

## Rome, Platform zoom

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# Transformation within the Church and in consecrated life

In the western world we are undergoing continues transformation and changes which interest the Institutes of consecrated life and the Dioceses: lack of vocations, low birth-rate, increasing number of elderly people, and many religious leaving consecrated life. This situation of transformation causes concern, anxiety and any kind of consequences: not only pastoral and spiritual ones, but also institutional, economic and social. The transformation that is now involving the Churches born during the early evangelization, could soon reach other areas of the world affecting some paradigms of the Church and of the Institutes of consecrated life.

Rather than spending time in analysing numbers, which have little to do with Christian life as Saint Vincent said to the Superior in Sedan: *three do more than ten when Our Lord puts his hand in it, and He always does it when He takes away the means to do otherwise* - and as it is clear in the Gospels, the "smallness", imposed by the history of these last decades, reminds us of the need to revise our way of being in the context where we live. The search for what causes the small number of vocations, the huge number of departures, the increasing age of consecrated people, may make us fall into depression or focus too much on ourselves, while we should remember that God is the Lord of our lives. It is time to trust in God, to take risks and not to hold on what makes us feel secure. You Sisters of Charity, are a necessary and exceptional way of living Christian life, you have something the world needs: you may offer meaning even if you are getting increasingly smaller. You are called to let yourselves 'be seized' by the men and women of today and especially by the poor, to whom to gift your life.

### **The transformations within the Church as in a "Jubilee"**

It seems suitable to me that we begin reflecting on transformation and change within the Church and in consecrated life starting from the time we are preparing to live: the double Jubilee. In fact, in a couple of months the whole Church is going to celebrate the Jubilee and at the same time the Congregation of the Mission, founded by Saint Vincent de' Paul is celebrating "its" Jubilee remembering 400 years of foundation. The word Jubilee comes from the Hebrew *yobel*, which means "goat" and more precisely recalls the goat's horn, that is the instrument with which it was announced the beginning of the jubilee year, which was celebrated every fifty years, while every seven years there was the sabbatical year, during which the earth was left to rest: "*Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. [...]Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the Lord your God.*" (cf Lv 25: 8-17).

During the jubilee year the land had not to be cultivated and debtors regained possession of the assets they had lost, while the servants were freed. It was like going back to the origins with a new

beginning of human history: the jubilee reminded of the primacy of God, who "rested on the seventh day" and to whom the Earth belongs, while human beings shall first of all praise Him and thank Him and share the goods of the earth with other people. The scholars think that this was a utopian ideal of justice and that the norms in Leviticus on debt relief were never really applied. They recalled the messianic ideal, mentioned by the prophets and by Jesus, who – with the words of the prophet Isaiah (61:1-3) – said that He had come to free slaves and prisoners and to "proclaim the year of grace of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

This institution written in the Jewish Law and kept by the priestly class was addressed to the poor and the weak who were given back land and dignity. The institution, which was never implemented, was a true revolution which served to bring things back in order, giving back freedom, returning properties and doing justice. The author of Leviticus, in other words, stated that transformations and changes serve to be faithful to the commandment of love for our neighbour (cf Lv 19:18).

Therefore, if it is true that transformations and changes reaffirm faithfulness to God, I invite you to read the crisis and changes in the Church and in consecrated life not as a failure, but as an opportunity to reaffirm God's primacy and the need to change our heart and our structure to make them faithful to the Word of God which always carries a promise of good.

### **Saint Vincent de' Paul**

Vincent de' Paul, great reformer in the Church who made many changes, was driven to the mission to the poor and to the formation of priests, by the ardent charity, and the zeal that animated him and 'compelled' him to be in constant agitation: *«It is certain that charity, when it takes possession of a soul, adsorb its entire energy. It gives no respite: it is like a fire that stirs without interruption, keeping the person enthralled by it in constant exercise and activity »* (SV, XI 216). Fidelity to the vocation of following Christ evangelizer of the poor, led Vincent to keep a tenacious attention to the signs of the time and of constant change in himself and in the surrounding environment, thus overcoming immobility and conveniences. Speaking of this, it comes to my mind what Saint Vincent told about the events that took place in Genoa during a plague epidemic. The brothers, compelled by circumstances, in one-week time left their home and went to live in a rented house, giving up their home so that it could be transformed in a hospital for the plague victims. Vincent praised the effort and suffering of the brothers who in few days had to change house, habits and sacrifice themselves in favour of the plague victims. The change is a sign of fidelity and it often involves privations and sufferings *«Thank God they are suffering in the right way, indeed lucky them who suffer for the public good! Their suffering is for the good of all: first of all for God, and then for others. You see, my brothers, we should be ready, even wish to suffer for God and neighbour, to consume ourselves for this»* (SV, XI 402).

### **Saint Jeanne-Antide Thouret**

Saint Jeanne-Antide was a brave and tenacious woman, capable to see in the crisis of her time (the French revolution, the misunderstanding with Mons. de Pressigny) not only obstacles, but opportunities to live in her time in a different way from the past. In a short time, she had to change her approach to reality: during the French revolution the Church was no longer accepted as a community living meaningful values but as an organization filled with prejudices and superstitions. In these changed conditions, she chose with courage to educate children in a barn and continued to be close to all, through her charitable gestures, caring for and healing the poor and sick people. She kept choosing fidelity to God and to the Church in spite of the change and the

injustice endured at the hand of members of the hierarchy. In the change of the time the hope of those who love and offer the gift of themselves does not change, what changes are the circumstances in which God's plan may take new ways.

The motto "God alone" is the dream of Jeanne-Antide which, in a time in which the absolute search for what is superfluous and superficial prevails, acquires a disruptive power necessary to affirm the primacy of God, of spirituality deeply lived and of the service of the poor who are the living image of Christ.

### **To observe the signs of the times**

In order to place ourselves wisely within a history in constant change, we need to observe what the Vatican Council II calls «signs of the times». The Church has the duty to scrutinize them carefully (cf GS 4), convinced that the people of God is led by the Spirit of the Lord that fills the universe; and in the aspirations, events and requests of our time, in which it lives together with its contemporaries, it sees the real signs of God's presence and plan (cf GS 11). Listening carefully to, discerning and interpreting, with the help of the Spirit, the many and different voices of our time is a duty for the whole people of God. The Spirit may close some doors, yet it opens others.

To discern the signs of the times, however, a series of provisions are requested: first of all, the conviction that the Spirit of the Lord does not work only within the Church, but it fills the universe. That is why we need to listen, together with the people of our times to the voices, the aspirations and the demands of humanity. This asks from the Church an attitude of openness, dialogue and proximity to our world and our time, in order to know what God wants from humanity. It requires discernment, to enlighten the reality with the values of the Gospel and of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Applying all this to the life of the Sisters of Charity, we may ask if we too are in a situation in which the Spirit is closing some doors while opening others. We need to discern if the current structures of the Congregation respond to today's signs of the times or, if they rather respond to past times of Christianity. The Spirit is closing the doors of a large community that was powerful, strong, posh, self-sufficient and self-referential, yet perhaps it is opening the doors to a different style of religious life more evangelical and poorer, more in line with the signs of today's times.

Let us ask ourselves if our experience of chaos may not lead us to a *kairos*, a favourable time. (cf VIKTOR CODINA, *La vita religiosa: dal caos al "kairos"?* in "La Civiltà cattolica", 2022 I, 167 – 179).

### **We are going through a change of time**

We too are compelled to go to the other side (cf Mt 14,22) to reflect and meditate on the necessity of making the changes that history invites us to consider and we are called to realize. It is necessary to consider the words of the Holy Father Francis: «*One could say that today we are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change. The situations that we are living in today therefore pose new challenges which, at times, are also difficult for us to understand. [...] Wherever you may be, build neither walls nor borders but village squares and field hospitals*» (Francis, Discourse, Florence 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015).

Change does not consist in betraying the history of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Jeanne-Antide. Pope Francis said to the participants in the International Congress on Catechesis: «*To be faithful, to be creative; we need to be able to change. To change! And why must I change? So that I can adapt to the situations in which I must proclaim the Gospel* » (Francis, Address to participants in

the International Congress on Catechesis, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2013). Change affirms a double fidelity typical of the Gospel: fidelity to God and to humanity.

Not to be overwhelmed by the transformations taking place in the Church and in consecrated life it is necessary to be aware that changing is a sign of fidelity and that we need to revise the habits and patterns in use in our community and start from a shared 'dream'. Before changing things, we need to understand what direction the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity is taking, as without clarity, as Stephen R. Covey said we risk "*rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic*". We need to understand together that in order to change we need to begin from a practical and shared dream that can be narrated, so that we may identify the criteria to put into action the change needed by the Community. If we change the structures but we do not share the dream we risk that the boat sinks while we are all busy rearranging furniture.

We also need to activate processes, to decide and to try experiences which do not respond to what is urgent, but to the priorities which make the dream come true, which respond to our shared vision. For this process of change to make us faithful to God and to our changing history it is necessary that the dream is kept alive and that there are guardians to keep it alight.

### **Let us share a dream**

The Pope keeps lighting fires and dreams of a Church with open doors, welcoming, similar to a field hospital, an out-going Church to take the faith to all and to reach the existential and geographical peripheries where people live and suffer. A Church with the smell of the sheep, which does not act like a tax collector but is merciful, which is not self-referential but an upside-down pyramid, polyhedric and synodal. A Church in which the poor and their piety are a privileged theological category (cf EG 197-201).

Let us begin dreaming, standing on the mountain, in prayer and attentive to see the signs in the firmament, so that after the drought the sky may grant again the restoring water that irrigates the field that is the Church (cf 1Re, 18,41-46). Let us dream again, sharing the life of people, opening our houses to their stores heavy with spiritual life, which enable us to see the Spirit at work in their history. Let us dream again choosing to love one another in spite of our personal and geographical differences, learning charity from the gestures of fraternity built among us and between the community and the brothers and sisters with whom we share our faith.

In this time of changes, may the Lord walk with you as He did with the disciples at Emmaus, helping you listen to the Word, kindling your hearts and making you taste the beauty of taking a new path, to be transformed, renewed and happy to follow the unexpected ways shown by God.

Inflamed by love may you live the Vincentian virtue of zeal, loving intensely the Lord and the poor in ways always new, avoiding remaining attached to ministries and services we repeat always in the same. Saint Vincent, though old, felt obliged to work for the salvation remaining open to change and new things:

*« Some may use age as an excuse. As for me, despite my age, I do not feel excused before God from the obligation I have to work for the salvation of the poor. Who could prevent me? If I could not preach every day, I would do it twice a week; if I could not climb into the great pulpits, I would try to preach to the little ones; and if I could not even be heard by these little ones, who would prevent me from speaking in a good and familiar way to the good people, as I am speaking to you now, making them approach in a circle as you are?» (SV XI, 136)*

May the Lord grant you the zeal, the passion for the service and the promotion of the poor that is contagious and like fire spreads and reaches the young people we know and should involve in the mission of serving the poor. May the Lord help you build Christian communities of consecrated and lay people capable to live at the side of the poor and capable to educate and to take care of the weak.