

"Living on/at the Edge"

Talk to the LCCL SA Conference 2016

Good evening everyone. Firstly, my sincere thanks to your LCCL executive for giving me the privilege of sharing our ongoing journey of faith and witness with you, my sisters and brothers in the religious life. I come - not as a theologian or expert, because I am neither. I come as one who is travelling the same road as you, as one who tries to discern what this call seems to be inviting us to in what is a very challenging global and local context - which places before us some real questions and challenges for those of us called to the ministry of leadership.

Stories and accounts of the life and commitment of religious down the years – they are many and inspiring! The Jesuit Refugee Service in Syria to which I was privileged to give the Pax Christi International Peace Prize in 2014 in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The two Jesuits who came from Homs and Aleppo in Syria testified to the extraordinary suffering they experienced daily. One of them said at the presentation: “We open our doors to everyone, and we will continue opening our doors, even though they may come in and kill us (which happened to their brother, Father Frans Van Der Lught in 2013 – they came in and shot him). Our only safety is in God”. Or the three sisters and lay missionary who were raped and murdered by the National Guard in El Salvador, or the 6 Jesuit martyrs at the University of Central America in El Salvador shot to death by the military together with their housekeeper and her daughter, and so on.....as well as the countless religious who have given so many examples of witness and ministry all over the world, and here in Southern Africa.

For me, these stories and accounts highlight, among other things, what kind of God those religious – and we – believed/believe in and want to express through our commitment to consecrated life in mission: a God we would prefer to focus us inwards on Church life *per se*, on internal Church concerns etc., important as these are; or the *relational* God, what Pope Francis is calling or inviting us to, a God who asks us to go to the "peripheries", “to live on/at the edge”; a relational God who challenges us to examine the quality of our love and relationship with God in terms of the way we live an “outreach” as individuals and communities to those who are most vulnerable, to those most marginalised or excluded in the Church and the world, and to the whole of creation which is under such serious threat.

Our vision of God should call us to a seamless living of mysticism incarnated in prophetic mission for life - by no means an easy process! To strive to live the Gospel authentically in life as it is today is a continual call to me in our changing context to discover a different world-view. I am invited by the Resurrection Jesus who walks by my side on the way to each experience and happening so that I will view it differently, so that it can be an Emmaus experience which invites me to a change of mentality. It is an invitation to see people and situations differently, to hear deeply enough what is going on in people's lives so that I can try to understand *why* Jesus' desire is that we see and discover together a different way of relating to God, to humanity, to the earth and all of creation.....so that we may experience the truth of Jesus' promise: “I have come that they may have life and life to the full!” (John 10:10).

If, therefore, on our Emmaus journey we have seen and chosen a *relational God* as our fundamental vision and expression of the God we believe in, the gift of God to us which we want to celebrate, then we have embarked upon a pilgrimage of discernment and search for all the ways we can live the "mystery of communion" - but on the "edges" of life where people and the creation suffer in different ways. It is to consciously choose to live out each day the implications for our life and pastoral choices and engagements the reflection of Albert Nolan: "Suffering must be the new starting point in modern theology and spirituality".

And so, back to our theme "living on/at the edge". Different expressions have been used to describe the charism and mission of religious they are called to be "liminal", to use the word of Diarmuid O'Murchu ("living as *liminal* communities on the edge of society....reflecting to it the significant values it longs for at its deepest core"); or to be "counter-cultural". Brother Sean Sammon, a Marist Brother reflected: "We've learned much from all that's transpired (in the changes which have happened in religious life). One, religious life was never intended to be an ecclesiastical workforce. Two, our way of life belongs within the charismatic church and not the hierarchical church. Three, religious life is meant to be the church's conscience, reminding that large body continually about its true nature, about what it longs to be, can be, must be." To be the "Church's conscience"....brings into focus the possibility of tension between the charismatic and hierarchical dimensions of the Church as a community of communities. "Living on/at the edge" is an invitation to try to understand in newer and richer ways the usual expression of our calling, viz. "to be prophetic". That immediately places before us the questions: how, in what way to be prophetic given our Congregational reality, indeed our experience of limitations because of age and ill health, of having to "let go".

The question for me at this point is: Can we, or rather *should* we try to determine *a priori* what "living on/at the edge" means, and then raise the bar in terms of expectations we place upon ourselves? Or should we not rather focus on living our discipleship with the Lord as holistically and wholesomely as possible in those situations of suffering and impoverishment in which we can *realistically* engage, but with our goal of bringing *an experience of God* into those experiences – and leave the fruit of our witness to God?

Interestingly, Sandra Schneiders identifies the social and cultural context as key for the living out of the charism of prophecy in consecrated living, and therefore members of communities will be called to prophetic action in different ways. She stated: "Every form of Religious Life is called to be prophetic in a situation that cannot be generalised to or deduced from some archetypal and abstract concept.....Solidarity with the people among whom one lives involves one in a specific cultural setting with its specific issues." (Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure*, 327). So, there can be different ways of expressing the "prophetic".

After Vatican II and "*Lumen Gentium*", consecrated living has to be situated and understood *within* the universal call to holiness which belongs to *all* God's people, and what is emphasised now is the *nature* of consecrated living as a "concrete sign", "a personal and community witness" to the *search* for the Absolute, the "God-is-with-us" or the "God-dimension" indeed the "mystical

dimension” made present in the life as it really is for people This reality calls for a search to live mystically, to see God in everything and to see everything in God.....*together with* a selfless striving to build the reign of God in the world, to transform the little world where we live and serve into a redeemed “site” of God’s presence which always brings with it the hope that there can be change, transformation for our people who have their struggles in daily life.

This takes me to my main focus in this address: “living on/at the edge” through our vowed life in community.

From my early years in religious life, I have felt there was a need to express and live a more holistic understanding and practice of the vows for today’s religious life, i.e. in a way which places witness and mission at the centre of living the vows. One of the great insights that liberation theology offered has been that we cannot live our lives as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, “ahistorically”. We can only try to be authentic by the way we incarnate our life and witness through our insertion into the actual socio-historical reality in which we live and serve, and to be open to new horizons in our ministry options. So, our vows, witness and mission/ministries should be viewed together, one feeding into the other, interfacing with each other.

Walter Brueggemann articulated what prophetic ministry in our contemporary Church and society is all about....it must “nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” (*The Prophetic Imagination*, 1978). We need to ask the question: is the dominant culture in the Church life-giving especially for all those who feel alienated and marginalised? And is the dominant socio-political culture around us often just a means for the advancement of the powerful elites at the expense of the poor.....and what does this call us to in terms of witnessing to an *alternative* experience of hope for those we encounter who feel “poor” in so many different ways?

And so I am trying to visualise the vows as values, ideals, which are to be lived out, expressed in *witness and mission*, and in relation to the creation. So, firstly:

The Vow of Celibacy - a Vow of Wholesome and Inclusive Love and Communion for the Reign of God in our world

We all know the essential characteristics of the Vow, viz. that all Christians are called to chastity, whether in married, single, priestly, or religious life, but that not all are called to celibacy. But I need to ask myself the question: What does the gift and struggle of celibacy mean to me personally at this point in my faith journey as a religious?

Yes, I understand that in living this vow I let go of the generativity of love in marriage, and that celibacy is just one way of “being” in the world; it cannot be ever conceived of as the best way of being in the world, but the question is: do I believe it is the best way of being in the world now for me in my calling, that will enable me to pour out my love upon everyone as a “prophetic act of witness” as Albert Nolan observed?.....Why, and how?

Celibacy essentially involves being *in relationship*. Coming from Africa as we do, being in relationship is at the core of an African sense of identity; the basis for African humanism is "I relate, therefore I am", or "I am because you are". Therefore, the *witness* dimension of this vow hopefully could be an invitation to others to move beyond personal or group identity, whether ethnic or national identity, to a deeper sense of being *world* citizens, that is, to be people who live in "communion" with everyone, no matter who they are.

So, if lived wholesomely or holistically this vow, like the others should be, on the one hand, essentially *counter cultural* and, on the other hand, offer the possibility of a more life-giving *alternative* experience which can help to transform the social context and the struggles of people among whom we live and minister.....especially people who might feel alienated, alone, and marginalised in different ways.

So, I would like to reflect with you on the Vow of Celibacy as Wholesome and Inclusive Love *in view of* Communion for the Reign of God. This is, firstly, a *witness against* a culture in many parts of the world and here, a culture of the use and abuse of people and particularly women and girl children.....especially through a culture of entitlement to sex. Our witness against such a culture could and should highlight that violence and abuse of any kind diminishes and even destroys the dignity of the "other" and the reverence which should be shown them.

Our Leadership Conference of Religious together with the Bishops' Conference, has taken up this challenge in the past years particularly with regard to the scourge of human trafficking, inviting us to play a meaningful role in providing relevant ways to freedom for those who are so cruelly exploited for economic gain. Human trafficking and migration is a global reality. In sub-Saharan Africa migration and trafficking opens vulnerable and impoverished women in particular to being infected and constantly re-infected with the HI Virus, often leading to a very distressing and lonely death, and leaving behind babies/children also infected; or having to survive as orphans. What they all suffer is truly a *sin-full* reality, a profound injustice, crying out to God for redress – a cry which we need to hear and turn into an experience of hope and a new beginning for them.

Being counter-cultural also requires that we, as individuals and communities, try offer an *alternative* which we strive to make possible *together with* the people among whom we minister, and with other actors working in this field. In this, I find it helpful to myself to link our expression of each Vow to one or more of our Catholic Social Teaching (CST) principles, in view of finding inspiration for our mission in the actual context in which we live. The CST principles can offer us not only ideals to live up to, but practical steps or orientations to consider in the quest *with others* to promote a more humane and sustainable global and local community.

I try to visualise the Vow of Celibacy, therefore, as bringing into focus the "mystery of communion" through striving to living out *two* Catholic Social Teaching Principles; firstly, "Person-Centredness". "Person-Centredness" is a clear challenge and invitation to all to recognise the uniqueness of every individual person in their total context, and from that foundation to build

up a *relational* spirit and attitudes which will transcend the boundaries of race, culture, gender, political affiliation and anything else that can become divisive in relationships between people. In addition, to transform that which keeps the marginalised, rejected and alienated in society *and* Church from being able to choose life and experience life as a person made in God's image, and in this way hopefully bring about more authentic "communion".

We should therefore be in the forefront of a counter-witness, so that we and others move towards the goal of *non-dominant* relationships which encourage the fundamental rights and responsibilities of every person, and the richness of diversity through living, acting within *collaborative* models, and the commitment to live "caringly and responsibly" for all of life.

But the individual, family and community also exist and live within another relational context and that is *creation, the universe, the environment*. An important aspect of a more humane society is that of creating and sustaining a more humane *environment* so that all creation, not only thinking human beings, but all beings within the environment and universe, become included in a vision of care, mercy, and the sustaining of life. Again, this is an aspect of living the "mystery of communion".

This understanding is at the heart of the Social Teaching Principle of the "Integrity of Creation" and requires of us the ability to study, analyse, critique and engage with what *diminishes* the uniqueness of the universe and all its beings. The objective is to engage with and support, even work with those groups and NGOs etc. which struggle against so many odds to call humankind everywhere to protect and care for life, for *all* of life on the planet, so that there can indeed be a future for all of creation.

To conclude this section. Religious in history, and our own Congregations, have been found ministering in so many situations of unmet need, exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, and also in more recent times in action to prevent the destruction of our vulnerable environment. The outcasts and rejected of society and Church today, the ravaged environment in many places...could these be the 'Holy Ground' where religious could or should be found present and, if possible, *active* - motivated by our sense of the presence of God? Jesus' whole life and ministry was an "outreach", a reaching out to touch life and reality with healing, mercy, hope, new life and beginnings - so central to the themes which Pope Francis speaks about today.

Our call, therefore, is to provide a counter-witness of *inclusion*, of 'communion' with, of love-filled "being with", which can be one expression of the Vow of Celibacy.

The Vow of Poverty - the Vow of "Sharing", a Call to 'having just enough' in view of solidarity and empowerment of others

Let me begin with a question: What does our way of life as religious, and specifically our Vow of Poverty, say to a world where:

- Consumerism and individualism thrives;
- Resources are limited and abused;
- The gap between rich and poor grows;
- The life-style of the elites, and the plundering of earth's resources is not sustainable.

Right away, we must always affirm that poverty is *not* a value; it is an *evil*. The word poverty in the vow can cause difficulty, therefore. In the end, however it is named, much will depend on our witness and praxis of the vow.

My own efforts to revision the Vow of Poverty, have brought me to understand Poverty, firstly in terms of "spiritual poverty" (the attitudes and values encompassed in "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit).

But the witness involved in living this vow calls me to be *counter-cultural* - to witness against the awful social sin of excessive wealth and power for the few, and degrading poverty and powerlessness to change anything for the millions around us, and the consequences this has for the planet and people. And it is also a call to the ethic and lifestyle of having 'just enough' – a daily call to personal conversion. On the other hand to offer an *alternative*, that living and acting in this spirit is to commit to solidarity with, to sharing our "goods" i.e. our gifts, our giftedness as religious people, our skills, personal and community resources to enable both ourselves and others to live with a basic dignity and quality of life - in the hope that people will not just be forced to survive, but become active in changing their situation. We are called to live simply so that others may simply live, to live simply and to participate in enabling others to live with a better quality of life, and not just to survive.

And as an aid to our study and analysis, I try to see this vow as a call to live out the Social Teaching principles of “solidarity”, "the universal destiny of the earth's goods" (the "goods" of the earth are meant for *everyone*, and to be shared by everyone), and the “preferential option for the poor”, the “primacy of the poor”. Understanding the richness of these 3 CST principles, which also have a deep spiritual content, could provide inspiration to us, and empower us to live our vow with greater richness.

I understand this vow, therefore, in terms of trying to live with an attitude of *non-conformity*. Firstly, on the personal level, of not conforming to the spirit/drive of "acquiring" more and more...Then, secondly, of being willing and able to study and critique political and economic policies which affect people and their quality of life, of seeking alternatives in collaboration with others, of being present on the margins with those who are vulnerable, of going beyond where Church and Government structures may be at present.

Sometimes, as I strive to be “in communion” with others in this way, I experience my own personal poverty as a religious and as a bishop, and the poverty in the quality of relationships in the communities where I live and minister. Perhaps we are all in this place in some way at different times. Here I experience a poverty - indeed a powerlessness at times – which calls for great patience, and even surrender to and centering on the Lord within as I strive to make – and continually re-make – a response within which there is a potential for growth, for resolution, for

reconciliation, and sometimes even just for more gentler or more human communication – therefore living and sharing what is possible.

I believe we need to hold gently an awareness of our history and experiences of God's presence and action in our own personal stories and journey as faith communities - in other words of our humble GIFT in the Church and world as religious. Our stories are a testimony to God at work even in weakness, because religious have felt truly "driven" by the Spirit to the margins, to places and people and communities where few have dared to go. And so, our ongoing recommitment to living the values of this vow has the objective of bringing a message of hope, a word of promise, to the little ones of our society and Church, to those who are searching for a truly *human* experience of life.....and we, in faith, must not lose heart as we strive with others who hold the same ideals to make a difference where this is possible, even in small ways.

But....I realise more and more, and as I get older, that I cannot be this presence of hope if I get taken up entirely in *activism* – and the needs where I am are indeed overwhelming. I have known the feeling of drying up inside because the tasks are just too demanding on my spiritual resources above all. Contemplation, silent reflection, prayer, holistic living, and responding consciously in God's presence – I know in my heart that my responses and engagement must “breathe” with a contemplative spirit; it must be infused with the mystical, the God-dimension. And I need to take time out for this, which I don't do enough.....And this takes me to a reflection on the Vow of Obedience.

The Vow of Obedience - a Vow of discernment through listening to the many "voices" of God

We live in a world, and in societies:

- where power is abused;
- where there is a system of patriarchy in many places;
- where there is self-centredness and selfish individuality;
- where some people, the political and economic elites, have power over others in their millions.

I am trying to see that the heart of our vow of obedience as *discerned listening*, or discernment through and after *truly* listening, in order to respond in freedom to the call of God in the many voices of God "out there" in the actual context in which we serve. (I want to emphasise the interconnectedness, or the interfacing of the 3 vows; they should be seamless in the way we live them out in practice, and the witness which each vow calls for).

The witness of our Vow of Obedience can be viewed, again, from two perspectives. In terms of what we try to *witness against* as we live this vow, its counter-cultural perspective, my life should be a questioning of the prevailing spirit of self-seeking and self-promotion which does not listen to anyone or anything except the self as I climb the ladder of success....and this includes all forms of domination over others, including patriarchy. On the other hand, to offer an *alternative*: a vow

through which I am called to seek God's will for humankind, our world and the planet. It is a commitment to building God's vision that everything in this world should be *interdependent*. This will require a sacrificing of self so that I can indeed listen to the "other", and so that the "good of all" which is inclusive of the entire creation can be sustained.

This commitment to discerning what promotes the "good of all" could be understood, therefore, as an expression of the Catholic Social Teaching Principle of the "Common Good" through which, by our lives and the way we work with others invites them to understand the importance of living *interdependently* so that together we can work towards achieving the "common good" of people and creation, and all beings on this planet. And as a practical witness in our quest to promote the interdependence in view of the common good, the Social Teaching Principle of "subsidiarity" - that the higher level does not take over or inhibit what can be done at a lower level.

This affirms that everyone has gifts and skills which can be integrated into the quest for the common good by enabling or inviting everyone to really "listen" to each other..... and then to discover (another word for "discern") what can be done or shared at their level of skill and responsibility, thus enabling interdependence to take on real meaning in the context in which people relate to each other and creation. It is a call to *decentralized decision-making and practice* based on personal and collaborative listening to the many voices of God which need to be discerned in our daily experience and ministries among the people we serve, in view of developing the partnerships with the "lower level" so that they are enabled to make the difference themselves. Therefore, the principles of the "common good" and "subsidiarity" should inspire us to always respect the reality in which we live and minister, and the concrete possibilities people have in their lives and in their personal and community context to transform the "sites" of suffering and impoverishment.

I remember the times I have been with someone who is very sick or dying, as I have done in our Aids hospice in-patient unit near my house. Their weakness meant that I had to listen very, very intently – and be silent within - to be able to hear and more importantly to *feel* the few words they struggled to share with me. Maybe it is the same with God. Most of the time I sense that God needs a *deeper silence* in me because God *whispers* a message to me in all kinds of situations. God does not shout aloud most times, I think; the gentleness of the breeze moving the leaves is much more characteristic of our *non-violent* God for me. The description in Isaiah 42 of the one who is called by God is equally true of the God who calls me: "He/she does not break the crushed reed, or quench the wavering flame" – i.e. the human person.

"There is more to life than merely increasing its speed," said Gandhi. Yes, and I also need to discover the truth of what can be read in Ecclesiastes 4:6: "Better is one hand full of repose, than two hands full of achievements to chase after the wind".

And Thomas Merton once wrote: "There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence.....(and that is) activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.....The frenzy of our activism neutralises our work for

peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”

And so as I move towards closure.....*meaning, relevance, credibility* - these are key questions which are part of the struggle I experience in religious life today as we face complex challenges. There is nothing to be discouraged about in struggling with complex questions *per se*; it is the spirit and attitude with which I do so which will count in the end.

This draws me often to contemplate the beautiful story of Jeremiah sent by God to observe the potter at work (cf. Jeremiah 18). We remember how the fresh piece of wet clay did not turn out as the potter dreamed, so he pressed it together again and began to fashion - more perfectly this time - the image, the dream he had. And God’s powerful words: “Can I not do with you what the potter does?”

Conclusion

With the developments at Vatican II and afterwards, the theology of baptism and the promotion of the universal call to holiness and so forth, there had to be a re-visioning of the fundamental call and meaning of the religious life. Becoming and being a “concrete sign” of the search for the Absolute, for the God-dimension, in any particular socio-cultural context, invited to a focussed commitment to the building of God’s reign, the vows also could no longer be understood in terms of what could basically be described as a set of norms and ascetical practices in view of achieving a state of holiness or perfection. Rather, the *raison d’être* of the vows is to proclaim and bring about the Good News of the reign of God and this especially among the vulnerable, marginalised and poor of the world, and indeed the vulnerable and alienated in the Church. The vows exist in function of a living critique of the different forms of personal and social sin which diminish/destroy the person, the family, the community, the planet. And so, the goal in *living* the vows is to “live on/at the edge” in different ways, to become ever more authentically *a prophetic sign and presence* of God’s reign in the midst of Church and world.

I offer you the following reflection of Richard Rohr to sum up everything I have tried to share concerning the prophetic or liminal character of our vowed life in community, and our call to “live on/at the edge”:

"Those at the edge of any system and those excluded from any system, ironically and invariably hold the secret for the conversion and wholeness of that very group.....You see, therefore, why the church was meant to be that group that constantly went to the edges, to the “least of the brothers and sisters,” and even to the enemy.....*When any church defines itself by exclusion, it is always wrong.* It is avoiding its only vocation, which is to be the Christ.

Only as the People of God receive the stranger, the sinner, and the immigrant, those who don’t play our game our way, do we discover not only the hidden, feared, and hated parts of our own souls, but the fullness of Jesus himself. We need them for our own conversion.

The Church is always converted when the outcasts are re-invited back into the temple. You see this in Jesus' commonly sending marginalized people that he has healed, back into the village, back to their family, or back to the temple to "show themselves to the priests." It is not just for their re-inclusion and acceptance, but actually for the group itself to be renewed." (*Richard Rohr, Adapted from Radical Grace: Daily Meditations, p. 28, day 2*)

So.... "living on/at the edge".....a daily invitation to renewal for all of us, an Emmaus journey of renewal in contemplation with a mystical heart and spirit. I conclude with a reflection by Mark Nepo:

"My heart was beating like a heron awakened in the weeds, no room to move. Tangled and surprised by the noise of my mind, I fluttered without grace to the centre of the lake which humans call silence.

I guess, if you should ask, peace is no more than the underside of tired wings resting on the lake while the heart in its feathers pounds softer and softer."

My prayer for all of this evening is this..... that the heart in our wings and feathers will slowly pound softer and softer so that we can be at peace, silent in God's hands, as we wrestle with the meaning of religious life today and for the future.

Thank you

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