people participated as guests, gives way to an assembly in which lay people and Religious with the same capacity to voice and vote discern and decide what corresponds to the mission in the Province.

What level changes do we need to promote in our shared mission processes? It is a question to answer based on the knowledge of reality, discerned with the perspective that our charism offers us by placing it in the context of a Church-Communion where the laity claim its protagonist role and where Religious Life is situated alongside and in function of the laity.

THE MOST DIFFICULT THING: HOW TO JOURNEY TOGETHER (MOVING FROM WHAT TO HOW)

Implementing the shared mission, which is implementing synodality, is a very complex and difficult task, because it implies changes in the being and way of doing things of the Church. Changes are imposed in the relations of equality and authorities in the Church, with an eye to decisions already made. Do the little that is in me (St. Teresa of Jesus).

But first let's think about some basic attitudes that favor or hinder our journey together.

Which would be the most important?

Journeying together, in a shared mission and in a synodal aspect, requires for all of us: generosity, responsibility and commitment.

Generosity presupposes empathy; responsibility, common sense; and commitment, coherence.

a) **Generosity and empathy.** Taking care of generosity presupposes an attitude of empathy. If it is important to take care of our mission, it is no less important to take care of people. Caring for those who benefit from our mission and those who share with us the responsibility of carrying it forward.

We are all necessary, we are all important. We need to take care, pamper, I would say, listening to each other. Promoting empathy through listening involves:

- Not only *listen* to those who we know think like me, but listen to everyone especially to those who have more experience of life and mission. Let us not refuse to listen to the "oldest" in our surroundings because they journey full of experience and wisdom because, according to Seneca, "the wise man in his retirement is useful to the community." Let's listen to young people who can provide creative freshness. To paraphrase Kofi Annan, "a community that isolates its young people and cuts its moorings is doomed to bleed to death." In any case, let's **listen** to each other.
- *Promote relationships* beyond the merely instrumental or epidermal. Let's try to foster relationships that help change or whose contagion enriches and changes our experiences. Let's not be afraid of not thinking alike because "the final test of a relationship is to disagree, but hold hands" as Alexandra Penney says. Let us not be afraid of "wasting time" with and for others because that investment will result in greater communion and vitality. Let us not be one of those who "always have something to..." and, therefore, we can never "meet" without rushing.
- And *promote networking*. Communion is frequently lost along the way due to an excess of individualism and a lack of teamwork, in Community. Discovering the interests we have in common, agreeing on the needs that we must address and sharing the search for answers

together, makes it possible for the challenges that appear in our path to be overcome more easily. "Unlike human society, Pope Francis affirms, where there is a tendency to seek one's own interests at all costs, or even to the detriment of others, the community of believers banishes individualism to promote sharing and solidarity" (Audience General 06/26/2019)

b) Responsibility and common sense. The second principle to promote is that of responsibility, which presupposes an unusual attitude: common sense. The shared mission in a synodal aspect requires us to overcome, among others, three frequent and paralyzing complaints: the lack of resources, the excess of plans and documents and the absence of consistent formation programs.

- About the lack of resources. Whatever the type of these, they abort many initiatives that, born of good will, are held back because "we are few", "we do not have enough committed people", "we do not have enough money"... However, it is not so much the lack of resources but the poor distribution of these and, above all, the temptation to self-referentiality that prevents adding, with the risk of generating a type of leadership that is very human, very managerial, but not very Christian or charismatic. It would be interesting here to delve into "the 15 diseases of leadership according to Pope Francis", we are content to list them, without further ado: believing oneself immortal, immune or absolutely indispensable; being too busy; having a "heart of stone"; planning too much; poor coordination; lose remembrances; rivalry and vainglory; "intellectual schizophrenia" – dual life; gossip; idolize Superiors; indifference to others; lack of sense of humor; hoarding; closed circles and extravagance. Each one of them, by themselves, can bring death and condition the misuse of our resources for the shared mission in a synodal aspect.

- About the excess of plans and documents. And, without a doubt, the Synod will increase them. Common sense leads us to prioritize the search for practical solutions over "excessive documentation." It should be noted that, frequently, more than the number, what conditions us is the lack of flexibility when it comes to their implementation and, consequently, we put them aside without having even read them,

much less internalized them. It is good to remember that phrase from tennis player Martina Navratilova that says: "the difference between participation and commitment is like ham and eggs. The chicken is involved; the pig is compromised."

- About formation. Journeying together implies being formed together and, therefore, having formation plans that make it possible and, above all, that make life and mission possible (both at the same time). We do not stop practicing synodality because of lack of preparation, but because of the fear of learning by doing what common sense invites us to do. It's not just about ideas and theories, but about shared experience. An anecdote is that of that enthusiastic young man who volunteers to serve in the navy. The recruiter asks him: "Do you know how to swim?", the young man replied: "I know the theory." The pandemic has made it very clear to us: we have learned many things because we had no choice. The shared mission requires learning by doing and even learning to stop or abandon what does not work, without insisting that it necessarily has to work. And, for a healthy synodality, that requires creative coordination, a hopeful will and audacity.

c) Commitment and coherence: emerging needs continually present us with challenges that are almost impossible for us to respond to. We analyze, we program and when everything is ready, other realities have already appeared. Often, our sense of "efficiency" plays tricks on us. We run the risk of reaching great intentions, great declarations, but with very limited results and not always consistent with our documents.

It is life itself. The same thing happens to us with the Word of God.

- Commitment: today's world, with its lack of balance, its conflicts of all kind, its lack of perspectives due to living a short-term presentism, needs a more "aggressive" commitment to decipher the where, when and how of our synodality, of our sharing together. Our people and institutions carry many "dead weights" in need of burial or resurrection, too many historical conditions that prevent us from engaging in real time. A commitment not to remain in a dream but to serve, together, where we are expected, when we are expected and how we are expected. A commitment, sometimes symbolic and sometimes real, so

that the Kingdom of God is perceived especially where there is poverty, marginalization and dehumanization. Many words, but fewer actions.

- **Coherence:** hence the importance of coherence. If we have arrived here, it is thanks to the charismatic strength of women and men who were coherent and bold. Our founders, our foundresses, at least those I know, had the courage and creativity to discern God's will and respond coherently. They knew how to live and act accordingly with their ideas and go against the current. What should we change in our horizon to grow by attraction and not by proselytism? What does our synodal experience lead us to renounce and what does it force us to bet on?

How is this journey together carried out TODAY? What steps does the Holy Spirit invite us to take? This is the big question that the Synod raises.

Some intuitions:

1. Promote and work on some personal attitudes:

a. Do the little that is in me (St. Teresa of Avila) *"I determined myself to do that little thing that was in me, which is to follow the evangelical counsels with all the perfection that I could and ensure that these few who are here do the same, trusting in the great goodness of God, who never fails to help those who for Him are determined to leave everything."*

Follow the example of St. Teresa. Deep experience of God and realism at the same time. Determined determination that this is the personal and ecclesial path to which we are being called.

b. Work on personal and Community conversion. As Rafael Luciani says, "we are in a time of ecclesial conversion that involves reforms." This ecclesial conversion must be preceded by a personal conversion in which all of us, Religious and lay, must face fears, flee from securities and predispose ourselves to have an open heart, an open mind and an open will for this transformation that comes to us through the Spirit, and that is, without a doubt, a sign of these times.

2. Implement a new way of living and acting.

Developing a shared identity between laity and Religious. Strengthen the vocation and missionary sense that contributes to moving from the distribution of tasks to true co-responsibility. Establish a new form of relationship based on equality, love and service. Some attitudes that help us all for a new way of being and living: dedicate time to sharing, not just to produce, to be operational and effective, to share life, concerns, how we feel (lay and Religious). Practice humility in listening and courage in speaking (St. Teresa of Avila). Dialogue from the heart and the truth of each one, without masks, without the weight of a relationship that is sometimes contractual and, therefore, conditioned. Without fear of making mistakes or showing human fragility. Also dream and spend time with the future that helps to build together, to have goals. By dreaming the future we build the future together.

3. Be traveling companions.

In the Church and in society we are on the same path, side by side. Listening is the first step, requiring that we have an open mind and heart, without prejudice. Listen to what each one is called to be (Franc Jalisc) to favor the autonomy of each one and welcome the whole person. Invite all the people in our apostolates to speak with courage, to seek together the truth of our mission. We must obtain the intervention of everyone. To be authentic communities in a shared mission, all interested parties have the right to participate with their voice and vote, so that decisions can be promoted and cause structural changes with the consensus of all. We must also celebrate: "Journeying together" is possible only if it is based on sharing Word and Life.

4. Discern and decide:

In a synodal style, decisions must be taken in discernment, based on a consensus that arises from listening to the Spirit. Therefore, we must encourage the practice of personal discernment and community discernment: a discernment that has the capacity to value diversities and different ways of thinking. In this way, the differences are resolved and the truth of thought is placed before them. Shared decision: everyone has the power to make decisions, but never alone; Decisions

are made with everyone else who makes up the process. A fundamental step for shared decision is to develop openness and listening between Religious and lay people. Generate the conditions leading to possibilities so that discernment and decisions are truly from the Spirit.

5. To live and be in the key aspect of shared mission, it is essential to include the complementary ones.

It implies the integration and involvement of diversity, openness to plurality. Perhaps in this we have acted more in words than in deeds. In this sense, we must overcome three temptations in the Church, in the Congregations and in ourselves. First, the temptation of uniformity. Let everyone have the same opinion, get together with those who are like us thinking that in this way we more numerous. Each one brings their own personality, each one follows their own vocation, follows their personal path. And we also have cultural particularities. In the face of intolerance and exclusion, the shared mission must be a school of integration, of unity in plurality. Secondly, we must overcome the temptation of self-referentiality, to use an expression of the Pope. For a long time, we have lived as refugees in what is ours, locked within the borders of our charism, losing the richness that the encounter with others, the common mission with others, brings us. Third, overcome the temptation of false tranquility when the objective is only to avoid problems, want peace of mind above all and not complicate our lives. "Make a mess!" the Pope asks the young people. That is, manifest vitality. Let's try to integrate everyone: different voices, different sensitivities, different opinions. Always in the unity of love.

6. There must be institutional places and procedures for its implementation.

The shared mission has to be real, full and effective. The synodal ecclesiological way of proceeding insists that "the laity must participate in discernment, decision-making, planning and pastoral execution" (Aparecida 371). Therefore, we must promote the creation of concrete, real and effective spaces. "By their works you will know them."

7. The participation of the margins and the excluded, who, sometimes, are very close to us.

Within our own mission we must go one step further and abandon our securities to go out to meet the rest of the People of God. This "journeying together" is a prophetic sign for the human family, which needs a shared project capable of seeking the good of all and generate hope. We are invited not to disguise or hide our wounds. Open ourselves to understand the wounds of today's world and make them ours, suffer them, accompany them and seek to heal them. A Church with wounds does not put itself in the center, it does not believe itself to be perfect, but it places there the only one who can heal the wounds and has a name: Jesus. This journey together invites us to open ourselves to those excluded, to those who do not speak, to those who are on the various margins and borders of the Church and, therefore, of our Institutes, of our Communities. Who are the excluded? Who fills the empty chair in our apostolic works? Once we have responded personally and in Community to these questions, we must generate channels of involvement, because this opening up to the margins must be materialized in practice and it takes reflection, prayer and audacity.

8. Favor autonomy. Without it there are no responsibilities, subjects.

Autonomy of people and ecclesiastical spaces, in relation to authority and the Institution. Synodality requires administration according to the principle of subsidiarity. Everything that is at the top serves/subsidizes/supports everything that is at the base, since synodality only has life if it is from the bottom up, these are the conditions for the exercise of an authority-service.

What would be the indispensable means to journey together today?

Added to all this is the importance of the Community.

Generosity and empathy, responsibility and common sense along with commitment and coherence are fundamental to building "Community". If we add shared intuitions to this, we find that the Christian community, enriched by the color of our charisms, is the one

that grounds and gives meaning to our Mission. And, therefore, it is shared. And for this "we walk together." Without Community, we will be able to carry out pastoral "actions", but not Mission.

What type of community or how it is formed would be a topic to address concretely. I would only say here that we should not confuse Community with life in common.

III. The long process of communion

The atmosphere of communion among people is the best basis for feeling co-responsible for the mission that everyone shares. That is why the path of co-responsibility must develop a process, which in itself is long, that promotes the integration of the person into the whole. Let's highlight certain aspects of the process:

1. Care of welcoming

The relationship begins at the moment of reception, when a person arrives to join any of our works, as a worker, as a volunteer or as a direct beneficiary. You must be able to feel communion: that you have not entered alone or as a priority in a workplace or an organizational structure, but in an interpersonal relationship, where the person comes first. Reception involves individualized attention that focuses on personal knowledge, a basic incorporation, the acquisition of the first appropriate skills and the finding of the most necessary personal references. All of this so that the person welcomed feels comfortable and sees himself as himself as part of the network that welcomed it. But also, at the moment of reception, the path of co-responsibility begins, in such a way that the newcomer feels invited to be creative, critical and responsible in a context of solidarity.

2. Then come the multiple ties to communion

It is about establishing ties that put us in relationship, ties that facilitate the bringing together of people, mutual knowledge, the communication of experience and the celebration of faith. The ties become effective in specific moments and situations: we must promote these moments of encounter based on what is most natural, such as the

celebrations that daily life offer, but we must also make it possible to reach moments of joint reflection and to share the faith.

The ties that develop must stimulate the feeling of mutual belonging and solidarity between the people who form the charismatic family, and which are created from the bottom up, which pass through the relationship between the close groups, between the Communities that form the Province. The Religious Community that opens up and facilitates the participation of lay people in its various activities; the lay community that develops its own project and shares with the Religious Community; and the mixed community, made up of Religious and lay people, with a common project that respects and facilitates sharing the richness of different identities.

And in this way the Province ceases to be the Religious Province, although it includes this one, but it is expanded with the groups and communities of lay people, and with the communities that integrate lay people and Religious. But let's not forget that this is the fruit of a long process, it is not imposed by a decision from above.

3. A new creature needs new structures

And when the network of Communities - Religious, lay, mixed - of the charismatic family is already being formed, it is important not to forget that this is a new creature, not a duplication or expansion of the Religious Institute, and that therefore it is not worth applying the animation and government structures of the Institute for the animation and government of the charismatic family. New structures must be put in place in which lay people and Religious of the same family are on equal terms, with voice and vote: collegiate animation bodies, animators who facilitate communion between the communities and the accompaniment of those who are joining.

4. Accompanying persons

The process includes personalized monitoring and accompaniment of people. It addresses the various facets of involvement in the mission, the integration of the individual in the communion and the development of their vocation identity.

5. Prepare those who accompany

The task of monitoring and accompaniment of people, like the entire formation process, refers us to the urgency of preparing those who accompany, especially lay people who can accompany lay people. We have to do it in the new context of the charismatic family, not in that of the Religious Institute that directs lay people.

IT IS ADVISABLE TO STAY WITH SOMETHING...

IV. 10 SIMPLE KEYS TO ADVANCE IN SHARED MISSION

1. Institutional conviction. The call to synodality as a call of the Spirit through the Church is very strong. Although, today, much of the horizon is determined, in the case of the shared mission, whatever be the conviction that Religious Life has about it. The shared mission will reach wherever Religious Life wants it to reach.

2. Clarity in the vision of the shared mission. Shared mission is a concept that is not clearly defined. Not every person, religious men and women, lay people, have the same vision; nor do all Institutions share the sense of what a shared mission is. Starting from this premise, it is essential that the vision of the shared mission be shared in the Institute of Consecrated Life.

3. Personal and institutional conversion. In relation to the previous key aspect, it is essential in many cases that there be a personal and community change about what is understood by shared mission and the vision we have of it. To carry out this conversion process, it is essential to develop an attitude of an open mind, open heart and open will.

4. Strong lines necessary to promote shared mission processes. They are three:

- Communion and creation of Communities: creation of ties that shape the Charismatic Family, while developing collective identity so that each person feels that they are part of something common.

- Formation in the charism: it fundamentally refers to the process of acquiring an identity, and is, therefore, a process of transformation of the person, which aims to enable the person to discover the mission beyond the task they perform; enable it to live the spirituality that gives life to the mission; integrate it into the bonds of communion that allow you to feel like a member of the Charismatic Family.

- Shared animation of the mission: these processes promote co-responsibility and require, on the one hand, the formation of the person in the charismatic sense of the mission and its spirituality; and on the other, the development of structures of discernment, accompaniment, animation and decision-making in which lay people and Religious come together on equal terms.

5. Mental preparation and awareness. When promoting a process of shared mission, it is very important to develop experiences that contribute to Religious men and women, as well as lay people, approaching this call of the Spirit.

6. Preparation of a Strategic Plan to promote the shared mission. It is having a clear horizon in the short, medium and long term. It must start from the diagnosis of the reality from which it is based, with its possibilities and strengths (personal and other resources). Once completed, a strategic Institutional Plan for the Shared Mission is designed, agreed upon and approved by the Institution, with different levels of achievement (General, Provincial and Local) for the awareness, constitution and formation of the responsible teams and their dynamization at each level. This plan must be communicated to all the agents who want to be involved in this process, Religious and lay, who will have to be formed and supported. From there, the implementation of the Plan is carried out, prioritizing the steps to follow for the rest of the agents involved in the apostolate in the apostolates (programming), taking into account the specific situation of the recipients in each local context: level of maturation, journey and connection, and sense of belonging; formative need (human, spiritual, theological, charismatic, etc.). Finally, the relevance of starting with the most immediate need will be taken into account, according to the reality of the persons and structures available at the time of departure.

7. Creation of structures to launch the Shared Mission process.

8. Preparation of the Formation Itinerary for the Identity and Mission.

Formative itineraries, in general, are catalysts that favor the reaction, the encounter of the Spirit with the possible recipient of the charism. For this reason, they are also the indispensable instruments that will allow us to share the founding charism of belonging. This formation will serve to share the mission, which means discovering the mission beyond the task being carried out, awakening and maturing the vocation for this mission; live the spirituality that gives life to the mission; to feel part of it and progressively be integrated into the charismatic family that supports or animates the works of the mission and to form an identity, and not simply transmit intellectual content.

Depending on the recipients, the objectives and the stages of the process, an itinerary can help to: discover the deep meaning of the task in which this mission takes shape; feel the needs of the recipients as calls that must be answered; discover the vocational dimension in the profession; identify the field of the task as a place of presence and growth of the Kingdom; discover themselves as mediators of God's salvation.

The contents are developed by interweaving these three issues: the development of vital experiences in which the charism is condensed or manifested, the project that carries out the response to the mission, and where we identify the aspects so that we can update it in our time and in the Church today; and the spirituality that gives meaning to the project.

Formative actions must be more interpersonal encounters than intellectual courses: participants must be able to relate, coexist, share their experience, feel like creative agents of the project, not simple repeaters. Laity and Religious must meet when sharing the mission. They must also discover themselves in their formation. Formation must include and be accompanied by participation in experiences of communion. All this formation requires willingness.

The formation itineraries must be sequenced from the following levels of depth: initial: provides the resources to situate oneself within the project

carried out by the Institution, and feel part of it; vocational development: gives the reference points to develop identity in a vocational aspect; itinerary of communion: its central objective is to live the experience of the Community from the founding charism, Religious and lay, together, each one contributing the richness of their own identity; formation of formators to lead the Shared Mission: develop skills to become mediators in the transfer of the founding charism, not alone, but in a group of formators made up of lay people and Religious.

9. Be clear that there is no shared mission without shared life. We could affirm that practically all of us come to a mission through a vocation in which the relationship has had a very important function. And it has usually been a relationship focused not only on the mission, but also on sharing life, concerns, worries, joys; a relationship in which there has been support, accompaniment, shared joy and sadness, etc. That is, one more proof that in life what builds us is the relationship. And what creates shared mission is that there is also shared life.

10. Two elements to add to these aspects:

- Leadership: it is essential that there are people, both consecrated and lay, who directly promote this process. We must "help" the Spirit with human resources, convinced of this process and with time and skills to promote it.
- Accompaniment: no one goes through this path (or any) alone. We need, like the disciples of Emmaus, to know that we walk with others. These, like the Good Shepherd, sometimes go ahead directing where to go; others, next to it; and, sometimes, also behind us to push us when our strength fails.

Knowing that you can, wanting it to be possible, removing your fears, taking them outside. With the lyrics of this well-known song titled "Color Esperanza" we conclude these main aspects. There are already many experiences and time lived "in shared mission" and "we know it is possible." It is only necessary to "want it to be possible", that is, to open ourselves to the action of the Spirit, to encounter the other and to set out on the path. And, to do this, face the most important thing: "remove your fears, take them outside." Therefore, I end with a very clear

invitation: whoever wants to advance on this path of shared mission has only to sit down with the other (Religious men and women with the lay), look at each other's faces and ask themselves, what are we afraid of? There we will have already begun to build that shared mission to which we feel, in some way, called. Have a pleasant journey.

SOME BIBLIOGRAPHICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sal Terrae Magazine No. 107 (2019)
- López, E: Leadership of Congregational Discernment <https://www.confer.es/412/trabajos/texto/8907-revista-confer-2.pdf>
- BOTANA, A (2020) It is time to make bold decisions in a shared mission. Religious Life. Monographs I.
- Reflection on Synodality in Mission. Regarding the XIV Synod of the Diocese of Coria-Cáceres.
- Synodality and the Synodal Church: its theological Foundations in the Light of the Second Vatican Council
- ARNAIZ, J.M (2014) Shared Life and Mission. Laity and Religious Today. Ed. PPC
- LUCIANI, R and SILVEIRA, M^a P (2020) Synodality in the Life of the Church. Reflections to Contribute to Ecclesial Reform. Ed. San Pablo
- LUCIANI, R (2020) Reform of Structures and Conversion of Mentalities. Ed. PPC
- ESTEVEZ, E and DEPALMA, P (eds.) (2023) Windows of Synodality. Ed. Divine Word
- MADRIGAL, S (2022) Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church. Text and commentary of the document of the International Theological Commission. BAC Col. Studies and essays.

06

JPICS

An Ecological and
Social Emergency

Sister Cécile Renouard

Province of France

To what extent have the changes in our societies over the past eight years confirmed the interest and topicality of this book written by more than 50 hands?

Who would have thought three years ago that the COVID-19 crisis would have had such an impact on our economies, our professional activities, and our everyday lives? This crisis has made us aware of the unsustainable nature of yesterday's world, but it has also shown us that the parameters of the "world to come" are not assured. Questions arise about whether or not we will be able to respect our planet's limits to avoid the sixth mass extinction and to curtail the increase in the average temperature by several degrees by the end of the century. Such average temperature increases cause the resurgence of extreme weather events, environmental migrations and the multiplication of pandemics. While the health crisis has made our interdependencies and vulnerabilities very obvious, it does not seem to have succeeded in transforming our cultural representations of what really matters and in reorienting corporate business models and lifestyles in that direction. As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres pointed out at the beginning of the international climate conference, COP 27, humanity is faced with the choice of collective suicide or cooperation.

In the encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015), the apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (2020), and the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (2020), Pope Francis has continually reminded us that everything is interlinked and that universal fraternity with our human brothers and sisters, now and in the future, is intimately intertwined with the clamour of the Earth and the care of animals and all living things.

Against the backdrop of an increasingly alarming diagnosis, the risk of violence erupting is imminent: in France, the Yellow Vest movement has shown the gap between public policies intended to address ecological issues and the perception - and reality - of the disproportionate struggles of those who are already in precarious situations. More and more activists are questioning the limits of non-violent action and its effectiveness in the face of ecological and social crises. In this context, our congregation - like all religious and spiritual traditions - is challenged, raising questions about whether drawing on our spiritual sources, with

others, will help us to find levers for action and to avoid or at least limit future disasters and their consequences for the most vulnerable. How can we collectively educate ourselves for lifestyles of sobriety and solidarity, which do not feed unsustainable trajectories regarding the climate and living beings? In this respect, the link between our spirituality and our educational action appropriately quenches today's thirst and addresses the need to anchor social, economic, and political action from an ethical, anthropological and spiritual perspective.

Revisiting *Towards an Eco-Assumption* can be a good way of stimulating us, in *Assumption Together*, along the paths of what some call 'the great transition', and others call the 'ecological reconstruction'.

The following are some salient elements that update this fine collective production of 2015, for both the diagnosis and the theological and spiritual frame of reference, as well as for the levers for educational and citizen action.

1. The revision of the 2015 diagnosis confirms the urgent need to change the trajectories of countries to reduce the ecological footprint and to fight against various forms of pollution. It calls on us to strengthen ethical and political analyses.
2. The reference framework retains its force and can be read in the light of the writings of Pope Francis and his calls for integral ecology and universal brotherhood.
3. Among the levers for action, transformative education appears to be a preferential one to be activated, at all levels, to favour change that is both internal, daily and structural.

I. Revisiting the diagnosis: for a deep transformation

a) Increasing Deterioration of Living Conditions on Earth

Since 2015, the deterioration of ecosystems has continued to increase. The Paris Climate Agreement set a target of limiting the average rise in global temperature to less than 2° by the end of the century. In a study published in the journal *Nature* in 2018, it appears that there is a median probability that the 2° threshold will be crossed as early as 2045. Many scientists stress the danger of a climate runaway, linked to the fact that developments are not linear, and the disruption of one factor - for example, the increase in the melting of glaciers - could precipitate the deterioration of the climate, leading, according to some studies, to a warming of more than 6° by the end of the century if the current rate of emissions is maintained.⁹⁰ Already, the temperature between June 2019 and June 2020 was 1.3° above the pre-industrial level, based on the reference from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for calculating the 1.5 or 2°C thresholds. The 2022 IPCC report confirms previous studies and highlights the small but real probability of dramatic runaway events.

As far as biodiversity is concerned, the findings are also alarming. Over the past 30 years, half of the world's coral reefs have perished. Ocean acidification is degrading the reproductive capacity of fish, which will have consequences for human nutrition. The risks of pandemics such as Covid-19 are huge, due to the increase in human population, and mobility which accelerates the circulation of pathogens; intensive breeding increases the chances of viruses passing between species.

b) Strengthened Ethical and Political Stakes

In this context, the trajectories of countries do not inspire hope for the effective implementation of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. In France, for example, the High Council for the Climate, which regularly submits a report to the President of the Republic, emphasizes the inadequacy of the measures taken: in 2019, Greenhouse Gas Emissions

⁹⁰ Lenton, T.M. et al. (2019) ; "Climate tipping points - too risky to bet against : the growing threat of abrupt and irreversible climate changes must compel political and economic action on emissions.", *Nature*, 27th of November 2019.

(GHG) fell by 0.9% whereas they should have fallen by 1.5%. In order to achieve carbon neutrality for the economy in 2050, they should fall by 3.2% per year from 2024 onwards. The COVID crisis helped to reduce emissions in 2020, but the reality since then has been that of a 'rebound effect' in a context where public authorities and companies are seeking above all to get the economic machine moving again, without worrying about environmental objectives and without making investments conditional on respect for planetary limits.

In this respect, the denial of ecological issues by certain country leaders, such as Trump and Bolsonaro, before the election of Biden and Lula, and the election in Europe of conservative leaders with little commitment to ecological issues, contribute to climate sceptic arguments or criminal concealment of environmental degradation.

Overall, there is insufficient coherent investment in the transition: in many countries, it is possible to invest in renewable energy while maintaining public subsidies for fossil fuels. Large multinational companies are increasingly being questioned about their contribution to climate change and must publish not only their direct but also their indirect emissions and explain their trajectories in the coming years. But the legal frameworks are still too weak to contribute to transformations in business models. European leaders, for example, quick to take clear positions on the climate crisis, are blocking processes at the UN for a treaty that would compel multinationals not to commit human rights abuses within their sphere of influence, and thus concerning their subcontractors, along global value chains. China Energy (coal), Saudi Aramco (oil) and Gazprom (gas) are the world's third largest emitters after the United States and China, and their expansionist policies do not reflect any effective commitment to energy sobriety.⁹¹ It is impossible at this stage to say what lasting consequences the war in Ukraine will have on the evolution of the energy mix of Western countries and geopolitical issues in the global agri-food sector.

However, there are some encouraging developments: the adoption in France of the law on the Duty of Care, in 2017, which obliges large

⁹¹ Correia, M. (2022; *Criminels climatiques. Enquête sur les multinationales qui brûlent notre planète*, Paris, La Découverte, 2022.

companies to publish a care plan showing their actions to limit their negative impacts and avoid undermining human rights and the environment; the recourse of NGOs against governments (notably Dutch and French) for climate inaction; cities, territories that committing to or encouraging virtuous local initiatives, to support the circular economy, the economy of shared goods (renting services rather than buying goods). Some cities, such as Amsterdam, followed by other global metropolises (such as Seoul, Los Angeles, Lisbon, and Oslo) are seeking to implement the doughnut economy, according to the image used by Kate Raworth, former Oxfam member and researcher affiliated to Oxford:⁹² it is a question of developing economic activities within the planetary limits, between a 'social floor' and an environmental ceiling.

Throughout all the measures envisaged, the need to link legal, political, and cultural aspects is strongly apparent: changing standards, measurement and evaluation instruments are required to look at our economies through other lenses than those of profit or short-term profitability alone. It is also urgent to work on our collective representations of the quality of life, of well-being' (*buen vivir*). This is what *Laudato si'* and *Towards an Eco-Assumption* emphasise: we need an integral ecology that links all areas and is based on a dynamic of ecological and social conversion.

II. The Frame of Reference: Deepening Universal Fraternity

The analyses proposed by the Pope in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, and later in the encyclicals *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti'*, highlight key elements that concern not only the disciplines of fundamental and dogmatic theology, but also pastoral and practical theology, the social thought of the Church, spiritual theology, inter-religious dialogue, and openness to non-denominational spiritual practices.

⁹² Raworth, K. (2018); *La Théorie du donut, l'économie de demain en 7 principes*, Paris, Plon.

a) Plural World

The Christian faith gives rise to different ways of life. They are not homogeneous but share a common spirit - the spirit of the Gospel. This "style of styles" (as the Jesuit theologian Christoph Theobald calls it) can be understood in relational terms. Each country and each people is called to find its own style or the specific way in which its members relate to each other, to other creatures and to God. In this regard, the image of the polyhedron used by Pope Francis helps to mark the shift from an abstract universalist conception to a more incarnational vision, where each particular context opens up to a wider horizon. The Pope emphasizes both that the whole is greater than the parts and that we must honour the uniqueness of each part.

This perspective has value for different types of organisations. Indeed, for example, many companies, like many Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) today, are global and multi-local. They seek to combine universal norms and values with particular situations and contexts. Moreover, our global economy must be designed to secure our common future by listening to *"both the clamour of the earth and the clamour of the poor."*⁹³

Thus, the image of the polyhedron makes it possible to propose a view of global issues that never loses sight of the specificities of contexts, and what some call the "ecology of the poor": alongside global conferences, there are many struggles led by collectives, men and women who seek to improve living conditions in their territory. The Pope uses this image to evoke the situation of the Amazon, an ecologically and socially precious and fragile area, the lungs of the planet that is being suffocated and a multicultural territory where more than 110 indigenous peoples live.

"In the Amazon, it is possible to develop intercultural relations even among the various indigenous peoples, where diversity does not represent a threat, does not justify hierarchies of power over one

⁹³ Pope Francis, Encyclical *Laudato si'*, 2015, n°49.

*another, but means a dialogue from different cultural visions about ways of celebrating, relating and rekindling hope.*⁹⁴

b) A Relational Theology and Anthropology

Pope Francis invites us to question our deep desire. Our ecological crisis is ethical and spiritual. "We have too many means for limited and stunted ends," he warns. Accustomed to organising our lives according to instrumental rationality, centred on performance and efficiency, thanks to the prowess of science and technology and the opportunities offered by finance to promote investments and innovations of all kinds, we can lose the habit of questioning the meaning and validity of these tools, and of verifying whether they serve the "good life" of all, today and tomorrow.

We are not without reference points to face up to the necessary changes and to carry out individual and collective discernment regarding our behaviour, our dominant logic and our institutions. Returning to our spiritual sources will help us to clarify our resistance and direct our strengths. In Jewish and Christian thought, Creation is the good work of an absolutely good God. God is presented in the Book of Wisdom as the one who, precisely because he is all-powerful, chooses patience and goodness towards this otherness which he created out of love (Wisdom 11:23-12:1).

Creation is love in action, an act of withdrawal by a God who does not want to "take up all the space": the unheard-of mystery of a God who steps aside and leaves it to the human being to continue his work, in the responsible care of this house entrusted to his intelligence and capacities. This autonomy given to man consists in allowing him to contribute to the work of creation and transformation, with respect for each being. Pope Francis proposes that human beings cultivate three attitudes at the heart of the cosmos.

First, he is called to recognise otherness, that of his Creator:

⁹⁴ Martinez-Alier, J. (2014) *The Ecologism of the Poor. A study of environmental conflicts in the world*, Veblen Institute-Les petits matins.

"The best way to put the human being in his place, and to put an end to his pretensions of being an absolute dominator on Earth, is to propose the figure of a Father creator and sole master of the world because otherwise, the human being will always tend to impose his own laws and interests on reality."⁹⁵

This posture is also linked to the refusal to consider human beings as the masters and owners of nature, but rather as the gardeners of Creation, received from another, and over which they watch with solicitude; from this point of view, it is necessary to refuse deviant anthropocentrism: *"the ultimate end of other creatures is not us".⁹⁶*

The second attitude consists in exercising constant discernment, in seeking the why of things, the meaning of techniques, and the purpose of our projects: to value an ethical approach to limit and direct our transforming action towards what is truly a source of life and justice.

"A fragile world, with a human being to whom God entrusts the care of it, challenges our intelligence to recognise how we should direct, cultivate and limit our power."⁹⁷

The third attitude consists, finally, in imitating God in this crazy love, without exclusivity, which limits itself, frees itself to let others be, while supporting and bringing out the capacities of each person:

"Human intervention that aims at the prudent development of the created is the most adequate form of care because it implies considering oneself as an instrument of God to help bring out the potentialities that He himself has put into things."⁹⁸

Imitating God's divestment invites us to cultivate a "joyful release" from our will to control and exert power, to seek to bring out the potentialities of others.

⁹⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, 2020, n°35.38.

⁹⁶ Pope Francis, Encyclical *Laudato si'*, 2015, n°75

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* n°78

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* n°124.

c) Integral Ecology, a Question of Relationships

Challenges faced during the time of St. Francis, cited as "*an example par excellence of the protection of the weak and an integral ecology, lived with joy and authenticity*" (L si '10), were related to the transition from a hierarchical to a market society: businessmen prospered by being less dependent on the elites and by having more freedom to develop activities in different cities (the 'communes'). A key question was how to promote the expansion of economic activities while taking care of the poor and going beyond an overbearing, philanthropic approach to the issue.

Today's digital and globalised society poses new challenges: we are highly connected, but what about the quality of relationships? Can we move from simple connections to substantial, socially cohesive relationships? Behind the appearance of inclusive horizontal relationships, the reality is also one of appropriation by certain individuals and groups of networks (media, financial, etc.) in the service of particular interests that lead to exclusion.

An integral ecology is first and foremost a question of relationships.

"Among the social components of global change are the effects of certain technological innovations on work, social exclusion, inequality in the availability and consumption of energy and other services, social fragmentation, the increase in violence and the emergence of new forms of social aggression, drug trafficking and the growing use of drugs among the youth, the loss of identity. ... Some of these signs are at the same time symptoms of a real social degradation, of a silent rupture of the links of integration and social communion".⁹⁹

Faced with this breakdown in social ties, the notion of integral ecology highlights the concern for social cohesion. It would probably be better to speak of integrative ecology, to emphasise the dynamic and non-totalising nature of the integration of different dimensions of existence, within ethical and political projects. Chapter 4 of *Laudato si'* defines it as an environmental, economic, social, and cultural ecology of daily

⁹⁹ Ibid. no. 46

life, guided by the dual concern for justice between generations and the common good.

d) Universal Brotherhood

The necessary transformations require the establishment of a new style of relationships, marked by fraternity and care for the other, in opposition to habits of competition, hyper-consumption and self-destructive behaviour.

"There will be no healthy and sustainable ecology, capable of transforming things if people do not change if they are not encouraged to choose another lifestyle, less greedy, more serene, more respectful, less anxious, more fraternal."¹⁰⁰

In the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, the Pope underlines how much we are called to widen our hearts to a truly universal dimension, to favour hospitality outside our own groups, to open ourselves to the most fragile and to favour institutional and practical means of protecting the weakest, the "hidden exiles"¹⁰¹ who may be disabled or elderly people. This fraternity is both interpersonal and political, since it concerns us in our daily relationships and choices, but also collectively, as citizens. The Gospel of the Good Samaritan, commented on at length by the Pope, allows us to reflect on our capacity to allow ourselves to be shaken in our agenda, our habits, to make ourselves available, and also on how our societies organise compartmentalisation and selfish withdrawal.

"Investing in fragile people may not be profitable, it may imply less efficiency. It requires a present and active state and civil society institutions that because they are truly ordered first to people and the common good, go beyond the freedom of the efficiency-oriented mechanisms of some economic, political, or ideological systems. Solidarity means thinking and acting in terms of community, of giving priority to the lives of all over the appropriation of goods by some. It also means fighting against the structural causes of poverty, inequality, lack of work, land and housing, and the denial of social and labour rights. It

¹⁰⁰ *Querida Amazonia*, n°58.

¹⁰¹ *Encyclical Fratelli tutti*, 2020, n°98.

means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money. Solidarity, in its deepest sense, is a way of making history and that is what people's movements do.¹⁰²

e) Spiritual Resources to Guide Civil and Political Action

The Summit of Conscience organised in early November 2016 in Rabat, before COP 22, under the auspices of the King of Morocco, which followed the one held in July 2015 in Paris, before COP 21, expressed the recognition by many leaders of the need to collectively draw on our spiritual and religious traditions to foster a new inner impetus, to make them the driving force of new trajectories.

These resources offered by the religious and spiritual traditions of humanity are at once critical, symbolic and practical: critical, insofar as they invite us to question economic dogmas, such as the defence of competition and the discourse of the 'golden mean'; symbolic, insofar as they favour the emergence of new collective narratives inspiring societal projects; and practical, insofar as they draw up diverse paths of social, economic and political action, marked by a common relational style. It is undoubtedly the greatness of Christianity to be both one of the religious traditions seeking an ethic adapted to ecology and 'the' integrative tradition, which authorises, from within itself, through the disempowerment that characterises it, all the others to exist, provided that they lead to a responsible ethic.

f) Inner Transition, Eco-psychology and Eco-spirituality

Our spiritual sources are precious in promoting profound changes in the organisation of our societies, but they are not always accessible or easily mobilised, particularly in countries marked by secularism. Some approaches have been developed and proposed to provide a common ground for various religious and non-denominational spiritual traditions. Here we can mention the work of Joanna Macy, cited by Cecilia Claparols in *Towards an Eco-Assumption*: a biologist converted to Buddhism, Joanna Macy is an activist committed to the defence of living beings, who has sought ways to enable each person to confront

¹⁰² *Fratelli tutti*, nº108.116.

his or her own emotions, to reconnect with him or herself, with his or her family, cultural, and heritage roots, and with the web of living things. His work is at the crossroads of eco-psychology and eco-spirituality. It may well resonate with a Christian approach. Within the framework of the Campus for Transition, for example, initiated in Forges in 2018, our training courses regularly mobilise exercises of the Work that connects, within the framework of a pedagogy aiming to connect us to our deepest desire, to associate the head, the body and the heart.

III. Levers for Action: Transformative Education as a Preferred Lever, at all Levels of Action

a) Three Transformations: Daily, Structural, Internal

The transformations needed to achieve the ecological and social transition can be understood in three complementary ways: they are daily, structural, and internal. We have just mentioned the issues at stake in terms of internal transition. The changes in our lifestyles are linked to our personal, professional and collective choices in our daily lives; and they need to be associated with institutional reforms, which lead to other public policies, other business strategies, etc. A report by a company committed to ecological issues estimates that 25 to 40% of the transformations for a less carbon-intensive world, for a sober and united lifestyle, are linked to individual decisions and actions.

In this context, educational engagement is a privileged path to cultural and social transformation. The articles published in 2015 have lost none of their relevance. The importance of mobilising complementary skills in the context of the educational pathways offered to students can be underlined.

UNESCO, in particular, has put forward skills to be valued and developed in the framework of research for sustainable development: Systemic analysis, Critical reflection, Normative, Integrated problem-solving, Anticipation, Collaboration, Strategy, and Self-knowledge.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Education for the Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives, Paris, UNESCO, 2017.

Highlighting these skills leads to the search for appropriate pedagogical means. All the work and experiments carried out in our schools and in informal education settings deserve to be shared!

Different resources (books, documentaries, etc.) are available, in different languages, and we could surely share them between regions.¹⁰⁴ They extend the examples given in *Towards an Eco-Assumption* about different dimensions of our daily lives: how to limit energy expenditure and reduce our ecological footprint in our homes, in our travels, in our food choices, in our purchases, in our use of the Internet and Information and communication technology (ICT), etc.

b) Collective Discernment and Engagement through Advocacy and Lifestyle

A short spiritual review of the beginnings of transformative justice includes a framework of analysis that articulates three complementary

¹⁰⁴ I would like to mention the work we have been doing in the framework of the Campus for Transition over the last four years, following a request from the Minister of Higher Education: with a small team from the Campus. We have been piloting an inter- and transdisciplinary work of more than 80 teacher-researchers, some students and some professionals, to write several works: a transdisciplinary work which aims to provide a base of knowledge and skills on the ecological, economic, and social transition: the *Manual of the Great Transition* (Renouard, C., R. Beau, C. Goupil, C. Koenig (dir.), Collectif FORTES, (2020), Paris, Editions LLL). And 12 small books will be published from 2021 onwards in the collection of Petits Manuels de la Grande Transition (LLL Editions) to break down the issues according to sets of disciplines: in the spring of 2023, 6 Petits Manuels were published: *Pédagogie de la Transition* (translated into English, to be published by Springer in 2023), *Transformation des Campus (Transformation of Campuses)*, *Santé publique en transition (Public Health in Transition)*, *Vers une autre gestion (Towards another form of management)*, *Incarner l'écologie (Embodying Ecology)*, *Regards indisciplinés des SHS (Indisciplinary views of the SHS)*.

Other books inviting to reflect on *Laudato si'* and to act have also been published recently:

Lafage, M-H (2020); *Laudato si' en actes. Petit guide de conversion écologique*, Editions première partie.

Herrmann, M. & J. (2020); *Comprendre et vivre l'écologie*, Editions Emmanuel.

Lassus, A. & B. de (2020); *Et lentement tout bascule. L'escargot*.

Bénazé, X. de and Renouard, C. (2021); *L'expérience écologique et sociale du Campus de la Transition. Relecture spirituelle*, Brussels, Editions Jésuites, Fidélité.

aspects of transformative justice proposing: the recognition of each person, especially the most vulnerable; the creation and sustainable and equitable sharing of the wealth created; the participation of each person in the decisions that concern him or her; and the representation of persons and beings affected by collective and institutional choices. At the end of each passage, we propose a short questionnaire designed to encourage reflective analysis, personally and/or with others. It could undoubtedly complement the questions that accompany the reading of the texts proposed in *Towards an Eco-Assumption*. This framework for analysis is presented in the longer version of this document, which can be found on our website: www.assumpta.org.

Conclusion

If these pages have given some elements of analysis linked to reflections carried out since 2015, notably by Pope Francis, they illustrate above all the relevance of our work *Towards an Eco-Assumption*, and its more than contemporary character! The very process of writing the book is a sign: it involved laypeople and sisters committed across the planet and carrying the same desire for social and educational transformation, starting from a look at both global issues and local contexts. Let us continue to share our experiences, our analyses, our pedagogical and educational means, as well as our spiritual and cultural resources.

07

Biblical reflection

Towards a Synodal Leadership Paradigm: Johannine Perspectives

Sister Dr. Rekha M. Chennattu

General Superior

Any biblical or theological reflection on leadership presupposes a context and is conditioned, to a certain extent, by that context. Today, we shall keep in mind (i) the global Covid-19 pandemic that forced us to make radical changes in our way of life as well as (ii) the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis for the whole Church. It is in these global and ecclesial contexts that we explore the leadership paradigm in John's Gospel.¹⁰⁵

There are different models of leadership in the Bible – charismatic, prophetic, administrative, transformative, appreciative, servant model, shepherd model, kingship model, and no doubt others. Each type has both advantages and disadvantages. The type that is best suited to a particular group will vary according to time, place, and circumstances. We must therefore ask ourselves: what kind of leadership is the best for us in the present context?

The Gospel of John has a unique way of understanding the Church and offers a distinct style of leadership. I shall first review briefly the Johannine ecclesiology. I shall then explore the Johannine leadership paradigms as portrayed in John 10, 13, and 21, and present the Johannine paradigm of synodal leadership emerging from the above analysis. Lastly, I shall examine the significance of the synodal leadership model for the Johannine Christians and reflect on its implications and challenges for us today.

I. The Johannine Ecclesiology

In John's Gospel, all believers are primarily children of God, those who are born of God, and thus share in the life of God (1: 12-13). The Fourth Evangelist also speaks of the Christian community in terms of a flock that hears the voice of the Shepherd, knows him and follows him (John 10). Later the Evangelist introduces another metaphor: The Vine and its

¹⁰⁵ This article is a revised version of the Paper presented at the 84th International Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America, 30 July – 2 August 2022, Santa Clara University, USA. A shorter version of this Paper was also presented at the 23rd CBCI Bishops – Theologians Colloquium, 6-7 July 2022, NBCLC Bengaluru, India.

branches. Jesus is the Vine and the believers are its branches. The Church is thus perceived as a community attached to Jesus, abiding in Jesus and bearing fruit (John 15). Jesus also refers to the "other sheep that are not of this fold", meaning those who are not Jews (or those who are not Johannine Christians; 10:16).¹⁰⁶ In fact, this radical inclusion of everyone in the flock of Jesus is already well demonstrated at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Chapters 2—4 where the narrative moves from Cana to Cana. The response of the mother of Jesus, a Jewish woman in chapter 2 and that of the official, a Gentile man in chapter 4 frames this section.¹⁰⁷ The first sign of Jesus at Cana is followed by stories that open the way to a series of responses to the ongoing revelation of Jesus within Judaism in 2:12-3:36 and among Samaritans in 4:1-42. By means of carefully constructed narrative, the evangelist instructs the readers that discipleship is universally possible for all who "believe in him" (Jn 2:11).¹⁰⁸ Hence, Jesus includes everybody who follows him whether they are Jews (2:1—3:36) or Samaritans (4:1-42), Romans (4:45-54), Greeks (12:20) or Gentiles in general (17:20). Jesus later calls his disciples his friends, and it is imperative for the friends of Jesus to keep his commandments (15:14) and to love one another (13:34-35).

It seems therefore reasonable to conclude that, in the Johannine understanding of the Christian community, all members are God's children and friends of Jesus. All believers are sheep of his flock and branches of his vine; there is no place for superiority or hierarchy among them. The only distinction that can be made is between the sheep who listen to the voice of Jesus and follow, and those who do not, or the branches that bear fruit and those who do not. The superiority or authority consists in the primacy of revealing God's goodness as

¹⁰⁶ This is a debated issue among Johannine scholars.

¹⁰⁷ For a detailed discussion, see Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 93-199; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966-70), 1.95-198. See also Rekha M. Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 71-74.

¹⁰⁸ The expression, "they believed in him" [ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτὸν] Jn 2:11), generally implies a dynamic interpersonal relationship between Jesus and the disciples. See the detailed discussion in S. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 87-90.

children of God, or in the primacy of witness by loving one another and keeping God's commandments, or in the primacy of bearing fruit by doing the will of God as the faithful disciples of Jesus. What distinguishes one member from the other is the quality of life and commitment as disciples of Jesus. John's Gospel does not seem to support any hierarchical structure within Christian communities. The primacy of power and domination are thus foreign to the Johannine spirituality. As we shall see, the power of love takes precedence over all other forms of power, and authority is exercised at the service of life.

II. The Johannine Jesus and Leadership Paradigms

When we look for leadership models in John's Gospel, three texts stand out: the Good Shepherd discourse in John 10, the foot-washing scene in John 13, and the commissioning of Peter as Shepherd of the community in John 21.¹⁰⁹

a) Jesus the Good Shepherd (John 10)¹¹⁰

The Johannine Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd who has come to give life in abundance and who lays down his life for the sheep (10:10-11). The Evangelist makes the distinction between Jesus and the false shepherds. Jesus is presented as the Good Shepherd who enters through the door as opposed to climbing over the fence (10:1-2), who gives life in abundance as opposed to stealing, killing and destroying (10:10), who lays down his life as opposed to leaving the sheep and fleeing (10:11-12), who knows the sheep as opposed to being a stranger (10:14). The Good Shepherd exercises his authority for the welfare of the sheep and is ready to give up his life, while the 'thieves' and 'robbers' think of their own profit and security. What gives Jesus the authority to

¹⁰⁹ Some traditional interpretations of these texts do not highlight the unique Johannine insights on leadership imbedded in them.

¹¹⁰ For a detailed study of John 10, see Rekha M. Chennattu, "The Good Shepherd (Jn 10): A Political Perspective," *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies* 1:1 (1998): 93-105.

be the Shepherd is the love of the Father and his love for the sheep (10:17).

In the second part of the narrative, Jesus defends himself as the Good Shepherd by quoting Psalm 82 (10:34).¹¹¹ In Ps 82 the rulers ('gods') are judged by Almighty God for their oppression of the weak and the orphans and for their indifference towards human suffering (Ps 82:3-4). The gods are accused of walking in darkness (Ps 82:5). The maltreatment of the poor and the downtrodden, the lowly and the powerless, is a matter of life and death to the gods. Injustice shakes the very foundations of the cosmos (the universe) and thus the world threatens to fall into chaos (Ps 82:5).¹¹² In other words, the 'gods' are judged because they are not doing the will of God.¹¹³ The injustice of the leaders thus threatens the integrity of the entire creation. God's radical and universal concern for *justice* is obvious in this psalm, which articulates God's will. In contrast to the rulers or the gods who are judged by God, Jesus, throughout the Gospel of John, goes on affirming that he does the will of his Father (see 4:34), and thus reveals his identity as the true Son of God and the Good Shepherd. Moreover, Jesus continues his defence by announcing that he has been *consecrated* and *sent* by the Father (Jn 10:36). The divine consecration of Jesus would imply that he is totally set apart for the works of God. The intimate union between the Father and Jesus makes him unique: "The Father and I are one." (Jn 10:30).

¹¹¹ The use of Ps 82 in the Good Shepherd discourse gives us a further clue to understanding the meaning and implication of the text. For a short survey of the research done on the interpretation of Ps 82,6-7 in relation to Jn 10, 34-36, see A. T. Hanson, "John's Citation of Psalm LXXXII Reconsidered," *NTS* 13 (1966-67), pp. 363-367. There are many who consider Psalm 82 as a social critique of the rulers in the 8th century BCE. For this interpretation, see H. Niehr, "Götter oder Menschen - eine falsche Alternative: Bemerkungen zu Ps 82," *ZAW* 99 (1987), pp. 94-98.

¹¹² For this interpretation, see H. Niehr, "Götter oder Menschen - eine falsche Alternative: Bemerkungen zu Ps 82," *ZAW* 99 (1987), 94-98.

¹¹³ The Jewish state being theocratic, the *rulers* of the people of Israel take the place of Yahweh who favours the poor and the oppressed, and they are expected to do the same.

The authority of the Good Shepherd consists in his power to give life: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10) and in his power of love and sacrifice: "I lay down my life for the sheep" (10:11). The life-giving and self-sacrificing attitude of the Good Shepherd presupposes a personal experience of God's love, deep communion and constant communication with God: "the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jn 10:38). By referring to Psalm 82, the discourse defines the mission of the Shepherd or God's will as a radical and universal concern for life, justice and the integrity of creation, fostering the growth and well-being of all the living.

b) Jesus and the Foot-washing Scene (13)¹¹⁴

Jesus washed the feet of his disciples despite the fact that he was their lord and master (13:13). How do we understand the symbolic action of Jesus? Jesus does the work of a slave and gives us an example of humility and humble service, which disciples are called to imitate. This traditional interpretation of the story highlights the servant model of leadership which is more in line with the synoptic traditions (cf. Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27) and Pauline spirituality of the suffering servant (cf. Phil 2:5-11). The foot-washing scene is found only in John's Gospel and is a symbolic presentation of Jesus' death on the cross.¹¹⁵ The servant model or the suffering servant model of leadership does not do full justice to the Johannine Christology, which presents Jesus' death on the cross as glorification or the most powerful revelation of God's love.

Sandra Schneiders rightly proposed the dialogue between Jesus and Peter as the hermeneutical key to understanding this symbolic action

¹¹⁴ Rekha M. Chennattu, "Towards a Covenant Model of Leadership: An Interpretation of John 13," *Jeevadhara* XLII/248 (2012): 133-45.

¹¹⁵ In the Synoptic Gospels, we have the Eucharistic texts of the Last Supper whose meaning and significance are also located in Jesus' death on the cross. As Sandra Schneiders rightly pointed out "both the action over the bread and wine and the foot washing serve as prophetic gestures revealing the true significance of the death of Jesus within the theological perspectives of the respective Evangelists" (see Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics," *CBQ* 43 [1981] 81. n. 22).

(Jn 13:6-8).¹¹⁶ She interpreted this scene by examining the dynamics of the relationship between the ones serving and the ones receiving the service in daily life. One can imagine three possible service-scenarios. The first model is the service rendered by the poor to the rich. Here we have the example of a forced service for the survival of the poor and the relationship among them manifests dependence, domination and inequality. The second model is the service rendered by the rich to the poor or by teachers to students, etc. In this model, there may not be domination, but there is still inequality and dependence. The third model is the service rendered among friends as an expression of love, which celebrates equality and evokes reciprocity.

The question therefore is: which model of service is implied by Jesus when he washed the feet of his disciples? If we follow the first model, Peter should actually wash his master's feet. Peter is refusing to be washed by Jesus because this reversal of roles is not acceptable to him (13:6-8a). Peter did not understand the significance of Jesus' prophetic action. In the original Greek, Peter's expression "you will never wash" is used with double negative particles for emphasis (13:8a): "By no means you wash my feet ever (unto eternity)". The response of Jesus to Peter, "if I don't wash you, you have no share (*meros* = inheritance, partnership, eternal life) with me" (13:8b), is shocking.¹¹⁷ How can Jesus deny eternal life to Peter just because he refused to be the recipient of Jesus' lowly service? The third model of service seems the best option in conformity with the Johannine tradition in which Jesus calls his disciple friends (15:13). Schneiders thus concludes that Jesus is not referring to the refusal of a menial service, but something more significant than a humble service as the foot-washing enabled the disciples to share the *meros* or eternal life with Jesus.

There are at least three meanings associated with the ritual of "washing" in the Old Testament. (i) Washing is a gesture of hospitality. When the

¹¹⁶ Schneiders, "The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics," *CBQ* 43 (1981): 76-92.

¹¹⁷ For the meaning of *meros* [μέρος], see the discussion in P. Dreyfus, "Le thème de l'héritage dans l'Ancien Testament." *RSPT* 42 (1958): 3-49.

Lord appeared to Abraham, he said: "let a little water be brought and let me wash your feet" (Gen 18:4). (ii) The ritual of washing was a sign of purification and preparation to meet God: "Israel washed their hands and feet before they went into the tent of meeting – lest they die" (Exod 30:21). (iii) Washing is closely associated with the new life and renewed covenant relationship with Yahweh (Ezk 36:25-28).¹¹⁸ The prophet Ezekiel stressed three things as signs of the eschatological time: (i) the washing of the people in clean water, (ii) the outpouring of the Spirit and (iii) the observance of the Law. These signs signal the inauguration of the new age so that the people might come and renew their covenant relationship with God. And these three things are symbolically fulfilled in succession in the Chapters 13 ("the washing"), 14 ("the gift of the Holy Spirit"), and 15 ("the commandment of love") of the Gospel of John.¹¹⁹ Therefore, by washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus is symbolically welcoming the disciples to a new covenant community of friends.

Jesus invited his disciples to do the same – wash one another's feet. The Johannine Jesus thus repudiates any form of authority that treats others as subjects and calls his disciples friends, but with one condition, articulated in the discourse that follows the footwashing: "You are my friends, if you do what I command you" (15:14). It is clear that Jesus is not talking about some sentimental or emotional friendship but a covenant-model of friendship in which God's command (God's will) takes priority over other things. Moreover, it does not deny the unique role and mission of Jesus as the Teacher and Lord: "You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am" (13:13). When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as his friends, he welcomed the disciples into the new covenant community. Jesus inaugurated a new community of disciples in which all members relate to one another as friends and covenant partners of God. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that John 13

¹¹⁸ See M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York/London: Doubleday, 1997), 726-40.

¹¹⁹ See the detailed discussion in Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship*, 91-118 and Rekha Chennattu, "Towards a Covenant Model of Leadership: An Interpretation of John 13," *Jeevadhara XLII/248* (2012): 133-45.

promotes a synodal way of leadership that fosters inter-dependence, reciprocity and co-responsibility.

c) Jesus and Peter in John 21

A third account that unveils Johannine leadership is the commissioning of Simon Peter as the Shepherd of the community in John 21: 15-23.¹²⁰ This narrative is very closely linked to both the Good Shepherd discourse in John 10 and the foot-washing event in John 13. While the theme of shepherding connects chapter 10 to chapter 21, the context of a shared meal brings chapters 13 and 21 together. The narrator resumes the meal motif by deliberately indicating the time of the dialogue between the risen Lord and Peter, "when they had finished breakfast" (21:15a). The foot-washing event takes place during a meal shared before Jesus' death and the commissioning of Peter takes place in the context of a meal after Jesus' death and resurrection. A shared meal plays an important role in the context of making a covenant in the Old Testament (Gen 26:26-30; 31:43-54; Exod 24:5-11; Deut 27:6-7).¹²¹ Shared meals deepen friendship bonds, mutual knowledge and trust, and commitment to one another in the community.

It is in this context of a meal, symbolizing their mutually binding relationship, that Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loves him: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (21:15-17). As I have argued elsewhere, what determines the meaning of Jesus' query is the phrase, "more than these". The context and grammar allow two meanings of the clause under discussion, "do you love me more than these?" (21:15): (i) Do you love me more than these [disciples] love me?¹²² or (ii) Do you love me more than you love these things? The

¹²⁰ Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship*, 173-79.

¹²¹ Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship*, 89-91.

¹²² For the arguments in favor of this view, see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 584; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 677. The passages, 13:8, 37-38; 18:10, 15-18, are used by Barrett (*John*, 584) to support the claim that Peter loves Jesus in a superior way, are not convincing enough to claim a greater love on the part of Peter.

comparison seems to be between the objects of Peter's love: "me" and "these" rather than Peter's love and other disciples' love for Jesus.¹²³ The second reading of the clause reminds the readers of the absolute claim that the covenant God makes in the OT when he gives the command to love: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:5). The risen Lord is asking Peter whether his love for him is absolute, definitive, and conclusive.¹²⁴

The threefold repetition of the question and the response communicate a progression in the dialogue and stress the importance and the significance of the event: the appointment of Peter as the Shepherd and his commitment to the new covenant community. One may also suggest different understandings of "these" as it can refer to people, things and actions: (i) Do you love me more than others? (ii) Do you love me more than these material things? (iii) Do you love me more than your ministries/functions? The risen Lord, like the covenant God, demands from Peter, the shepherd of the community, precedence, primacy and absolute loyalty to God in his relationship with God.

The repeated responses of Peter, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you" (21:15b), seem to imply that Peter loves Jesus more than anything else. Peter's affirmative response is followed by the command to feed Jesus' lambs (21:15c). Peter's confirmation of his love with Jesus' subsequent commission to feed/tend his lambs/sheep combines the covenant-discipleship motifs of loving God with obeying the commandments (14:15; 15:10). The climax of the dialogue between Peter and Jesus reveals the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God (21:18). The destiny of Peter as a martyr signifies the deepest level of discipleship and commitment to the commandment of love (15:12-14). The command

¹²³ R. Hanna supports this view on grammatical grounds as he holds, "If 'more than these do' would have been the desired translation, the pronoun *ού* would have been included" (*A Grammatical Aid to the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983] 185).

¹²⁴ For a detailed discussion on "love commandment" in John's Gospel, see Francis J Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 99-133; 161-189. See also Moloney, *Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth. New Testament Reflections on Mission* (Sydney: St Paul's Publications, 2020), 109-27.

to follow Jesus in 21:19 ("follow me") indicates that the radical call to following in discipleship unto death is modelled on Jesus. In sum, the commission of Peter as the shepherd is grounded on his unconditional love and obedience to God's commands, and it is modelled after the life and mission of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and lays down his life for the sheep. Leadership is defined in terms of one's unconditional love for God and unwavering obedience to God's commands and projects.

d) The Paradigm of Johannine Synodal Leadership

The theological elements of the synodal leadership emerging from the above analysis of John 10, John 13, John 15, and John 21 can be summarised on the following list which is not exhaustive:¹²⁵

1. All believers are called to become God's children, Jesus' friends, and covenant partners in God's mission. Jesus is the Vine and all the disciples are branches (John 15). Abiding in God's love, and discerning and fulfilling God's will is mandatory for both discipleship and leadership (John 10; John 13; John 15; John 21). A synodal process is thus implied here as both disciples and shepherds share in the life of God and in the mission of God.

2. God's love is the heart of Johannine leadership. Loving God in return more than everything else – oneself, others, material things, ministry, and functional roles – is the requirement to be commissioned by God ("Do you love me more than these?" John 21). An experience of God's love manifesting itself in the whole hearted commitment to God's project is the foundation of leadership in John's Gospel.

¹²⁵ See also Rekha M Chennattu, "To Be Rooted and Relevant: A Call for a Paradigm Shift in the Life of Women Religious," *UISG Bulletin* 142 (2010): 47-61; Idem, « Enracinée et Pertinente: Un Appel à Changer le Paradigme de la Vie Religieuse Féminine, » *Bulletin UISG* 142 (2010): 46-61; Idem, "Una Spiritualità Radicata e Attuale per un Cambiamento di Paradigma nella Vita Religiosa Femminile," *Bollettino UISG* 142 (2010): 47-61; Idem, "Enraizadas y Pertinentes: Un Llamado a Cambiar el Paradigma de la Vida Religiosa Femenina," *Boletín UISG* 142 (2010): 46-60.

3. Shepherds or leaders/animators are chosen, consecrated and sent by God (John 10; John 21; see also 20:19-23). As consecrated and sent by the Father (10:36; 21:15-19; see also 17: 17-19), the leaders participate in the work of God which would imply joyful detachment from the idea of accomplishing one's own mission and total commitment to the mission of God.

4. The mission of the shepherd or the leader is to give life in abundance (10:10) by building up communities, ensuring justice, equity, peace, and the integrity of creation (10:34; Ps 82). No one is excluded, especially the poor and less privileged ones. If not, our leadership leads to the destruction of the entire universe (Ps 82). A synodal leadership is the only way forward.

5. Leadership implies mutual knowledge and personal relationship – “I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:14) which includes attentive listening, the respect for and acceptance of each one's unique role in the mission of God (John 21). Leadership is defined as a reciprocal service to one another as friends and covenant partners, and it is therefore participatory. We are invited:

1. to know one another (John 10:14)
2. to wash one another's feet (John 13:14)
3. to love one another (John 13: 34; 15:12. 17)

6. Jesus leads the disciple by his life and example (“as I have done”) (John 13:15, 34-35; 15: 12; 21:19). Jesus invites the disciples to lead the people as he himself has done. Leaders are thus called to lead by example and by the power and wisdom of God's abiding word.

7. Johannine leadership consists in the power of love and demands a loving service unto death – laying down one's life for her/his friends or covenant partners in the community (John 10:11. 15. 17; 15:13; 21:18-19). It implies sacrifices and participation in the paschal mystery of Christ – in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.

III. The Synodal Leadership Paradigm and the Johannine Christians

Why did the Fourth Evangelist (or the later editors of the Gospel) present a story of Jesus that contains a synodal leadership paradigm? Or what function did the synodal leadership paradigm have for the experience of the Johannine Christians? We must ask the question of the *Sitz-im-Laben* of the Johannine Christians that eventually led them to develop a story that portrays a synodal leadership style.

There were Jewish, Samaritan and Gentile believers among Johannine Christians. There is enough internal evidence to conclude that there were internal struggles among the members of the Johannine community.¹²⁶ Moreover, when we read through the Gospel narrative, we recognize the portrayal of many characters who perform the role of leaders in the Johannine story. For example, the mother of Jesus (2:1-11), John the Baptist (3:25-30), the Samaritan women (4:1-42) the royal official (4:43-54) and Martha (11:17-27), Mary (12:1-8), Thomas (20:26-28), Peter (21: 15-19), and the beloved disciple (all-through-out the Gospel, see 21:24 for a summary statement of his role). These leaders are from Jewish, Samaritan, and gentile backgrounds; they are both men and women. Each one has his or her unique leadership role to play in the Gospel narrative.

Unlike the Synoptic tradition (see, for example Mark 9:33-37; 10:13-16, 35-45, and parallels) never are these roles associated with superiority or inferiority. As R. Alan Culpepper puts it:

¹²⁶ See for example, Ludger Schenke, based on the analysis of John 6:60-71, points to the evidence of a schism in the Johannine congregation," ("Der 'Dialog Jesu mit den Juden' im Johannesevangelium: Ein Rekonstruktionsversuch," *NTS* 34 [1988] 599). See also J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3d ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Idem, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York, etc.: Paulist, 1978). R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979). Francis J. Moloney, *Letters to a Johannine Circle: 1-3 John* (New York: Paulist, 2020).

The ... strength of John's ecclesiology is its egalitarianism, 'the sense of equality among the members of the community.' Even the Twelve do not seem to have a special place; there is no list of the Twelve and no account of their calling. Later [cf. 3 Jn 9-10], when Diotrephes attempts to exercise a kind of episcopal office the Elder reacts strongly.¹²⁷

Peter and the Beloved disciple clearly play special leadership roles in the community. Their mutual respect for each one's leadership role is outstanding. Their relationship is marked by interdependence rather than domination. For example, in John 13, Peter signals the Beloved disciple to ask Jesus about the one who is going to betray Jesus (vv. 23-25). On the other hand, in John 20, even though the Beloved disciple arrived first, he waits for Peter and let Peter go first into the tomb to discover that it was empty. Yet it is the Beloved Disciple who is the first to "see and believe" (vv. 1-8).

The synodal aspect of leadership is further clarified in the final chapter of the Gospel as we have it, during the dialogue between Peter and the Risen Lord (21:20-23).¹²⁸ Peter's query regarding the destiny of the Beloved Disciple is responded to by a rebuke and a command: "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" (21:22). The explicit use of the pronoun, "you" reaffirms the fact that Peter should focus on Jesus and follow Jesus, and no one else. Both Peter and the Beloved Disciple have unique roles to play, which cannot be imitated or replaced by the other. Peter is portrayed as shepherd of the community and witness by his martyrdom (21:15-19), while the

¹²⁷ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Quest for the Church in the Gospel of John," in *Designs for the Church in the Gospel of John. Collected Essays 1980–2020*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 465 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 463. The internal citation is from Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist, 1984) 99.

¹²⁸ On the question of the literary and theological role of John 21, see Francis J. Moloney, "Closure," in Douglas Estes and Ruth Sheridan, *How John Works. Storytelling in the Fourth Gospel*, Resources for Biblical Study 86 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016) 225–39. While accepting its secondary origins, Moloney regards John 21 as a "necessary epilogue."

Beloved Disciple is the one who abides with Jesus from the beginning till the end (21:22) and is a true witness to the works and life of Jesus (21:24).

The synodal model of leadership emerged as the best response for the community to resolve the many conflicts that existed among its members and leaders. This is no easy undertaking, given the hostile world into which it was proclaimed. There were no doubt difficulties and tensions. Precisely because of the internal conflicts and external hostility, the synodal leadership, the prayer of Jesus for unity (17:1–26) as well as the centrality of the love commandment (13:34–35; 15:12, 17) become more meaningful.

In light of the above discussion on Johannine leadership and its significance for the Johannine Christians, one can reasonably conclude that Jesus inaugurated a new covenant community of friends characterized by universal discipleship of equals and an inclusive leadership of synodality, which values the other as friend and covenant partner, fosters inter-dependence and calls for shared responsibility.

IV. Synodal Leadership Paradigm and Its Challenges for Today

The Johannine covenant-friendship leadership model promotes both greater participation and shared responsibility and it is in conformity with the spirituality of synodality. In the words of Pope Francis: "The journey of synodality is the journey that God wants from his Church in the third millennium. ... it is to walk together, to be together on the way of faith and that concerns everybody. ... but it does not take away the difference of function and ministry and roles."¹²⁹ In the context of our

¹²⁹ Pope Francis said at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of St. Paul VI's establishment of the synod of Bishops in October 2015 (<https://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2018/synods-words-on-synodal-church-puzzle-some-people.cfm>). See also the document published by the International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Vatican: 2018). See also the Preparatory Document – *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission* (2021).

Church, synodality includes all the baptized members of the Church taking responsibility for its life and mission for our times.

1. Peter is commissioned by the risen Lord as the shepherd of the community. The evangelist presents the shepherding ministry of Peter as a command to be obeyed as a manifestation of his unconditional love for the risen Lord. Leaders are commissioned to participate in God's work by obeying God's command and fulfilling God's will. Therefore, leaders should enter into a never-ending process of discerning together God's will for our changing times.

2. The covenant-friendship model of animation is not hierarchical, but reciprocal. It does not mean that all will have the same role to play in the Church. On the contrary, it implies respect and acceptance of each one as different and each one's role as unique in the Church. We understand equality here not as uniformity, but as equity, which by nature promotes diversity and plurality. Very often we forget this reciprocal or "one another" aspect and collective responsibility. It is a reciprocal animation in which each one has something to hear, something to offer, something to learn and something to achieve, always in favour of what is discerned as the choices of God.

3. Johannine leadership is possible only when we (both leaders and members) have achieved inner freedom. It can work only when we are mature, free, secure and balanced persons. Inner freedom refers to freedom from within which no one else can give or destroy. It is an inner disposition – the way we see and interpret things, and the way we relate with one another and the way we respond to different situations, both simple and complex. Self-awareness and mindfulness are the keys to this interior freedom. God's grace is always there, but we need to remain open to receive it.

4. In this paradigm, authority consists in the POWER of love and sacrifice and we can animate a community:

- when we strive to have selfless love for all the members of the Church;

- when we have genuine concern for the common good;
- when we have our eyes fixed on God's project.

5. We can become "leaders" when we possess authenticity and integrity. We earn respect and exercise authority:

- when we establish credibility with people by demonstrating our intention to do the right thing and making clear our efforts to practise what we preach (character);
- when we show that we are capable of getting things done (competence);
- when we are able to inspire and mobilize the group towards the common mission (charism or spiritual power).

6. With this leadership model, we will find ourselves always in a "win-win situation". Our goal is to win over everyone and to ensure fulness of life for all. There is a unique place for each one, and a special role to be played by each one in the realization of the common goal. It requires attentive and contemplative listening which transforms the one who is speaking and the one who is listening. According to Pope Francis, this mutual listening is a mandatory step on a synodal journey.

7. Each one is called to a "continual conversion of heart" as many sacrifices will have to be made for the sake of the common good. This leadership is not easy as it involves an experience of "dying" on a daily basis. But the more we practise the covenant-friendship model of leadership in the Church and in religious congregations, the more animation becomes an experience of grace and wellness for all members.

Conclusion

We need forward-looking, optimistic, daring and committed leaders who are open to offer and receive in the process of discerning the will of God, cost what it may. The well-being of each member as well as the common good of the entire Church determine the choices and decisions. The Johannine model creates a sense of community of equals and friends, and invites all to contribute their abilities and talents, which will complement each other. In such an atmosphere, relationships are mutual and collaborative rather than hierarchical. What is unique to John's Gospel is the aspect of reciprocity in leadership roles: "one another" as friends or as covenant partners. This is the synodal way.

In this synodal model of leadership, each member has a different role and a different function in the building up of the Church, but these different roles or functions are not equated with superiority or inferiority. It fosters a style of leadership at the service of life, characterized by an ongoing discernment of God's will, attentive listening, loving service, radical inclusion, greater participation and fairness, transparency coupled with confidentiality, and shared responsibility. Far from insisting on conformity to one or the other set pattern, it encourages diversity and promotes creative ways of responding to the challenges of our times.

The leader will hopefully respond to the gift of the grace of God to inspire all members to live the charism of the Gospels in its fulness and to accomplish our mission with zeal and hope for a better world. The mission of leadership, in place of control from above, consists in the "power of love" that inspires synodality. Leadership then becomes an animation from within to build up an egalitarian community of covenant partners and friends that upholds equity, justice, peace, and integrity of creation.