

Sisters of Holy Cross

GENERAL CHAPTER 2017 Fourth Conference

Moving forward

In the ecclesial, cultural and socio-political context mentioned in our preceding conference, an urgent question is raised: where does fidelity stand today and what is the role of Tradition at the heart of the new challenges? Your chapter reflections urge you to move forward without losing your inspirational reference points.

Sociologists and anthropologists are in the habit of saying that women are the protectors of a people's cultural values and spirituality. They are the primary educators who accompany their children throughout their lives and, as such, are responsible for transmitting traditions. But this vision could lead us to believe that women, by purpose, are conservative, while men are charged with exploring the unprecedented.

Evidently, that is not how things are. Women look to the future and build this future with and for their children, while what we earlier referred to as masculine egocentricity often tends to be conservative because of fear. Thus the dilemma is to unite Tradition and risking the new, without naively opposing them.

When the holy women decided to go to the tomb, their intention and their initiative were inspired by Tradition (Notwithstanding their impatience). They observed the Sabbath first of all. But above all, they wanted to pay the last tribute, imposed by Tradition, to Jesus' body.

This inspiration, however, was not exempt from risk and openness to the unexpected. Knowing that access to the body was made impossible by the stone, they gambled on the impossible newness of the resurrection, not knowing what it could mean. Their fidelity to Tradition was the source of their openness to what was new.

It is this tandem I would like to contemplate in this fourth reflection with you, because moving forward has meaning only if we know from where we have come.

I A break with continuity and the crisis of Tradition

Our times are characterized by a progressive loss of meaning – and even the simple knowledge – of history. Our contemporaries suffer from a serious Adam complex¹ and from blind and guilty ignorance. It would seem that everything starts today; that the past never existed and in any case, that it is perfectly of no use to us. But this conscious ignorance is the cause of many of the present ills. We come back to our emesis like the Bible says about the swine.

¹ The Adam complex is the illusion that all begins with us, as if we had invented everything from zero and that the past and tradition are of absolutely of no interest.

We are repeating the fatal errors that led us to two world wars. If we are not careful, we could end up by justifying the exterminations of Auschwitz. “Nothing can be really taken for granted”, says the poet. As is the case today, we can perfectly well turn back the clock on 100 years of human achievements: human rights, respect of minorities and differences, and even globalization. This backtracking, claiming to go forward, is explained by our ignorance of History and the breakdown of the conduits of universal humanism.

But this ignorance and this breakdown of continuity also express themselves by a strong temptation towards conservatism. It consists of turning a stage in history into stone, the stage which suits our interest and those of our group, to set it up as an exclusive absolute. This regressive dogmatism is also ignorant, racist and mortally particularistic. A return to past populism and nationalism is a troubling sign of this dogmatism.

Genuine Tradition, on the contrary, is inscribed at the core of the ongoing movement of history where wisdom and creativity embrace like two inseparable friends. We ourselves need to relearn to be heirs and to re-educate today’s humans to be heirs also. Let us transmit past experience by transforming it, so as to deliver it, recreated and reinvented, to the new generations.

What was the secret of the women of the Gospel which enabled them to “move forward” in fidelity to the energetic Tradition of their peoples? On a number of occasions the evangelists indicate that the women “shared among themselves”, but also that they “were telling” the apostles what they had seen and heard. Even if according to the disciples of Emmaus, their companions gave little credit to this “women chatter”, in the final analysis they were the ones who were right.

The secret lies in the art of storytelling. The whole of Tradition is built from testimonies related and transmitted from generation to generation, after many additions and transformations. Faith is necessarily rooted in storytelling, in the testimony of personal experience. And this is precisely where our era of “everything virtual” is seriously handicapped.

In the world of networks in real time, we never contemplate anything other than ourselves in the immediate. The meaning of continuity is absolutely lost, as is the momentum of time and its evolution. We are caught in the deliberate delusion of our selfies. And we forget that we are part of an immense and irresistible wave that came before us and will outlive us.

Nonetheless there is a lovely space for story telling in our postmodern world: the cinema. Beyond its simple and often stupid and degrading entertainment, cinema has become the witness and guardian of humanity in the making. The great cinema directors forge ahead, telling stories that reveal us to ourselves by arousing us from our hypnoses; stories without embellishment or detours. So that we may open ourselves to the risks and opportunities of the

future, faith should connect us once again to this frequently countercurrent cinematographic conversation which creates Tradition, as it has been doing already for some time now.

II Fidelity, the revelation of unprecedented hope

Loss of the meaning of both History and Tradition also leads to the current discrediting of fidelity, not only in the Church, but in all aspects of society. Whether we consider affective bonds, or ethical, professional and political commitments, the connection between life and professed commitments seems increasingly relative. What weight do they carry given a person's changing social sanctions at different moments of his/her life? This is what Pope Benedict XVI often lamented when he spoke of the galloping relativism from which our society suffers.

Yet we have never "theatralized" the celebration of pseudo-commitments as much as now. It is no longer the content of these commitments, nor their consequences that we assume, that matter, but their appearance and the image they project, (furthermore their duration is often trivial and insignificant). The fleeting narcissism of our civilization is equal only to the great fragility of human bonds.

In view of this deep crisis of fidelity, the only way to reanimate the believer's memory of God's marvelous works would be to reconnect with gratitude and praise. Fidelity, in Christian terms, first of all has something to do with the fact that God is reliable. God's action in Salvation History, but most of all our in own personal and collective history, is the foundation of our gamble on hope and on our long-term choices.

Today, many think we must no longer choose, but rather "eat, drink and be merry" now, before the great explosion that was predicted, occurs. All commitments seem trivial, even ludicrous, or "old-fashioned". Will we still risk engendering life and as a result accompanying this vulnerable life towards its future? This question applies equally to couples and to our Consecrated Life, and to commitments within social, professional and political responsibilities.

On the contrary, we are very quick to claim, demand, and advocate for anything and everything by setting ourselves up as exclusive and conclusive judges (often cruel and merciless) of all reality, while we carefully avoid touching it with the tip of a finger. Are we too, not more inclined to ask, to even make demands on God, rather than to let ourselves freely express gratitude?

"Moving forward" necessarily involves regaining awareness of the commitment underpinning our words, gestures and actions. Whether we like it or not," "our kisses in the distance follow us" says the poet. As we regain awareness, it is also important to reconnect with the duration of time, and with the abuse of time today. Fidelity absolutely depends on the duration of

time. We might be able to satisfy our whims and fancies immediately, in real time. But gestation demands time and patience, our whole being's involvement in a birth to which we slowly consent, allowing life to surprise us.

Hope's surprises do not fall from the sky. They rise up from the earth, from our combined efforts and from receiving grace in trust. Failure and sin are not rare in this gamble on fidelity, source of hope. In Christian logic, these are not enough to break the commitment. On the contrary, Jesus, with renewed mercy, invites us to be born again of the Spirit. It seems to me that this is the underlying intuition of Pope Francis's post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, especially in what concerns those divorced and remarried.

Moving forward means finding confidence in ourselves, in God and in others once again, and through this rediscovered trust, believing that fidelity is possible and necessary beyond the many defections observed during these last years.

III Establishing Tradition

We often identify Tradition with traditionalism. Nothing is more false. Instead, by our approach of wanting to forge ahead through the obscurity of these times, Tradition and its incarnation through fidelity, expresses faith's vital coherence and stubborn insistence. The believer who looks towards the horizon of her hope, relies on her own personal past experience with God and that of her family, at the heart of the Church and its people.

Unlike dogmas which are "final and closed", Tradition demonstrates faith's incompleteness, its mystical dimension, always approximate yet experienced profoundly. It continuously and impatiently awaits God's surprise downstream from History.

Faith's dynamics are necessarily enlivened by the dialogue between Tradition and History. We need to rebuild within this dialogue continuously but not haphazardly. Admittedly, in light of new challenges, of what was unheard of in History, we will frequently need to call Tradition into question, create it anew, or at any rate, reinterpret it. But this will always be within a creative dialogue. Tradition is a permanently unfinished project, imperfect and even flawed – open, in any case. Such is its *raison d'être*. As a community, given its progressive, permanent revelation of a mystical order, of an experiential order in other words, Tradition constantly warns us against the temptations of immutable dogmas.

In his major work on hope, the Jewish and communist (!) atheist philosopher Ernst Bloch speaks of the "deficit of action" as the driving force behind hope. In a believer's language, this is the true meaning of Tradition. As time goes on, the action of the Spirit and of the community is embodied in Tradition. But this action, always deficient, opens the door to hope, what Bloch calls the daytime dream.

On the eve of a Congregational Chapter where you will have to make major decisions which involve your future as a Congregation and the future of each of its members, your audaciousness (Bloch would call it your daytime dream,) will be proportionate to your memories and your creative fidelity.

You are now “making Tradition”. You are receiving the gift bequeathed by the sisters who came before you, that you may continue the journey with their inheritance under your arm and in your heart. You in turn, will deposit all your own charisms there; in the words of Saint John and Saint Irenaeus, your “capability of God”, that is, the creative understanding of your faith.

Moving forward is as much bearing witness to your convictions rooted in your Tradition as welcoming, respecting and drawing on other Traditions, particularly and primarily those of your sisters originating from other cultures or other generations.

Be not afraid of yet uncharted pathways. They will lead you where no other known path could lead you. Do not be afraid “to open the way by walking” in the words of Joan Manuel and Antonio Machado. But may this audaciousness be guided by the fine compass of Tradition. Without this compass, you would most certainly get lost.

I know that among you, this is not a spontaneous conversation. It is even a little questionable. It is true that in the Council’s elation, we sometimes lost sight of our spiritual past. Today it is not easy to rebuild Tradition. We have difficulty penetrating the severity of the psalms, for example, and we prefer the trivial flippancy of shallow contemporary texts, texts which always rub us the right way without converting us. As Saint Paul tells us, we need the courage to nourish ourselves with solid food, not with the milk intended for newborn infants.

Go to the source which never runs dry: Jesus! He fills us for the long journey across the desert where today’s men and women wait for us. They also thirst for this Source which is yet unknown to them. Be demanding. Don’t be satisfied with the cheap pseudo-spiritual “fast food” which exists among so many men and women religious today. Such food does not sustain us, nor does it prepare us for the hunger and thirst that wait for us, because it does not draw from our most reliable and profound treasury.

IV A pedagogical approach

For several years now, I have insisted on the urgency of repairing the torn fabric of the people of God. One of the reasons for the deep crisis in the Church today is precisely this break with continuity of which we have been speaking.

My dream is that Religious Life, and therefore your Congregation, will resume its mission as “weavers” between the institution – currently secluded in the inflexibility of another era – and a

people of faith – lost in the desert of our world in search of meaning. This task was at the origin of our foundations, particularly for Congregations whose mission is projected *ad gentes*. Today, these “*gentes*”, the pagans, are no longer in the Amazon or in the tropical forests of central Africa, but among us, in our communities, in our cities.

Faced with this imperative need for meaning, our Religious Life is often situated in an awkward position. Without being aware of it, we too have in fact separated ourselves from the expectations of today’s world, so as to respond increasingly to those of the ecclesial institution. We have become specialists of the conversations that no one understands, and worse still, in which no one, frequently not even ourselves, believes.

The theme of Salvation, for example, so often recurring in our speech, is one of these topics in which we have lost interest, at least in the way we habitually presented it. Heaven and hell no longer concern anyone today. What our contemporaries expect of us is a credible proposal for happiness, and construction sites for meaning. Happiness and the search for meaning are the priorities for a world in turmoil. It is in these areas that we must invest. The real meaning of Salvation passes first of all by such wilderness.

I suggest, therefore, that we go back to our founding inspirations and charisms, and at the same time, that we break our implicit contracts with the desires of the Institutional Church. We need to choose between continuing to play the passive role of conduits for doctrine, or once again becoming “weavers of the future” for the tattered people of God; to be witnesses of the status quo or a community of risen people.

As mentioned above, it is a conversion process for our Religious Life, beginning by going back to the sources of our Tradition. Reconnected in this way with what is ours and what gives us in-depth life, we will then need to question the Church as well as the world, and allow ourselves to be interrogated by all the new questions mushrooming everywhere.

This reciprocal questioning will then lead us to relearn the art of story-telling, the fertile and creative parable-narration of which we spoke earlier. This task begins among us, in our own communities. Do we dare tell stories to one another, the beautiful stories of our faith and about how we follow Jesus, day by day? Let us turn off our television sets and our computers for a moment, to practice seeking the meaning and happiness that Jesus proposes in His Gospel.

Then we will need the courage to practice critical thinking and self-criticism. In our Church of “double-talk”, criticism is not popular. We frequently need to adopt “correct” language, even if we do not believe in it. The time has come to abandon this destructive habit which consists of always protecting the Church, even at the cost of truth or morality. Such was too long the case in the tragedy of pedophilia and of financial disasters. Jesus, in all his mercy, was very critical of what he referred to as hypocrisy. In this hypercritical world, where criticism is not always used

wisely, for that matter, a religious who is simply a “conformist” will neither be believed nor welcome.

On this path I call educational, we will then be able to consecrate ourselves to transformation in Christian terms: conversion of our mentalities, our relationships and our actions. But this transformation-conversion will come about only if it is inscribed in the ongoing process we have just followed: returning to the Sources, questioning through universal spiritual and human curiosity, exercising the art of telling parables, and learning the duty of critique and self-criticism at the service of creation and of what is new.

Since the coming of jazz and other forms of artistic creations, the gift of improvising has become deeply appreciated. God himself is a marvelous improviser when through unfinished creation and History, and after every impasse imposed on it by unpredictable humanity, God constantly re-invents God’s work so as to make it viable.

But this improvisation has nothing to do with amateurism and non professionalism that so often mark our pastoral work. The great improvisers, on the contrary, possess their technique fully and profoundly, constantly refining and completing it so as to draw convincing creative imagination from it. In the great romantic concertos, the composer always provided a space, when the whole orchestra was silent, for the soloist to improvise at will and reconnect with it and the written score whenever he would decide, resuming the adventure once more.

Yes, we must improvise our faith, its language, its spaces, its darkness and its requirements. But we will not be able to do this unless we are seasoned masters of our own theological, mystical and practical technique. The fruitful improvisation which your community is getting ready to establish by this chapter will not be possible unless each one of you, and you as a community, be both professional soloists and symphonic orchestras, powerful and in tune. The fruits will depend on the soil in which you plant the tree and the reliability of that soil.

The scribe in the Gospel who draws both the old and the new from his treasure is a paradigm of this improvising wisdom which ought to inspire us. Remaining with the “old” would make us a museum or a deep freeze. Relying only on the “new” would make us dangerous sorcerer’s apprentices. Improvising life, faith, prayer and mission involves bold wisdom and the wise freedom of the scribe.

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