

Sisters of Holy Cross

GENERAL CHAPTER 2017 Third Conference

Emerging from fear and insecurity

Let us now strive to enter into the mysteries of our fears and our insecurities. This exercise is all the more urgent today because we find ourselves precisely in historical circumstances that further aggravate the mechanisms that both produce and falsely negate these feelings in so many ways.

Hence, in this social, political and religious context of extremism, the fanatical identity-based conversation of religions plays an essential role where we too could become complicit, if we are not careful. I insist on the word complicit because what is at stake today is exclusive and fanatical violence at all levels.

How can we “emerge” from this deadly fear and contribute to the world’s freedom from it? Christ’s death was the result of three combined fears: that of the temple which felt threatened in its role of doctrinal and political power, that of the disciples, overwhelmed by fear of the consequences of “the Jesus fact” for themselves and their group of poor people, and finally, maybe that of the Roman occupier faced with the risk of the religious nature of the nationalist social unrest (this is less evident).. Each of these categories will create its own mechanisms producing and negating the threat, a scenario quite like our own world situation.

I Source and false remedies against fear and insecurity

Psychoanalysts are specialists in accompanying these mechanisms. According to them, many of our insecurities originate in traumatic family relationships related to the parents’ sexual history. Despite DNA testing, men’s castration anxiety, their doubt concerning their manhood and their fatherhood, are ongoing sources – among others, to be sure – of masculine violence.

But this doubt also exists in women. For women, what throws doubt on their value are all the patriarchal statements about women’s exclusion and oppression. In both cases, the insecurity which produces fear and the violence of exclusion comes from doubting oneself and one’s own ability to exist.

The paradox lies in the destructive illusion that this fear can be eradicated by a violent affirmation of the Ego, macho for men, or “*mamist*” in the case of women. It is as if the identity-based conversation and the practice of excluding differences allows the uprooting of doubt and fear by projecting these onto the “victim”, the one who is different: women, strangers, Muslims, etc. etc. To some extent, we are dealing with a “boomerang” negation which never ceases to blow up in our faces.

To remove threats and self-doubt represented by those who are different, by the other, we highlight all the characteristics that affirm our own identity as the only valid one, the only safe choice, rejecting everything that does not correspond to this model. That is what James and John suggested to Jesus by calling down fire from heaven on the village which had refused them hospitality. They too were caught in an identity-based conversation of exclusion. Jesus fiercely opposed this. For Jesus, on the contrary, everything that is not “against” us is “for” us, however different it might be.

To escape from the spiral of violence which submerges us today, it is urgent that we relearn the holy ambiguity of the field where wheat and weeds grow together, beyond our ability to distinguish one from the other. We need to have the a priori of “for us” not the a priori of “against us”. This divine uncertainty, this confusion about good and evil (the forbidden tree), already present at the heart of the Garden of Eden, is the real condition of peaceful cohabitation.

To come back to this first, and in my opinion, only prohibition, we need to constantly expose our respective denials. Here I would like to make a distinction, which some might find arbitrary, between masculine egocentricity and feminine self-centeredness.

It seems to me that men’s fear and their own violence are rooted more precisely in selfishness: the masculine remedy against fear and doubt is to take care only of oneself, without assuming one’s true responsibilities at the level of fatherhood, for example. That is what happened in Gethsemane and at Golgotha. The masculine ego, even shared with other men, is often a solipsistic monologue with himself, his desires and his suffering.

Masculine sexual violence in particular is most commonly the expression of this selfishness. Open intimate dialogue is not a male’s forte. He often covers up his great fear of opening up to another, especially to a woman, with false modesty. The overwhelming masculine isolation, from the time of Cain to Judas and beyond, resides in this recurring egotistical mechanism.

On the other hand, feminine strategies to escape from fear and personal insecurity are found on the side of self-centeredness. It is not as much a mechanism of isolation as a permanent search for approval and confirmation. I remember Guy Béart’s song, already dated, whose title says it all: “Speak to me of me; that is all I am interested in”. There are those like Simone de Beauvoir and feminine ideologists, who think – and rightly so – that this is women’s retaliation when faced with patriarchal dictatorship.

Held hostage like objects, women have created strategies of seduction, using vulnerability on one hand and power on the other hand. From the time of Eve with her

first born, passing through Sarah and Agar, Rebecca and Jacob, Bathsheba and Solomon, Judith and Esther, women have taken their revenge without really changing the systems in the society which oppresses them.

It is Mary who, inaugurated a new feminine conversation when came the time to make a decision, by breaking the straitjacket obliging her to request a masculine statement. Mary's autonomous YES is a genuine feminine revolution, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is here as well that, for feminine Religious Life, the pathway to true liberation from all violence is to be found: daring to speak out by drawing on its own spiritual resources, far from infantile submission or strategies of self-centered seduction.

Masculine selfishness and feminine self-centeredness are often "partners in crime" so as to perpetuate fear and violence and the unlikely security these claim to guarantee. In the context of Religious Life, this perverse complicity is reflected through mutually and implicitly accepted clericalism, which pope Francis never ceases denouncing.

So that the holy women at the Cenacle could help the apostles emerge from their fear and insecurity, I imagine they had to dare speak up and undo the knots of clericalism and patriarchy, following Mary's example at the Annunciation. What a challenge for today's consecrated women!

II Fear and violence in today's world

Denying the difference which frightens me by claiming to wipe it away only provokes violence. Adam and Eve's original sin was nothing more than the permanent temptation to feed on the other, to absorb the other or to eliminate the other altogether.

Populist and nationalist ideologies rising up everywhere these days play with these deadly illusions of fear, exclusion and the compounded affirmation of a single identity. The Franco-Lebanese author Amin Malouf wrote a very inspiring book on this subject, whose title is a complete programme in itself: "The Murderous Identities" (*Les Identités Meurtrières*). Being a citizen of diverse cultures himself and the fruit of a subtle intersection of spiritualities and religions, he pleads for a multiple, hybrid and fluid identity as an alternative to violence.

In the Bible, the difference between a man and a woman consists of their image and likeness to God. From this divine matrix of humanity, we can affirm without risk that all differences reveal the diversity of God. For us Christians, the dogma of the Trinity is like a confirmation of this deep intuition: not only is God the great different One in God's transcendence, but is also the God of the irreducible relationship between the Father and the Son. It is the Holy Spirit who saves us from the temptation of reducing God to a

single image: masculine, white, etc. etc. God is the different One and the difference of God is the Spirit who constantly gives rise to diversity.

Jesus' preferential option for women, in giving up patriarchal privileges by his celibacy, speaks out against the source of all violence hiding at the core of our gender-based relationships. In this way he inaugurates a new era of non-violent relationships between men and women, and over and above this, between all creatures in their divine diversity.

The challenge of Religious Life set free from patriarchy is to rebuild relationships of trust among us as the premises of peace. This reconstruction begins within our own communities.

III Rebuilding networks

The urgency of present situations strongly calls us to action. If, after so many years of the preferential option for the poor, things are as they are despite our having consecrated ourselves to justice on behalf of the Reign, it may be because of our gullibility. All too soon we believed that it was enough to dream and speak about this Reign to make it appear, as if by magic. We forgot the rude requirements of action to ensure that hope be more than a slogan. We also underestimated the resistance of old demons: complexes and alienations, even – and maybe especially – among the poor.

Over and above our generosity and our unfailing courage, we neglected the coherence of our testimonies. The “already present” of the Reign, which in fact is the only convincing factor, requires testimonies from our personal and community life. Here lies the problem. Our contradictions too often invalidate our speech and sometimes even our work.

Only a multi-faceted community, like that of Jesus, countercurrent to all competition between clans, races, gender and religion has a chance to rebuild indispensable trust. It is through openness to differences, in our communities and outside of them, that our charisms, mutually orchestrated in a beautiful symphony, will become fruitful. But for this to happen, our top priority must be to be aware of, to denounce and to heal our self-centeredness in the feminine and our egocentricity in the masculine.

We need to re-invent mutual liberating dependency to replace ferocious and alienating competition. So as to truly exist, it is urgent that we fully reassume the reality of our creature hood in a joyous proclamation of our need for one another and for Another.

In this perspective, men and women together, let us re-think the meaning of our mono-sexual communities. In no case must they imply competition, fear of the other, or flight from threatening differences.

On the contrary, our celibacy lived together, can only be a decision to let go of grasping the other for myself; to be a school for universality, for pluralistic openness to the world. The priority of celibacy, truly human and lived for Jesus, is the cure for our violence. Fear conquered by love opens us little by little to differences and to diversity. Through this decision, which is also a letting go, we learn together and propose to those outside [our community] to proceed progressively from violence to peace.

Postmodern civilization confronts us with a permanent dilemma. On one hand, we are increasingly integrated within a multitude of networks constantly connecting us at all levels in real time. Today it is unthinkable to dream of a world outside of this worldwide spider's web.

But on the other hand, the temptation of withdrawing into our own identity is on the agenda more than ever before. We cannot get along without Facebook or selfies. But these, instead of transforming us into an intercultural and pluri-charismatic society, on the contrary, stir up fear and hatred and pleas for exclusion and contempt. What should have united us in brotherhood isolates us and makes us universal strangers who constantly feel threatened, and who believe that we too should be threatening.

Certain sites and means of communication have already given up publishing their customers' frequently disgusting comments. This is an attempt to stop the irresistible wave of hateful comments including ignorance and the many frustrations of the system's forgotten ones who are its victims. In this context, must we not come out of this virtual mess to recreate real arenas of relationships, listening and dialogue? We acknowledge that outside of concrete and interpersonal connectedness, it will be more and more impossible to offer a non-violent way out, particularly for youth.

The other challenge of networks is the position of truth. We now know that these social networks build totally virtual messages, in other words misleading, to attain their political, economic and even religious objectives. The virtual dance with its entertaining and dreamlike dimensions, projects us into a consciously unreal world which becomes our only reference point. In this artificial space, ethical criteria seem to be diluted, as if we were talking about rules of another, forgotten age. Reality becomes non-existent in the interests of universal fiction which rules the world.

How can we prevent our communities from also becoming areas of virtual fiction? How can we restore the concrete and historical connectedness of our communities as an

antidote to this virtual pandemic of which we ourselves are victims? What a strange revolution to operate so as to offer a therapeutic space where young and old alike can awake from the hypnotic sleep which trivializes violence and heightens anguish. How can we escape from the face to face isolation and security of the screen? We need to learn to “turn everything off”, to lose time together, to listen to one another and to dare speak about ourselves in a dialogue rather than spit out our most obscure frustrations and desires alone on the web.

I do not wish to go back to the Stone Age. But I feel the vital need to recreate a dialectic between what is real and what is virtual, to regain control of our instincts and those of the system. “My life, no one takes it, it is I who give it”. This affirmation made by Jesus could very well inspire this revolutionary return to what is human. Beyond robots and other Pokemons, such is our proposal for ourselves and on behalf of our communities for the world. It is a matter of understanding resurrection in a new way: restoring the vital reality of our relationships. I make an appeal, so to speak, for an urgent “reincarnation” of our human lives.

IV “Be no longer incredulous; be a believer”

Without Thomas’ disbelief, I would have a hard time believing in Christ’s resurrection. It is he, who by demanding to put his own hand in the crucified One’s wounds, guarantees that our faith is rooted in history and in the pascal challenge. Without him, the resurrection would be an ill-founded childish “happy ending” without substance. The cross and the resurrection are permanently inseparable.

But that does not prevent Jesus from blaming Thomas for his disbelief. He does not criticize a lack of faith. Thomas’ faith is no doubt deeper than that of his companions; it is more pascal, in any case. No, he denounces disbelief. This disbelief refers to Thomas’ mistrust of his brothers’ testimonies. This individualistic mistrust which allegedly tests everything is very postmodern. We also have lost confidence in others, in political figures, in judges, in the police and even (above all?) in the Church. We only believe ourselves.

Paradoxically, however, our disbelief is consciously nourished by all this blind faith in virtual fiction which “protects” and manipulates us. Our faith must once again find this good adult fraternal solidarity called obedience in our somewhat outdated jargon. Finding the *a priori* confidence in the Other above all, is also a condition of Christian faith. This faith, in fact, is wholly rooted in the testimonies of men and women who are sinners as vulnerable as we are, and like us, inclined to make mistakes. And yet there is nothing more reliable than a brother, a sister in faith as we move forward through the dark night of these times.

The antithesis of disbelief is evidently not “belief” of which our contemporaries, relying on the culture of new paradigms, accuse us with a smile. Jesus does not tell Thomas: “Believe”, what certain parts of the Church continue to repeat, hoping to keep us – especially women – in childish submission. Jesus’ invitation to Thomas takes a completely different direction: “Be a believer”. Here begins the difficult and beautiful road of faith.

I greatly admire women theologians from North and South America, who, by refusing the constraints imposed by naiveté, have taken the risk to explore their faith with the passionate courage of adulthood. With them, and together, we must constantly rethink our faith and renounce all the hodgepodge of mythical Cosmo visions and Theo visions. If our faith depends on these outmoded conceptions, it will not resist the postmodern storm for very long.

In the Church, women are newcomers on the scene. Therefore their perception and their understanding have the energy, the freshness and the necessary freedom of beginnings. Men, on the other hand, are often bogged down in the stupid certainty of routine repetitions and rusty clerical truths.

Teach us again to think, without resorting to [standard] beliefs. To achieve this, teach us again to doubt like Thomas, but also to trust. This, after all, is the mystical paradox of faith: doubt is a work of intellectual honesty, and the mystical gamble its witness. This is what Jesus asks of Thomas and of each of us. This is what it means to be a believer, beyond our comfortable innocent beliefs.

The holy women brought their companions out of fear and insecurity. Feminine Religious Life today can also teach us and teach the world to be true believers, beyond the naïve and mediocre “theism” of the premodern past, or plain atheism, which confuses faith and belief, and simultaneously rejects both. Together let us enter into what certain people already refer to as the “post religious” times, a new attitude of believing in “anatheism”, God beyond God, beyond all images.

Here we are that the frontier, where only leaping over the wall will set us free (with all due respect to Trump!) Today faith has become a leap into the void like that experienced by all the mystics; a costly decision, a choice for life “even if it is in the dark of night” as Saint John of the Cross tells us.

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