

Sisters of Holy Cross

GENERAL CHAPTER 2017 First Conference

Faith in the feminine mode

As we joyfully take up the reflection we started together last year, we accompany the holy women once again from Christ's passion and resurrection to Pentecost and beyond. First of all, as an introduction I suggest that we reread the theme chosen for this second phase from the perspective of what I call faith in the feminine mode.

The slogan for this second phase of your Chapter focuses on a series of significant verbs, each connected to the profound movement of faith and its dynamic requirements: to accompany to the very end, to emerge from fear and disbelief, to keep on being witnesses by our insertion at the very core of the world. In the same line as that of our previous encounter, it is a matter of conjugating each of these verbs in the feminine mode in the company of (with) the women disciples.

In the following conferences therefore, I propose to go back to each of these verbs. But I would like to begin by sharing my perception of the rules for conjugating faith in the feminine mode. I do this with the conviction that I am addressing this first conference to an audience broader than that of the Chapter. This allows me to share with you all my inner convictions concerning the urgency of the feminine in the Church, the world and today's theology. It is now a matter of setting the stage where the totality of my subsequent reflections will be played out.

I Faith as action

Unlike men, whose convictions or doubts are most often rooted in the ground of ideas or abstract messianic projects, women generally situate themselves in terms of action. For them, faith with its doubts and objections are first of all actions. Martha, Mary's sister, is a symbol of this *a priori*. In Saint Luke, when Martha does not understand her sister's passive listening to the Word – a disciple's attitude – she demands action from her. On the other hand, in John's gospel, she reproaches Jesus for having been absent when it was time to act on behalf of her dead brother. Martha introduces herself to us as the icon of a pragmatic believer.

But her sister Mary is no exception when she herself expresses her mystical faith in a gesture of lavish gratuity, by pouring very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet.

Mary, Jesus' mother, only partially understands the angel's message as well as Jesus' activities. But her faith is built on *la garde du coeur* (being a keeper of her heart) and active visitation embodied in service. Once again, a pragmatic faith consents to the annunciation

when a concrete sign confirms it (the pregnancy of her elderly cousin). God receives Mary's impossible acceptance (adhesion) when the call is confirmed by action and leads to action.

The same goes for the women disciples at the foot of the cross and at the tomb. It is a matter of wiping the bloodied face, of seeing where the body has been placed, of preparing the burial spices and, at the risk of their lives, going to embalm the body. The pascal faith of the women is an active and dynamic process, a permanent and risky initiative, while the men lock themselves up in a passive attitude of fear and flight.

But this faith-action does not stop there. Faced with the surprise of an empty tomb, their faith evolves in an always active continuum. Mary Magdala first asks the gardener where they have placed him so as to go get him. And when she recognizes the Lord, she sets off to relate what the Lord has told her. It is only in Saint Mark's gospel that fear paralyzes the women's action.

In the Pascal process however, this faith-action evolves. To begin with it is the expression of a devout and committed fidelity beyond all fear. But in the Cenacle, this fidelity will little by little be transformed into eschatological hope, where the women, attests Saint Luke, moving from table service to waiting in prayer, are there from beginning to end, "generating" so to speak, the Spirit in the midst of the community (see the beginning of Acts).

This faith-action begins with a consequential accompaniment: Luke reminds us that these women accompanied Jesus from Galilee to the resurrection (a condition for being part of the counsel of 12 when Matthias was elected to replace Judas) and they supported the community (concretely) by sharing their goods (another criterion of belonging to Jesus' close-knit community). This close companionship allowed them to prepare the event of the resurrection and to make it public by proclamation.

This is their argument: they had seen him or had shared a conversation with angels. Nothing abstract or theoretical: reason enough to provoke the skepticism of the men in the community. (see the disciples of Emmaus)

Moreover, this feminine syndrome of faith-action is already present from the outset in the words of the Magnificat.

II Faith as birthing

Faith in the feminine mode also has much in common with maternity and with begetting. Like a woman who discovers she is pregnant with an invisible future, possibly desired, but not created by her, the believer discreetly and patiently sets about listening to life. While at the service of the growing, nameless mystery she shelters, she learns, day after day, to experience the unknown and to feel herself changing. Faith is the growth of the Other through this mystery's own inner growth, until the day when, like Elizabeth, it is felt leaping as the Spirit approaches.

But time is long between conception and birth. The constant risk of uncertain futures; the anguish of aborted hope, and little by little, mutual taming in the silence of caresses or whispered words unanswered, on a growing belly. A mysterious prenatal dialogue in the hope that nothing will happen before the appropriate time, nothing fatal will take place in the obscurity of the docile but uncontrollable surrendered body.

Faith's consent, accompanied and caressed, but also handed over, surrendered to the active powerlessness of love over the long term. The work of birthing Christ through faith, without impatience and without delay or negligence, begins from conception or even before, and continues long after birth.

At the end of the obscure path of so much stripping and relinquishing, faith in the feminine mode very gently becomes the victory of a gamble over trust, a growing awareness that God is an integral part of our own flesh. There exists a feminine wisdom of faith, an experience not abstract, but enfleshed. If a man nourishes doubt for a long time about what he engenders (even the DNA of his son!) a woman knows when, how and by which channel of her flesh he was conceived and brought to birth. There is no doubt about whom she engenders, but she has anxiety concerning who he will become.

This birthing of faith too, involves the painful experience of indispensable wrenching. The umbilical cord must be cut. At the tomb, Mary of Bethany learned this at her own expense from the lips of the Beloved. Jesus' mother was rejected as well, along with her brothers and sisters, for the benefit of the new family of disciples which she herself would have to integrate.

We have to surrender what we create. God, in the feminine mode, had to learn this through the incarnation of His son. No one knows this better than a woman in labor. So it is with faith: "Do not cling to me... go and tell my brothers..." And in this wrenching-surrender of self, how many frustrated beliefs, how many lost illusions so as to remain faithful to Jesus as he is, not as how we would have dreamed him to be or how he has been described to us. An extreme and ultimate stripping so as to remain steadfast in the dark night of faith and the risky proclamation of mission "without knowing where we are going" like Abraham and Sarah.

III To keep on being witnesses: faith as a tradition

In all cultures, women are the guardians of wisdom. They are responsible for the transmission of the spiritual and ethical Tradition. Maternal narration of the founding events of humanity, of a people or of a family is the essence of culture. It is what allows human

beings to situate themselves personally and communally in History, all the while transforming it.

Today we are going through a terrible crisis of transmission. The conveyor belts of narration are cut and replaced by virtual pseudo history, leaving us seriously orphaned. It is urgent that we find the keys of story-telling once again at the level of our faith as well. The Gospel would not exist without the “telling of stories”; without those we are told. No evangelisation is worthy of that name without personal and communal concrete testimonies. Google will never replace a mother. In oral cultures like the Andean culture with which I rub shoulders, all speech is punctuated with a pivotal expression which indicates that it has been heard in a reliable story. In Aymara the word “*sasa*” or “as it was told to me” is repeated endlessly, to give credit to what would simply be hocus-pocus without this verification.

But at the core of faith in the feminine mode, there is also another approach essential to Tradition: the Visitation. It is not the same as a simple “visit”, which has no other purpose than an elusive friendly meeting. The feminine “visitation” like that of Mary to Elizabeth had a double purpose: to share the Good News, but most of all to put it into practice diligently “to the very end”. There is sharing in the visitation, not only of knowledge, a story and wisdom, but most of all the learning of human and divine *savoir-faire*. It is through these visitations that faith is developed, that Tradition establishes the foundation for witnessing what we believe.

When faced with today’s storms, it is urgent to relearn, with the women of the Gospel, to treasure and meditate the events of faith in our hearts, that there they might mature, grow and be strengthened. Mystery is understood via the art of constantly creating traditions by an attentive transmission of witnessing. This is more urgent for our mission today than keeping the frozen meat of our lifeless dogmas in a deep freeze.

However, there is a risk in this transmission. Yes: the risk of remaining at the level of “traditions” anecdotal in nature, disconnected from the great movement of the eschatological vision, is great. Tradition is not only the juxtaposition nor the simple sum of little religious anecdotes repeated but disconnected from the great message, the great dynamism of Salvation History.

This implies a conversion to the feminine. We cannot remain in the role of telling stories about faith; strictly speaking, we must rise to the theological level from a rediscovered narrative. There is no theology without Tradition, but no fruitful Tradition without theology. Today, faith in the feminine mode is also women’s new and complete theological statement, a new understanding of God’s mystery and God’s relationship to the world,

IV Daily commitment in the present

What, then, are the characteristics of this new feminine understanding of faith we are to relive in our daily life? To try to answer this question, I would like to go back to several

personalities in the Gospel. Each of these women has one point in common: all are rooted in reality, but with their gaze fixed on the seed of utopia already dwelling within them.

Mary of Nazareth ponders the angel's mysteries in her heart and, without embellishment, confronts them with the practical impossibility: "How can this come about, since I am a virgin?" Her theological knowledge is rooted not only in the consistency of human biology, but also in the contradictions within the patriarchal system. In Jewish society, it is the man – the father, the brother or the husband – who makes decisions for women and in their stead. Breaking this law puts them at risk of being stoned to death or rejected: what Joseph had contemplated for an instant. Mary measures her faith-belief against the challenges of reality, not so as to fearfully relinquish it, but to situate all decisions of faith and their consequences in the light.

The same goes for Martha but also for her sister Mary as we have already seen. Both of them will break the law: Mary by taking the place of a disciple, that is, in occupying a place reserved for men (at the feet of the master), and Martha in requiring Jesus to face his responsibility to transgress rules at Lazarus' death (without losing sight of what is impossible: "...by now he will smell."). Yes, that is precisely the new understanding of faith in the feminine mode: to transgress the patriarchal norms and even the laws of biology, while knowing and assuming the consequences.

The Samaritan woman will follow the same scenario at the rim of Jacob's well. She knows through experience that Jews are not to speak to Samaritans, let alone a Jewish man to a Samaritan woman. The disciples will not avoid whispering silently about this topic. This woman who had five husbands, the last of whom is only a temporary companion, knows the price of patriarchal rules and their exclusions.

Nonetheless, she indicates an extraordinary theological knowledge of two secularly opposed traditions. At this moment, her well is transformed into a burning bush, thanks to Jesus' new revelation of the divine: "I who am speaking to you, I am he," says Jesus, speaking to a woman. This heretic, sinful and marginalized, is transformed by the grace of her feminine theological transgression of faith, into a new Moses!

But each of these women theologians also undertakes a process of inner transformation. From her yes onward, Mary begins the difficult apprenticeship of discipleship, with its renunciations, its enigmas and its conversions, to the foot of the cross and to Pentecost. Later, at the empty tomb, before her sister Mary and better than she, Martha will go beyond her syndrome of competition and her anecdotal points of view to become the theologian of the resurrection. As for the Samaritan woman, she inaugurates for herself and her compatriots (who had nonetheless excluded her) the first, the deepest and the simplest Christology in history.

In my book *Dieu derrière la porte* (God behind the door), I speak of women as "the memory of the future". This expression wishes to be a summary of everything that has been said

since the beginning of this reflection on “Faith in the feminine mode”: pragmatic and embodied women theologians, witnesses of invisible processes, of Tradition, yet bearers of the future by their continued attentiveness to all that is and the movements of life, women bear and generate hope by their fruitful receiving of the Spirit. They hold the whole universe “to come” in their flesh and in their thoughts.

I dream of feminine religious life that lives its faith in these unprecedented paradigms. I dream of your Congregation at the service of this way of believing and of announcing the Good News. This implies a necessary breaking away from many of your old ways of being and acting in the Church too steeped in patriarchy. I expect women to re-invent the Church in the feminine mode, so that the Church will let go at last of its old patriarchal reflexes, its resistant and deviant ways.

But that too and maybe first of all, goes through consecrated women’s own awareness. Forsake once and for all your patriarchal alienations and dare the unheard of, the newness that Jesus offered women, and that Church history rushed to defeat. The urgency of our times will not be satisfied with mending old clothing with new cloth. Either we will respond to the terrible challenges of today with what is entirely new, or we will be relegated to the rank of anecdotes without impact, wax figures for an unlikely Tissot museum.

We will explore this dream throughout these days, by replaying, in light of this introduction, each of the verbs on which you have wished to build your future during this Chapter: to accompany to the very end, to emerge from fears and uncertainty, to keep on being witnesses at the heart of the world!

Simon Pierre Arnold, o.s.b.