



**Reflections on Consecrated Life**  
Sister Mary Sujita, SND

## **Introduction**

I was asked to reflect on consecrated life today and its future prospects especially from my point of view as an Asian woman religious. Your own preparations for this General Chapter are an excellent and comprehensive reflection on consecrated life today and in the future. What more can I share? At the beginning of this sharing itself let me make it clear to you that I am not a theologian or spiritual writer. Perhaps what is most valuable and worth sharing is my own lived experience of consecrated life, lived as a missionary, as an educator and with the poor and the marginalized people, the ex-untouchables of North India. I have no great ideology, theory or teaching to share with you except that I am absolutely convinced that consecrated life will always be relevant, meaningful and prophetic in the present and in the future if we dare to live it with a passion for Jesus Christ and creative compassion for all God's people. We are here today because we carry this future within us! The Spirit is leading us to do what we need to do at this time to nurture and rebirth consecrated life in the changed and changing realities of our Church and of our world.

As I reflected on an introduction to my talk today, my thoughts went back to the final days I spent with my dear 94-year-old mother during January this year. On January 4<sup>th</sup> I was called home to be with my mother who had a fall and was gradually sliding into a state of coma. Within a few days she was unable to respond at all. My whole family remained at her bedside, helplessly watching, praying and hoping to hear at least a word from her and see her smile again. After about two weeks of this agonizing and silent journey with her, one day my sister-in-law kept asking her many questions about how she was and so on...There was still no response. Finally she asked my mother, "Amma, do you see Jesus?" And the miracle happened! Amma responded with a delightful smile and an emphatic: "Oh, Yes!" All of us who were around her were filled with a profound sense of awe to the point of tears! There was a sense of the emerging new life, a new hope even as death drew near, for Jesus was present there. Then on January 24<sup>th</sup> my mother peacefully went home to God to enjoy the eternal beatific vision.

Since my mother's death, I have often reflected on her beautiful response to the question: Do you see Jesus? I believe that consecrated life will always have deep meaning and relevance as long as we keep our focus on Jesus, seeing and following the real Jesus of the Gospel! What gave and continues to give religious life its meaning, vitality and relevance is indeed an irresistible passion for Jesus and his mission. The future of religious life depends on our ability to SEE Jesus Christ and be so captured by him and his mission that others are able to SEE and experience Jesus in us. The transformative power of consecrated life comes from SEEING Jesus, SEEING others and the whole of creation in Jesus and responding with the heart and mind of Jesus. This divine relationship with Jesus Christ is a conscious and constant choice and a journey in faith. Your General Chapter is a wonderful time to stop and ask yourself: Do I SEE Jesus? How does "SEEING Jesus" transform my personal life, my community life, my ministry and our mission? How does the community of the Lasallian Brothers SEE and experience Jesus today?

I invite you to focus with me on the three components of religious life: Spirituality, Community and Mission.

## **Spirituality**

A spirituality that is visible, credible and prophetic is the basis for giving religious life its vitality and meaning. More than ever before, for us consecrated persons, this is the most urgent need of the time. One thing is absolutely certain: ONLY our rootedness in Jesus and His Gospel has the power to provide the answers that we are searching for today and for a desired future. Our real challenge is a radical return to Jesus with all our hearts, with all our being and to discover anew our identity in him and in His mission.

Where do we find the inner energy, the fire within to live our consecrated life with a passion? It is not possible to live a relevant and authentic consecrated life without having a deep *Abba* experience like Jesus and living in the awareness of being sent to be Christ to our world. As a community of disciples consecrated for mission in the Church, we become the sacrament of hope especially for the poor. We may be the only face of Christ many will ever see in their lives. Participating in the liberating mission of Jesus requires a spirituality of radical Gospel living, a spirituality that is holistic, integral and transformative, a spirituality that is clearly in the service of life in all its forms.

It is the spiritual that can both cherish and challenge the human heart to a transformed way of being, doing justice, creating community and tending mother earth. For Mahatma Gandhi, the father of my country, India, contemplation and non-violence were the source of the "soul power" that produced the fruits of true freedom and transformation. As a woman religious from Asia, my experience is that religious persons in Asia are expected to be persons of deep contemplation, renunciation and asceticism. Their very presence is to communicate the message of peace, harmony and inner freedom. It is this inner spiritual vibrancy and authenticity that make the consecrated person a wisdom person

who can guide, inspire and challenge others to fullness of life. Is this not the liberating spirituality of Jesus? The Gospel as it is embodied in the consecrated person carries much more credibility and power than all our dogmas and reasoning.

In his book: *Jesus Today*, Albert Nolan states that the spirituality of Jesus was one of radical freedom! He says:

The freedom that Jesus experienced reached down to the very roots of his being. It was a freedom that he challenged his followers to strive for, and it is a freedom that challenges us today as we hover over the edge of chaos...He [Jesus] was able to stand up and contradict the assumptions, customs and cultural norms of his society... Within that society and its religion he had no authority to do any of that. What he did have was the personal freedom to do God's will regardless of what anyone thought or said. He was free to love without reserve...Jesus' radical freedom made him completely fearless. He was not attached to anything or anybody, not even to his own life, or the success of his mission. His freedom had no limits, because his trust in God knew no limits...The basis of radical freedom is trust. (Ch 17, pp.180-181).

The real issue confronting religious life today is above all a spiritual lethargy and lack of faith. No spiritual wisdom or radical inner freedom can come when we neglect contemplation and protect ourselves from all asceticism and a discipline of the heart. When we have a profound and irresistible attraction toward God and experience God's unconditional and constant love in our personal life, we will be filled with a passion for Jesus and for His mission.

For us, consecrated women and men, the challenge of this millennium is to be perceived and experienced as women and men of God who are spiritual guides and prophets of a new world order. We need a spirituality born of a contemplative relationship with God, a spirituality that leads us to prophetic involvement with God's people and God's wounded world. Contemplation and prophetic living lead us to where Christ is in agony: into the slums, to the cities, to the dilapidated village huts, to the hungry and violated women and children, to the AIDS victims, to the influential circles of politicians and social reformers, to religious leaders of all kinds...to everyone in need. In explaining to her sisters the deep significance of the words, "I thirst," Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, "I fear for you, dear sisters, that you will go to the poor without having first experienced Jesus in your hearts. Unless and until you have experienced the thirst of Jesus for you and your love, you will not be able to quench that thirst through your ministry to the poor."

***Take a few moments to think of one of your religious Brothers in whom you experienced the real "soul power", a spiritual energy that he radiated. Share with your neighbour.***

### **Communio and Community**

Jesus entrusted His mission of establishing the Reign of God to His community of disciples with a promise of His abiding presence with them. Religious are called to rediscover and live the ecclesiality of the first Christian community. My reflections on community are focused more on the reason for our community life. In a world of intolerance, exclusion and individualism our life lived in community and communion is a powerful witness to an alternative model of social life, rootedness in the Kingdom-values of Jesus. Community is to be SEEN in the context of a shared spirituality focused on a shared mission and a shared journey into the future. St. Paul saw the Church not as an efficient organization but rather as a community which is a communion of believers, filled with the Holy Spirit, enriched by a multitude of gifts, all engaged in the transformation of the world into God's Kingdom (1Cor.12, 4-7). This is true of our communities as well. This is what builds communities in mission and for mission. No community for mission is possible without self-transcendence. Have we not experienced the crippling effect of members following a life-style which reflects individualism, consumerism and excessive professional efficiency? We religious have co-opted many values of the world in the name of efficiency, prudence and common sense. We know that Jesus was not particularly known for His prudence, efficiency or strategic planning. But His intimacy with His *Abba* as well as His compassion led and empowered him for His mission to the end.

The person of Jesus and His Kingdom values transform group living into Kingdom communities, making visible the values of the Kingdom in the concrete historical realities of our time. To live in such communities is to live counter-culturally our prophetic call in a society that places great importance on individual pursuits and comforts, material possessions and conveniences. True communion is possible when we risk moving out of our comfort zones to be incarnated in the messiness of our own local community as well as in the messiness of the society outside. But, how often we squander our consecrated energies to make ourselves comfortable and secure as individuals and communities!

As a young Sister I was fortunate to experience community and mission in the context of the poor. Three of us Sisters were among the first to live in community with the poorest of the poor in our diocese. This came as a response to the murder of a Jesuit priest in one of the mission stations and the consequent closing of our mission there. Although we had volunteered to return to our poor villagers, there was much fear and insecurity in our hearts and also in those who missioned us because some of those villagers were involved in the murder of the priest. For the first several months we went from house to house, meeting the poor, eating whatever they could offer us, sleeping in any little space that was made available for us. We had no agenda except that of re-establishing relationships with the people. We wanted them to know that we did care for them and were willing to be with them. During those months we had many intense experiences of God's providential care. The poor took us into their villages and made great sacrifices to accommodate us in their little huts. At times we also experienced the pain of outright rejection and threat from people who feared that our presence would be detrimental to their vested interests.

Very clearly the three things that kept us going were an abiding experience of God's providential care for us, the strong bond of communion that we experienced among the three of us and the wonderful relationships we developed with the poor. In fact for me, those months and the many years that followed were greatly significant in my life as a consecrated woman. My life experiences with the poor changed my own understanding

of my call to religious life, community and mission. There I experienced how community and communion empower us for mission. We developed a pattern of regular prayerful reflection on the meaning and the consequences of living our consecrated life in our present context. And in the Gospels we always found the answer. It was this experience that gave us the inner freedom to keep going forward although we lacked even the very basic facilities like clean drinking water, toilets, bathing facilities, a little room of our own, electricity and such things which are considered the basic necessities of daily living. Sharing the lot of the poor, even periodically, nurtures compassion in us and propels us to work for justice and peace in solidarity with them. The spirit of renunciation and dependence on the people and on Divine Providence are part of our solidarity with the poor.

I was attracted to a simple statement in your preparatory booklet: "We are simply Brothers to our brothers and sisters." A lived experience of *communio* gives birth to true solidarity within the religious community and with others. In his 1987 encyclical "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis," Pope John Paul II wrote that solidarity "is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (No.38).

Solidarity is the quality of our presence, of reverence in a multicultural, multi-religious milieu. Here I am reminded of one of my experiences during my life among the poorest of the poor in Bihar, India. Two of us Sisters shared a little mud hut with a poor family in a Hindu village. In the adjacent hut lived a very pious Hindu destitute woman. Every morning she would do her *pūjā* [worship rituals] on the sacred stone she had enshrined in a corner of her little hut. I was very new to the village and new to the culture of the poor. Of course we were there as young, educated, well-trained women religious who were so eager to revolutionize the miserable condition of the "superstitious and the illiterate poor!"

One day I met the old woman as she finished her worship and I could not resist my desire to call to her attention the meaninglessness of worshiping the "stone" and so I said, "Nani [grandmother], why do you worship the stone? God is not in that stone. God lives in our hearts." Her response to me was a loving glance and a gentle smile and I came away thinking that I had done a great service of making my old friend reflect on true worship! The next day was Sunday and Holy Mass was celebrated in our village hut. My friend Nani came and sat right next to me with much reverence for the Mass that was going on. After communion when I returned to my little mat on the floor, she nudged me gently and whispered in my ear, "Listen my child, yesterday you said that my God was not in the stone I worshiped. But then, how is it that your God is in the bread that you ate just now?" I was speechless. It was this timely questioning by my illiterate old friend that awakened me to the realization that simplicity, compassion and deep respect are essential ingredients of true communion and community.

Sharing the lot of the poor day after day can indeed be a powerful eye opener for us who take it for granted that having middle class (or even higher still!) comforts and conveniences is our right, part of our promised hundredfold because we have left everything for the sake of Jesus! It may be a very revealing exercise to reflect with utmost honesty, consequent to saying YES to our call to consecrated life, what we have

really “left behind” and what we have “taken in as our entitlement.” As consecrated women and men called to create contrast communities, what is our lived reality of community? Sharing in common? Recreation and relaxation? How can we transform our communities into true experience of communion? How are we building communities of reconciliation and peace in our broken world?

***What are some of the most outstanding characteristics of community life that have been passed on to you by your founder which continue to be valued and lived today by you in community? (Pause...Share in small groups)***

## **Mission**

Now let us reflect a little on our call to mission. We know that Jesus and His mission are the only reason for the consecrated life! Mission is the enfleshment of our spirituality. A genuine spirituality moves us out of ourselves to be in the mission of establishing the Reign of God. Our response to mission must go beyond the boundaries of rationality and mere human logic. Doing mission is all about risking in faith. And that is possible only when we are energized, sustained and sent by the Spirit. Often all our energies are burned out in the management and maintenance of institutions, projects and personnel. In the race for technological updating of our institutions and projects, have we neglected the role of spirituality in our ministries and mission? What are the spiritual disciplines and contemplative practices that mark your ministries? In an age of cultural rootlessness, moral relativism, religious pluralism and social disintegration where might is right and the future is uncertain, we need genuine holiness and all the creativity and imagination of the heart to make all our ministries transformational.

Most of our active apostolic religious congregations are known for our big and efficient institutions of education, health care, social service and other works of charity. How often are we known for our holy, simple and prophetic life and mission? Counter-cultural living? Asking disturbing questions first among ourselves, within the Church and in the society is the beginning of the desired transformation. Have we not become domesticated, invisible, lost in the madness of individualism, neo-liberalism and the need to find personal fulfillment and at times institutional fulfillment? Do we religious have an identity that is visible and credible? The testimony of our life as we live it today is perhaps of no significance to our world. Why are we attracting only very few new vocations? Over-concern for personal security and comfort is a growing problem among religious of all age groups. I sincerely hope that we religious even in our old age will continue our witnessing presence among the people to the very end rather than opting for comfort, privacy and extra special care (which is the privilege of a secure middle class) that we expect as part of our "hundredfold" for having left all things for Christ!

Prophetic risk-taking will always be integral to our consecrated life and mission. Our ability to speak even the most uncomfortable and unwelcome but very essential and life-giving truth, can only come from the comfort we enjoy in our divine rootedness. Prophets were great risk-takers. As prophets we will be sent by the Spirit to speak God's truth to our world and as disciples we must be willing to pay the price! Prophetic witness

is an expression we use so easily to explain the challenge of consecrated life today. The prophets lived their call with a spirit of adventure to the point of risking their lives. Today can we say that our communities and congregations are empowered by a spirit of prophetic adventure? Reflecting on our call to live in the spirit of adventure, Fr. Anthony J. Gittins, CSSP, asks:

Has the bold energy vanished from religious life and the spirit of adventure--so characteristic of our youth and of young religious today—been sapped by a spirit of frustration and helplessness? If caution and prudence are more evident than risk and trust, if the art of the possible has become more practiced than the virtue of hope, and if some of the most adventurous religious have long since left their communities, by what right do we expect the Holy Spirit to renew the face of the earth? Many communities spend huge amounts on projections for the future and maps for the journey...Meanwhile, what is happening to our faith, trust and imagination? The very qualities that drew us to religious life and the features that we so passionately sought seem to be in short supply in some communities. If we are not attracting new life, could it be that we are simply not attractive, precisely because we are not adventurous enough? ...I believe that unless religious life remains an adventure, we are not being led by the Spirit of God but have become tame, domesticated and predictable, rather than marked with the wildness and unpredictability of our mothers and fathers in faith. ...A spirit of adventure and a sense of mystery are not mutually exclusive. People of faith and chosen recipients of God's revelation should have a keen sense of mystery, and a sense of adventure should be, if not already in our grasp, then certainly not beyond our reach...We dare not forget that the initiative belongs to God's Spirit, and we must not muzzle the Spirit who is responsible for renewing the face of the earth and transforming each of us. (Talk given to the Sisters of Notre Dame, Canoas, Brazil 2007, by Anthony J.Gittins, CSSp)

But when the pressure of our ministries builds up, when we cannot meet the high expectations of society, when we have no time for solitude and prayer, when we have no time to be in communion with our co-religious, we can be sure that we are blocking the Spirit of God in our life and mission. Today many religious congregations are busy trying to maintain and save their once-upon-a-time wonderful institutions! Mission is not only about what is but about what might be. We will have to do some soul-searching to discover how much of our apostolic energies are going for maintenance and how much for mission!

**Where have you found “prophecy and risk-taking” in your personal life, community and in the congregation during the past five years? Share your reflections with your neighbour.**

Since your congregation is well-known all over the world for your ministry of providing excellent Christian education, I would like to reflect a little on the ministry of education in this millennium. One remarkable characteristic of Jesus the Master Teacher was that he never asked a disciple to do something he was unwilling to do himself. Our effectiveness as religious and professional educators will depend on our ability to be contemplatives in action who live a spirituality of sufficiency. Then we can teach our students with authority and credibility how to combat materialism and individualism and the excessive compulsion to power and control as against compassionate concern for one's neighbor. Reflecting on educators, Fr. Arrupe, SJ said in 1973: "The students, their families, our colleagues, all have the right to see us as integrated, to see no division between what we teach, what we say, and how we live. And we have an obligation to respond to this need. We are being hypocritical if we warn our students about the consumer mentality while we live lives that are secure and comfortable...".

What do we offer our students that is really ours because it is what we have SEEN...heard...touched with our hands...experienced, believed and lived in our own lives? How do our students, teachers, collaborators perceive us as individuals and as institutions? Let us ask them: Who do you say that I am? Indeed they SEE us as professionally competent, excellent managers, organizers, selfless and committed workers, competent and generous. Do they also SEE us as very secure people living a comfortable middle class life, having everything? Do they experience us as women/men of God? Do they SEE the face of Jesus in us? Do they SEE you as men energized by a passionate love for Christ, men on fire for the mission of Christ? Education, and for that matter, all our ministries are about sharing God, sharing God's unconditional and constant love with others, especially with those on the margins of our society. The Gospel says that the people were amazed at Jesus' teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as the scribes. Today we need to teach like him and that is possible only when we are caught up in the power of the Spirit and when our life, our life-style, our choices and our priorities are an echo of the life and mission of Christ.

We live in a very globalized world with all its consequences and challenges. Can Christian education give a soul to globalization? Called to nurture global love, global concern for the other, global justice and peace, how can our educational institutions be transformed to produce such results? Can our institutions and ministries become agents of globalizing the Good News of Jesus? Globalizing solidarity and unity? The prophetic challenge of Christian education needs to prepare our students to work for what Pope John Paul II called: "Globalization without marginalization, globalization in solidarity." (World Peace Day, 1999)

As educators we need to prepare our students to be transformational leaders who are not afraid to challenge the sinful structures of society and to make hope alive in the 21st century. Our education must be impacted by the fact that a two-thirds majority of the world's population lives in chronic hunger without clean drinking water and over ten million children die each year due to malnutrition and disease. Education and all our ministries will have a future only if our way of educating and ministering are deeply influenced and motivated by the active concern Jesus had for the society of His time.

## **Releasing a future filled with hope for God “makes all things new!”**

We often hear the concern: Is there a future for consecrated life? Indeed the answer is in each one of us who carry the future within us. We need more than optimism in re-imagining our future. What fortifies us always is the assurance of the abiding presence and gifts of the Spirit Jesus has promised us, provided we “keep awake and pray.” As men and women religious, we collaborate with God in shaping the future when we dare to believe in the impossible and persist with hope in our searching, in our questing, in our striving and witnessing of another way of being religious who are heralds of the Reign of God here and now. Do we feel privileged and passionate to live the holy and wholesome traditions and apostolic energies of our congregation and to pass them on to the generations to come after us! True hope is the fruit of an uncompromising spirit of trust in providence, prophetic courage, fidelity to enter into the ever new divine plan of transformation and collaboration with the Spirit “who makes all things new.”

Yes, there is a crisis in religious life. A particular way of living religious life/consecrated life is dying and part of it is already dead! Do we perceive this as the end of religious life or as the work of the Spirit “who makes all things new? Our response to it will make this crisis the turning point of consecrated life in this new millennium or the closing point of consecrated life! We religious of the third millennium may not and cannot take the middle ground of security if we are to collaborate with the Spirit in the birth of a hope-filled future for consecrated life. Many religious are becoming deeply aware of the need to return to their roots... to a deeper spirituality, asceticism, genuine *communio* and prophetic involvement in the transformation of our world. When the crisis is big, our search for meaning and quality of life can be greater. That is our hope.

The future will not be just a rearrangement or re-enactment of the past configured more attractively! God will make a new covenant, but it will not be like the old. (Jer.31:31) As a woman religious I perceive this whole scenario of transition into something new and unknown as the vision of a woman in labour pains...There is the fear of dying in giving birth to a new human person and there is an inexplicable joy and expectation in birthing another human person. A new and fresh way of being religious Sisters and Brothers is being born and we need to have the eyes, ears and heart of an expectant mother and midwife to SEE, hear and assist in this birthing process. We are privileged to be part of this transformative time in the Church and in the world, to facilitate the birth of a new way of being religious, of being disciples of Jesus today.

As men and women of hope we believe that things can and will be radically different from what they have been and are now. Only in Jesus, the Missionary Son of God, will we find the answer to this present situation. Today we suffer from having too much “outer security” and very little “inner security” that comes from our prophetic commitment to the person and mission of Jesus. A spark of Jesus’ *Abba* experience and His radical missionary freedom will indeed rejuvenate consecrated life today! Deep within us most of us religious are aware that the Spirit is leading us once again to the foundational experience of our congregations, to the core of who we are called to be. Formation of

our members in a deeper spirituality and radical discipleship is of utmost importance today.

Even in our post-modern world, living the vow of poverty with all its radicality as Jesus lived it can give much credibility to consecrated life. Sandra M. Schneiders says: "If the Poverty religious vow were lived seriously and consistently by every member of the congregation, no matter when or where the congregation found itself now or in the future, its spirituality, its community life, its ministry, and its witness would effectively challenge the world construction of the Evil One with the Gospel's vision of the Reign of God." (Sandra M. Schneiders, Congress on Religious Life, 2004) I believe that the new religious life that is emerging will be one characterized by a deeper spirituality, radical simplicity, Gospel poverty and incarnational involvement with the life struggles of the marginalized. Every intervention Jesus made on behalf of life and human rights was radical. What is expected of us religious today is to continue the "Jesus movement" of restoring the God-image and human dignity of every person and the beauty and balance of God's creation.

As long as there are persons willing to risk carrying on the mission of Jesus, there will be consecrated life. Mission will always be at the heart of consecrated life. Since consecrated life is a movement, our spirituality, community and the whole structure of religious life will continue to be transformed when the focus is on Jesus and His mission. Our contribution to the transformation of our globalized world is our creative, radical and critical fidelity that is credible and visible... What is the alternative future vision that is being born in your heart for the Congregation as consecrated individuals and communities in mission and for mission today? What are the concrete steps we have taken so far in preparing for and moving into a hope-filled future? "I am doing something new."(Is.43:19) The future of religious life depends on our commitment to the Gospel challenge to BE more and to HAVE less!

May the Spirit breathe new life and hope into us, give us a renewed understanding of God's universal mission and drive us out of our fear and complacency, into encounter with God's people. May this General Chapter be a great Pentecost experience for all of you and may you experience anew the fire and passion of your call, your being sent out once again. You cannot turn back because you carry the future within you. It is worth risking everything because the Spirit is busy *making all things new*, busy in us birthing a new way of being consecrated persons. Let us hear the words of Jesus to His anxious disciples: "Why are you terrified? Don't you have any faith?" As long as we believe that God's transforming and creative Spirit is at work in our world, we will continue to hope in a future that is God's gift to us.