Liliana Franco: “There is nothing more prophetic than being a Brother”

“There is nothing more prophetic than being a Brother. To be a Brother is revolutionary: what you represent in the world and in the Church is profoundly evangelical”. These were the final remarks of Sister Gloria Liliana Franco Echeverri, ODN, on the challenges of consecrated life in Latin America and the Caribbean. The religious of the Company of Mary is the current President of the Latin American Confederation of Religious Men and Women (CLAR) and led the retreat which opened the Encounter of the Lasallian Region of Latin America (RELAL) with the Superior General and his Council which is taking place this week in Medellin (Colombia), from 4 to 9 September.

A time of grace

Throughout this day of spirituality, Sister Liliana Franco invited Lasallians to embrace the Encounter as “a time of grace, a chance to glimpse God’s will, and an opportunity to increase unity and glimpse missionary horizons”. “**The novelty is made by the Spirit and that is why the key is to listen to Him”**, she said.

To be born of the Spirit, widening the heart and aware of the reality in which consecrated life is inserted in Latin America and the Caribbean, also suggests passing through new pathways in the following of Jesus, passionate for humanity. In this sense, the Colombian religious Sister highlighted various **trends that could paralyse religious life,** but also various **overflows that mobilise religious**.

Here are a few words that Sister Liliana addressed to the Lasallians, which are also included in six short videos that can help to **reflect and internalize the challenges of consecrated life today.**

The trend to numerical decline

“Religious life is challenged to embrace its minority. We are in a time of numerical decline. What we see on different shores of the world is that the

vocational flourishing of the past is no longer a reality in continents like Europe and America. Then **we are challenged to accept that we are fewer, but in our smallness God can continue to work miracles, possibilities and new life"**.

"The fact that we are fewer cannot be a justification for saying that we cannot, that we are not invited to insert ourselves into different geographical and existential realities. Our minority is precisely the possibility of God. Today, **more than the question of how many we are, we have to answer ourselves the question of where are we founded on, what kind of religious men and women we are**, what values we have, with what audacity and apostolic passion we place ourselves, what we are capable of at this moment in history – with the grace of the Spirit-".

"I often think of the *anawin*, the 'poor of Yahweh', and I think that **in the logic of the Kingdom everything is built from the germinal, from the small**. I believe that it is precisely our minority that can be the possibility of our God".

Tendency to comfort

"We need to overcome this temptation to conformity to custom. **We have sheltered ourselves under the protection of institutionalism, of routine, of ways of proceeding**, and today more than ever there are so many cries in history and in society. That is why we should allow all these cries from our world, from our people, to reach us, to shake us, to make us uncomfortable and to mobilise us.

"I believe that in recent decades there has been a tendency to live in our comfort zones, with many justifications: because there are fewer of us, we are older, or there are no vocations. And precisely **this juncture means that we need to have the courage to go out, to visit other areas** where the Lord is telling us: the commitment to consecrated life is urgent!

"Religious life is built on a tripod: prophecy, mysticism and mission. And perhaps this missionary dimension in recent decades has been weakened by various factors. Therefore, today more than ever, in this ecclesial *kairos* in which we are reflecting on the importance of synodality, we should recreate ourselves from the awareness that **we are called to 'be in mission', to accompany our people, to walk with them**, and to attend in a more lucid and conscious way to the urgencies of this historical moment".

“There is the temptation to remain in our comfort zones, but there is the cry, the clamour and the permanent call of our God to **go to those other shores where the commitment and presence of consecrated life is urgently needed**.

Tendency to homogenise

“The tendency to homogenise is a trend – which is present at the moment in the Church – to want the following of Jesus to reduce the possibility for each person to express who he or she is. **There is a trend to want to standardise**: the same measures, the same manners, the same haircuts, the same tone of voice when reading… as if following Jesus in religious life meant standardising ourselves, and the deepest conviction is that the Spirit recreates us with different gifts and charisms”.

“Therefore **we have to make it possible that in the Church there is space for diversity**, that the voice of all can resonate, that the capacity to dissent, to think differently, to enrich our community lives and each of our institutions, also with that particular gift that God has given to people, can resonate”.

“Logically, all this from the awareness that those who feel called to religious life may feel called to a common project, and this also entails, therefore, going out of oneself, *kenosis*: an **effort to build community, but without denying the particularity**, without denying that gift, that special and personal charism, which is the charism with which God is pleased with each person, and that it is precisely from there that each one can contribute to enriching the fabric of the apostolic bodies to which we belong”.

“To homogenise is to clip the wings of the Spirit, to refuse to recognise that God is pleased with each person in a different and unique way. **We are invited to the ecclesial ‘we’, and that means embracing and welcoming the particular gift as well**“.

Overflow of the germinal

“The overflow of the germinal is nothing other than believing our **God, who opts for the human and then becomes incarnate**. Our God decides that his place is the manger, the cross, Nazareth”.

“The logic from which we have to situate ourselves is incarnation, which

privileges the fertile, the simple, that which is apparently incipient, but which is, without a doubt, the place where God manifests himself. It means believing in the processes, accompanying people, striving for the human, giving our daily life the place it has, where God's revelation takes place".

"To opt for the germinal is to opt for what is apparently useless, worthless, or irrelevant in the logic of the world, but which in the logic of God is what makes the difference. It is to opt for the gratuitous, it is to embrace the human, it is to give us time, it is to give us life".

'Inter' overflow

"The 'inter' overflow is that capacity we have to widen ourselves, to weave the net, to see ourselves beyond our own plots or ghettos in which we religious sometimes shut ourselves in. It is that willingness we have to **build and work with others in intercongregationality, interculturality, intergenerationality**. These are overflows that can fill us with new life".

"Today more than ever we are called to work with others, to **build networks of collaboration in favour of projects in relation with life**, with the defence of cultures, with the care of the Earth".

"Today we are also urged to insist on intergenerational dialogue, on the ability to **sit at the same table, the old, the young, the middle-aged, and to truly dream of the religious life and the Church we want**, to recognise the strengths that exist in each generation, and that together we can envision the future and the next step to which the Lord is calling us".

"And logically we are intercultural. **The face of the Church is becoming more and more intercultural. All our communities are being shaped by the presence of people from different cultures**. So, we are challenged not to have hegemonic cultures that are positioned as if they are always right; we can rather create spaces to embrace each other in our cultural diversity, to welcome the different sensitivities, rhythms and ways of interpreting life. There is no single culture, there is variety, and that variety arises from the love of God and the outpouring of the Spirit in us".

"New life comes to us in that capacity we have to combine and live: interculturality, intergenerationality and intercongregationality, and this also

from a dimension of itinerancy. **Today religious life is invited to movement, commitment and going out**, in the logic of what Pope Francis has told us".

Prophetic and community overflow

"The prophetic and communitarian overflow is that awareness that **we are living in a very fragmented world**: in wars, xenophobic, racist, excluding... it is a world in which the Lord is inviting us to the utopia of the common, of the fraternal, and to be brothers".

"Being brothers at this moment in history is absolutely prophetic. This world is in need of that shelter of what the care, accompaniment and commitment of a brother and a sister means".

"I like to think of the way the early Christians identified themselves. They said to them: who are they, and they knew who they were because of the way they loved each other: 'look how they love each other'. **Today, what is counter-cultural, what is significative, would be that the quality of our love also shows who we believe in**; that the quality of our fraternal relationship, of our commitment, of our bonds, of the way we express ourselves to each other, makes it possible and shows what it means to follow Jesus".

"This broken world is in need of the shelter and commitment of Brothers. **A Brother is the one who is ready to walk with others and widens the space of his heart to make room for other people**; he is the one who includes, who shelters with love, who opens horizons. This world needs brothers and sisters!