

THE ONE WHO LIVED IT, GIVES WITNESS

REFLECTIONS ABOUT A CHANGE OF IDENTITY

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Spiritual Exercises' Guide

When I received the invitation to contribute to the present number of the Review of Ignatian Spirituality, giving my reflections on the relationship between identity, community and mission, I thought immediately, 'Yes, for **us** life has changed...' I emphasize 'us', because I don't know to what extent many religious congregations of men, and specifically the Society of Jesus, are aware of what the change of identity which Vatican II required of us has meant for many women's congregations.

A little history

As readers will undoubtedly recall, The Second Vatican Council, in its Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, '*On the appropriate renewal of religious life*', after dedicating its first numbers to fundamental themes like the general principles of renewal, practical criteria for it, elements common to all forms of religious life, etc. (nn.1-6), and before embarking on a series of specific themes like the vows, prayer and community life (nn.12-20), devoted its central numbers to enumerating the forms of religious life, classified thus: *Purely*

Contemplative Institutes (n.7), *Institutes dedicated to apostolic life* (n.8) and *Secular Institutes* (n.11), as regards which it begins by explaining that they are not religious institutes, even though they profess the evangelical counsels. Bearing this in mind, we shall leave them aside in this reflection.

Many women's congregations which were established, so to speak, in the shadow of the Society of Jesus, wanted from the beginning to resemble it, as far as possible, in its style of apostolic life, given that we are consecrated women in the Church. But we could not do it, because in the times when we were founded it did not seem to be a form of life suitable for women, and the few who tried it had much to suffer to achieve it even if only in part. So a style of religious life called 'mixed' appeared and grew up. This imposed on women's congregations a form of enclosure which, without being total, required permanent residence in the convent and the strict prohibition on leaving it except in very, very extreme cases.

This meant that the apostolic activities of these congregations had to take place within the convent walls, with an even stricter area of enclosure reserved for the religious, and the obligation to pray the divine office in choir unless it was really impossible. With a stroke of the pen the Council suppressed this form of religious life, and we found ourselves obliged to re-situate ourselves: either contemplatives or apostolic. As, evidently, we were not the former, nor had we ever wanted to be, the choice was clear. What we had no idea of, at that time, was everything that this redefinition was to mean.

A mighty wind

Suddenly, everything changed. The Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* was promulgated on 28 October 1965, during the fourth session of the Council, even though the Council Fathers had already had the first schema in their hands two years earlier, a schema from which, inevitably, details were leaked which were not slow to be made more or less public. As I am writing from a particular congregation, the Society of the Sacred Heart, to which I have belonged for more than forty years, and which I think I know fairly well, I am going to centre my reflection on the way in which this congregation lived through the whole process. Without doubt, particular incidents and ways of doing things could be added from many other women's congregations, but essentially they are similar. Besides, in these pages I

intend, above all, to tell a story and not to elaborate, even though the narrative will be accompanied by reflection when necessary. Let us start.

In autumn 1963, in a letter addressed to all the religious of the Sacred Heart, the Superior General at that time, M. Sabine de Vallon, wrote:

The atmosphere of the Council is making hope discernible on the horizon; as yet we do not know very much about its work, but we have a sense that undoubtedly it will be under the sign of the cross. But the cross is good, and through it the Holy Spirit works in the Church and in the world, and will know how to renew the face of the earth.¹

In 1962, the Holy See had asked M. de Valon to organise the International Union of Superiors General for women, on the model established by the male Superiors General. That meant working out its statutes, starting it off and being its president. This office of president enabled her to be chosen as an auditor in the third session of the Council. From 26 September 1964, the day on which she entered the Council's aula for the first time, she had an opportunity to find out about the work of the Council without leaks or rumours.

In these same months of autumn 1964 the Society of the Sacred Heart was holding its 26th General Congregation, so named because those present at it as delegates were only those called at that time 'Vicars', superiors of what were later to be Provinces. It was to be the last assembly composed in that way. M. de Valon's first-hand knowledge of what was happening in the aula of the Council brought about the making of three decisions which were to have a substantial influence on the development of the Society afterwards. These were the abolition of grades of membership in the Institute, the abolition of enclosure, and the juridical change in first vows, which became temporary vows and not perpetual vows conditional on a new admission by the Congregation, as they had been previously. It is said that when the General Congregation came to consider enclosure, M. de Valon said simply 'The Council has just said that there is no enclosure for apostolic institutes. We have nothing to discuss, we have only to obey.'²

Driven by the wind

It is almost impossible to explain in a few lines the significance of this change of identity imposed upon us, the first exterior sign of which was

the abolition of enclosure. It had immediate effects on the apostolic mission and on community life. It escapes to no-one today that the abolition of

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enclosure was the essential requirement for the later insertions into working-class districts. In turn, these insertions demanded smaller communities, more open, more involved in the lives of men and women of the districts to which in many cases we moved house. In addition, it made it possible for young religious doing secular studies to attend their classes at the university and dedicate themselves completely to their academic

formation, without having to combine it with work in the schools. This abolition of enclosure also brought with it the giving up of the religious habit. In turn, the suppression of grades within the congregation meant a readjustment of community life, together with an indispensable discernment to make clear which of the former coadjutor sisters could receive an academic training, and what type of formation was suited to each one. This is not to mention the fact that we also had to learn to live the vows in another way. *There was only one way in which we did not change: we continued to give time, and prolonged time, to personal prayer, though this also was enriched by new forms of community prayer.*

Clearly, this whole process was not carried out all of a sudden. We had to work on new constitutions, because juridically we had to change identity. We had to hold an Extraordinary General Chapter to adapt ourselves to the new situation, and to try for a period *ad experimentum* a style of religious life which was different, especially in what concerned apostolic and community life. We had to clarify the Congregation's mission. We had to involve all the members in all this, which meant a new form of government..... We had to.....

In autumn 1967 a General Chapter with members elected from the rank and file was held for the first time. It was the required Extraordinary Chapter. This was followed by two other General Chapters, in 1970 and 1976, both held in autumn, before the one which, in 1982, was to approve the new Constitutions submitted for the approval of the Holy See, whose decree arrived only on 1st January 1987, thus putting an end to a prolonged *constitutive* period.

The three sides of a coin

I know that there are two. In this case the three overlap so much that change in one of them means change in the other two. For teaching purposes they have to be separated, but each one has to be read with spectacles whose lenses are the other two. Let us see.

Identity

Given that the Council had suppressed the 'mixed life', we had to choose. The first document of the 1967 Extraordinary General Chapter was entitled '*The Society of the Sacred Heart, apostolic Institute in the Church and the world today*'. Three years later the Chapter of 1970 called its principal document '*The Society of the Sacred Heart, apostolic community*'. Six years later the Chapter of 1976 dedicated its work and its documents to the theme of mission, but began by recalling the definition which the Congregation had given of itself in 1967. Finally, no.1 of the Constitutions of 1982 affirms: '*The Society of the Sacred Heart is an apostolic Institute of pontifical right*'. What did all that mean in practice?

Speaking of Institutes dedicated to apostolic life, the Council expressed itself thus:

In these Institutes, apostolic and charitable action is of the very nature of religious life (...). The entire religious life of the members should be imbued with an apostolic spirit and their apostolic activity with a religious spirit. In order, therefore, that the members may first answer their call to follow Christ and to serve Christ himself in his members, their apostolic activity must have its source in intimate union with him.
(PC8)

The time had come to be fully contemplative and fully apostolic, in a more conscious way. The time had come to seek in prayer, in a much more personal form, the motives for being and acting. It was not that we had not meant to do that previously, but until then we had kept to some external signs which allowed us to identify ourselves: a very organized life, a distinctive way of dressing, a

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house in which you could lose yourself (and isolate yourself, for better or for worse) very easily. In those post-conciliar years we often turned to the words of the letter to Diognetus:

Christians are not distinguished from other men by their country or by their language or by their dress. For they do not live in their own cities, or use a different language, or live in an extraordinary way... But, although they live in the cities of Greeks and barbarians, according to the lot of each one of them, and follow the local customs in eating and drinking and other occupations of life, the nature of their citizenship is amazing, which they manifest publicly and which conceals from sight what can be expected of them. They live in their own countries, but only as those passing through; they carry out all the duties of citizens, and suffer all the penalties as strangers. Every foreign country is a native land for them, and each native land is a foreign country...

During those years, someone formulated in more or less these words the process which she was living through: thinking about identity in this, I came to the conclusion that I find my identity in prayer. Not that other Christians do not pray but because in prayer, in silent communion with the Lord, in contemplating his life, I find the reasons for my being and acting...

To put it in another way: in prayer we discern, in prayer we stop and look at the Lord Jesus, in prayer we become clear about what we are living through; from prayer we get strength to carry on, and to make sure that no other love may push into our life and change its direction, as happened so many times. In prayer we lived what we were, and we threw ourselves into a life that was very different in its structures, to turn back afterwards to prayer, with everything that we had experienced.

Because of that, fruit of the experience of many religious of the Sacred Heart, the 1982 Constitutions could affirm what follows:

In prayer we approach Him with everything that makes up our life, with the sufferings and hopes of humanity. We learn to be before the Lord in silence and poverty of heart, to adore and to rest in Him, and in love and gratitude.³

It is another way of expressing the heart of our identity: union and conformity with the feelings and attitudes of the Heart of Jesus.

And today? How is the process of identification handed on to the new generations? All the documents about the different stages of initial formation insist on the part played in our lives by prayer, and I know that novice-directors and formators during probation give all their enthusiasm

and much of their time to 'teaching how to pray' and to the accompaniment of prayer. Much has to be seen in this of the importance that has always been given in the congregation to the month of the full Spiritual Exercises, which is obligatory before final vows, and which is being introduced in many novitiates in its different ways, even though what is prescribed is eight days. In this experience of the Exercises, as is well known, what each person is looking for is 'what God gives her for making a choice'. Here each young person, and each one of us all through our lives, each year, finds the quest for God constantly renewed, the recovery or the reinforcing of that first call which made us identify ourselves with a charism and a way of life.

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Community

Perhaps from the 'inside' point of view this is the most striking aspect of what was meant by the change of identity of which we have been speaking. Once again we must refer to the way in which the General Chapters of what I have called the *constitutive period* speak on this subject.

Thus, in 1967 a document was devoted to community life, entitled, 'A fraternal community built on Christ to serve the world'. This asks for the community,

to be...the living and always up-to-date expression of a communion of persons, not a juxtaposition of individuals; of the 'one heart and one soul in the Heart of Jesus'; of a genuine and mature friendship among the members; of a spirit of service towards men and women. A renewal of community life begins with an interior reality, a reality of grace which has its origin in the Eucharistic celebration, and must be expressed in a renewal of structures (...) but the community atmosphere is more important than the structures....⁵

Likewise, as we recalled above, in 1970 the congregation defined itself as '*apostolic community*'. The Chapter expressed the will of God for

us, at that moment, in five very serious options, two of which have to do explicitly with community:

*International community, one and necessarily pluriform: we want to live this new awareness of our communion and to accept the practical consequences of coresponsibility and to share at international level for greater service.... We commit ourselves to the renewal of fraternal community, essential condition for the future of our religious life and for an authentic response to the call of the Church and the world. Each community will create its own lifestyle, evaluated in faith and in the light of the gospel.*⁶

Possibly this is the richest and at the same time most difficult point in our life at the present time. The 1982 Constitutions affirm:

Gathered in community in Jesus Christ's name, we are sent to proclaim in our life and work the good news of the kingdom. We receive from his Heart the love to live in communion among ourselves and with others.... (no.30)

We want to be discerning communities which live in attentiveness to the Spirit, docile to Him. ... (no.32)

Our life in community is a celebration of the Paschal Mystery.... (no.33)

What does this mean in practice? First of all, and in what is most external, there are more communities, with fewer members. In what we now call 'large houses', buildings which used to accommodate a school and a large community, the living quarters for the sisters have been moved to a space which does not interfere with the life of the school, and the communities, usually numerous, have organised themselves into smaller groups to facilitate relationships, especially at meetings and for the different forms of community prayer. Already in the late 1960s, and especially all through the 1970s, we moved many communities into working-class, even marginalised districts, and learned to live together with neighbours in the flats, to do the household chores, to take part in parish life and neighbourhood associations, to be interrupted by a neighbour coming to have a chat, drink a coffee, ask help in many different ways... Community relations are more complex: sometimes they have become more fraternal, at other times not very much so. There are fewer meetings, because of the demands of mission, and community prayer has turned into a privileged space for expression of faith. The smaller number of people in the communities has made it possible, in general, to share more deeply, more

freely, and often to be involved in necessary discernment, both for the community itself and sometimes on some more personal aspect concerning the members of the community.

The more or less younger persons who come to join us find this style of community life which is simpler, friendlier, makes different demands, and calls for totally generous commitment to the path of fraternal communion.

Mission

I have already mentioned earlier the enormous consequences that the abolition of enclosure has had on apostolic mission. The communities have become aware that they are *apostolic*, and in the midst of the diversity of work we all feel involved in the *common mission*. This mission consists in communicating the love of the Heart of Jesus⁷ in each and every one of the tasks that we carry out.

As the Constitutions remind us, our foundress, St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, carried this mission forward through education. But for the religious of the Sacred Heart, to educate was never synonymous with giving lessons. Education is much more: it is the Latin *educere*, helping each person to draw out the best of themselves from what is within them. Many religious never taught in class, or did it only for brief periods; but still they were educators, because that is our way of being apostolic. At the present time we carry out this task in different fields, which we might sum up as activities of development and formation, of human development and promotion of justice, pastoral work and accompaniment in faith.

But *what does it mean for us to educate today?* Quoting the Constitutions, we would say that it is doing what lies in our hands to ensure that, each person may be open to truth, love and freedom; that they may discover the meaning of their lives and be committed to others; that they may collaborate creatively in the transformation of the world; that they may live the experience of the love of Jesus; that they may be committed to active faith. (Const. no.11)

Bearing this in mind, in the last twenty years the Society of the Sacred Heart has incorporated young women from other fields of work, not related to teaching, especially doctors and social workers, who have not been asked to give up their professions. Certainly they have been given a serious theological formation, in many cases encouraged to take degrees, because

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today we cannot conceive that it might be possible to be a religious of the Sacred Heart without a solid foundation for faith. The years are long past when we entered the congregation as soon as we left school, and our normal destiny was to be trained to go back to the same schools. In recent years there have been religious of the Sacred Heart as educators of families, teachers of theology, hospital chaplains, nurses and doctors, directors of the Spiritual Exercises, teachers in the rural areas and in State schools, lecturers in Catholic and secular universities, all this in different countries of the five continents. The world has opened up for us, and keeps opening us up, each time that we live with a sister from another country, with another language and another culture ; each time that one of us goes to give a service to one of the 43 countries in which the congregation is established. This is another way of being educators: to be so in a congregation which is strongly international.

Drawing everything together

Identity-community-mission are for us the inseparable parts of a triptych which challenges us every day to seek the love of God today – here and now. It demands of us an up-to-date formation, wholehearted prayer, exposure to the pain of the world and of so many of our brothers and sisters who are suffering injustice. We are given the accompaniment of sisterly community, and the help of some of us who are asked to serve in government. Our identity as religious of the Sacred Heart, union and conformity with the Heart of Jesus, is inseparable from our apostolic mission lived in community: to help the world to know the immense love of this Heart.

What has been done, and what is still to be done

As I said at the beginning of this account, this process took place in all the congregations of women which belonged to the 'mixed life' before Vatican II. We are many, a not inconsiderable number inspired by Ignatian spirituality. During these years we have told each other our stories, we have helped one another, and on occasions involved ourselves in inter-congregational projects, though maybe more through necessity than conviction. Through this knowledge of one another, and above all because the Church obliged us to do it, so that we could redefine ourselves, we have come to a deeper knowledge of the life and charism of our respective founders, and from this new knowledge biographies have been written that are less hagiographical. Rather, we have looked for the theological and scriptural bases of our respective charisms.

Still, it seems to me that one task remains to be done. Behind each founder, female or male, there was a series of other women, some contemporaries, others who came later, whom we have left in oblivion during these years. The founding charism belongs to the founder, who received it from the Holy Spirit, but each person who shares the charism brings something to it. It is the responsibility of all of us to preserve and develop it. But there were some who, so to speak, 'touched it more closely': the first companions, the successors in responsibility, and those sisters who, because of their way of living it, and often of proclaiming it, have been especially significant. Hasn't the moment come to draw closer to them, to gain a deeper knowledge of their lives and writings and to let ourselves be set alight by their fire?

In conclusion

I have given these pages a title which may seem pretentious, parodying St. John's gospel: *The one who lived it, gives witness*. At the basis of these reflections there is not merely a theoretical study and the reading of some documents. Above all, there is a lived experience. The writer of these pages entered the congregation three months before the

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Second Vatican Council started. The changes, of which I speak, the difficulties which we have lived and are still living through, the challenges posed to us, are, above all, lived experience: what has been built for us over the years.

¹ Circular Letters, p. 139-140. Quoted in M. LUIRARD, Sabine de Valon (1899-1990), *Décima Superiora General de la Sociedad del Sagrado Corazón*, Sociedad del Sagrado Corazón, Roma, 1999, p.154

² Ibid.p.161

³ Constitutions of the Society of the Sacred Heart, no. 20

⁴ Motto of the Society of the Sacred Heart.

⁵ Extraordinary General Chapter, 1967, photocopied edition.

⁶ General Chapter 1970, p.12, 16

⁷ 1982 Constitutions, no.10