

Spirituality in a Time of Restructuring

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0. Introduction

We are used to saying that the Church is both an institution and a charism. And we like to think that, in religious life, we have the better part, the most inspirational, the closest to the creativity and liberty of the Spirit, while the concept of institution corresponds to the hierarchy, which is more rigid and structured. However, the very language of restructuring confronts us with the reality that we too are institution. Are we in danger of losing our focus on charism because we have to attend to laws and structures?

Be what it may, the use of that language doesn't sound very familiar nor very "gospel". It is hard for us to relate it to our spirituality and mission.

But when we talk about restructuring, we should be talking about spiritual renovation and commitment to our mission, because restructuring shouldn't be a reordering of things simply to help us move into the changes of context and to address our declining numbers. It shouldn't be something to save us in time of shipwreck. It should be a movement of spiritual renovation oriented to the mission. Its motivation should not be fear of falling into a catastrophe, but rather in a renewed enthusiasm for the following of Jesus.

Therefore, restructuring should be an occasion to take advantage of the opportunity to renew ourselves spiritually and to rekindle the fire of our vocation that in turn is capable of rekindling other fires. It should be regarded as "good news" for consecrated life (1). The question that we should ask ourselves is: "What government structures would help us today to revitalize our lives and our mission?"(2)

1. Availability

I have a friend who, when he wants to consult about something, he starts by asking: What reaction does your body feel if...? And it's true. The body prepares for the work that is to come. It gets tense, it relaxes, it's on alert, it has goose flesh, it trembles, it perspires, or it shivers.

Our spirit, also, has to be available to the task at hand. St. Ignatius, in his spiritual exercises, gives a lot of importance in the preparation for prayer to make sure that the body and spirit are ready to pray. He is very careful, as well, to the beginning steps of the prayer and that we are conscious of where we're going and why.

And that's not all; he begins the Exercises with the Principles and Foundation that are oriented to create in us an attitude of indifference, that is, to prepare ourselves to accept the will of God,

without ourselves having a will and desire of our own that could interfere or obscure the voice of the Lord who calls us.

What we call restructuring is a change that touches upon our world that is closest to us and also our deeper roots. It changes the way we look at things apostolically, the relationships of obedience, the relationships that are possible in community which includes new members, our pastoral and communal habits, new cultures also come into play; it also changes the possibilities of opening up to new countries. Therefore, it touches on themes that for us are very sensitive: communal life, mission, culture.

A change of that size can be received with resignation, which supposes little or no effort to cooperate with the objective, y probable internal resistances, that exempt us from interiorly assuming the change, sometimes even externally, which makes its execution openly difficult.

That's why it is important that all the persons and communities implicated in the restructuring feel that they are part of it as subjects of change. And for that, it is important that there be availability.

It's a good idea that there be a process of reflection that will permit everyone to understand what the group is looking for, to contribute, to assimilate the new proposal, and work for possible consensus. But the road to rationality doesn't always end in agreement. It is because there are things that are never so clear that everybody can see them in the same way; because our visions are conditioned by our histories and points of view; and above all, because our reasoning functions are very much related to our affections.

There is a need to work with our emotional world. And the disordered expressions of love will only be overcome by a much greater love that can order the goal of our life. It is only by putting the process on a level of this greater love that we will be able to make our spirit available with joy and even enthusiasm. It is situating the process as a search for the will of God and making our heart available to what God wants, although we may not see it, even when this is difficult.

It is necessary to separate the will of God from my desires. For that reason, we must begin this passionate search for the will of God. It has many venues, that are not always our desires or that correspond to our rationality.

It is important to start with our efforts to center our eyes on God and renew our openness to accept what He wants, even if it is contrary to our own desires and interests. And it is equally important that in all the processes we be attuned to purifying the way we perceive communally and centering our intention on God. It is our hope that this rational process of analysis and deliberation of the facts and reasons always be prayed through the prism of openness. It is important to keep before us Jesus' attitude in the garden of Gethsemane, and of the Annunciation to Mary; "May it be done to me according to your will". God is the center. That's why all restructuring should begin with communal openness to this action of God.

2. The function of the structures for mission.

In order to assure that a spiritual renovation takes place during the restructuring process, a second element needs to be taken into account: to think of the structures in their function for mission.

All restructuring has an objective that is different from restructuring in itself. We reorganize ourselves in order to obtain an objective. It could be to make money, or to improve the image of our institution, or to attain greater professional performance. In the case of religious life, it is for the mission; a mission that is not ours, not individual; it isn't even congregational. It is the mission of Christ—to build the Reign of God.

But we cannot confuse the mission with the task. Our task could be to teach mathematics or to care for terminal patients. The mission of the institution to which we belong could be to educate children or cure the sick. But our mission as religious is to be witnesses and builders of the Reign of God according to the charism of each Congregation. All the work of restructuring should be to organize ourselves to be more effective in this mission. And here we say effective not efficient. Efficient is the one who obtains better results with the less inversion of time and resources. Effective is the one who reaches their objectives more fully. What we are interested in is to be effective in the testimony of and building the Reign of God.

To arrive at this, it is an absolute must that we be attuned to the signs of the times. These will indicate to us where the question for the Reign of God is, where the new signs of Reign of God are budding forth, what is the language in which to communicate the testimony of Reign of God to the recipients of the message.

We need to put our ear to the earth and the seedlings of growth that is about to emerge in all their splendor, to the cocoon that begins to break open so that the butterfly can be liberated. Precisely, this is seeing from the height of the giraffe (1). The giraffe, because of its long neck can see beyond and open itself to the horizon. But in order to pump blood up to the head so high, it needs a big heart. Our vision must be like that: that is, take in the expansive horizon of our whole wide world with a long distance vision, strategically; but at the same time, it has to be connected to a big heart, where everybody fits in, where there will be room for unlimited generosity.

We need to have a vision that doesn't lose heart neither in the small world of my fears and personal necessities, nor in thinking that my work contains all of the Reign of God in itself, nor in limiting myself to my surroundings, my culture, my country, my Congregation. We need to be open to the world, to the Church, capable of empathizing with the sufferings and hopes of our world as if they were our own, especially the sufferings of the poor of this earth. Our vision should be with a heart anxious to understand, willing to receive and love all peoples, one that doesn't build walls to impede their entrance; a vision that doesn't scrutinize in order to judge, but rather to save.

The contemplation of our world will first to speak to us about globalization. Distances are shortened and through internet we have opportunities to expand our information, even to the point of saturation; it also gives us the ability to attain knowledge more for its connections than as a simple accumulation of data. That is why our world functions through web connections that not only structure our behavior and the way we relate to each other, but also invade our privacy. These are connections that are omnipresent but extremely fragile. These connections are made

and broken easily, strengthening something that is provisional, temporary, without roots or commitment. It is a world that changes with the click of the mouse. It opens us up to a plurality, to interculturality, to a dialog with the other, but at the same time, it invites us to a superficiality of one who tastes everything but doesn't deepen anything; a world where nothing lasts. It is the culture of the supermarket, with unlimited offers and a throw-away culture; it includes this includes things religious, where there are a multitude of offers, attractive and cheap so as to calm the anxieties of transcendence without the cost of commitment. This is where strong sensations substitute for depth and an embrace doesn't go beyond the epidermis.

This is a plural world that teaches us openness to others and their cultures, where we have to assume multiple identities and relate to others with diversity in such a way that our own identity becomes fragmented and obscure to the point that we don't know who we are. It is a world that searches for integration, a deeper identity and stable affections that go beyond sensations and experiences that are strong, but fleeting.

It is a world that, together with the expanse of opportunities open to us, fragments and divides us, not only interiorly but also in a dynamic that builds walls and barriers: to exclude the participation of an emergent culture within a country, to prohibit the entrance of immigrants, to exclude the poor, the indigenous ("original") peoples, all those who are different and all oblige us to move out of our comfort zone, to take them into account and to include them in our plans.

This world poses new questions and demands answers in another language. We need a spirituality that is sensitive to these new attitudes that understand its concerns and speak its language. We need to change personally, communally and institutionally in order to respond to the new challenges of the new evangelization in a new way to be able to live the experience of our unique God. The process of restructuring should help us to do this so as to translate the fundamental charism into new cultural languages.

In this world "our government structures and the way we function should be conceived by beginning with a greater universality"¹.

And amid this jungle of technologies and interests that, at the moment feel like the tower of Babel where it is impossible to either overcome the conflicts or to understand each other, we need to discern God's passage through our history and listen to God's calling. Personally and as a community we need to put ourselves into a mode of discernment so as to discover the God who is present and who challenges us within this reality.

Our spirituality should be one of searching, of constant personal and communal discernment, of listening to the Word that deciphers the signs of the times. Our prayer should be that of eyes open to the reality, learning to read in it where God is calling us. We must assume the risks that come with change, the adventure of beginning the new, to enter into the unknown roads of new structures. We need the courage to face this risk².

¹ Carta de Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., sobre Las Estructuras Provinciales al Servicio de la Misión.

² Cfr. Luis González Díez, La Reestructuración es Cuestión de Comunidad, Vida Nueva, Con Él, En.2012.

And this demands a deeper communal life, where we are connected not only to make us feel more secure, but to share our deeper selves, to search for Dios who calls us personally and collectively to construct his Reign in this world, to change our structures in a way that will help our mission and will keep us in constant discernment.

3. Structures as an expression of the Charism

We are called to live the mission according to the charism of our Congregation. The presence of charism in the Church gives testimony to a Spirit of liberty that creates diversity, and is a reflection of the plenitude of God. None of us can assume that we have the whole truth, nor the best option. Different from the concept of institution that tends to affirm itself as unique and absolute, religious life lives in the humility of diversity and is called to construct unity based on its plurality. The temptation to absolutism must be put aside because the identity of this restructuring consists in the variety of forms in which the Spirit manifests itself, and doesn't allow anyone to believe it is the only one or the better one.

That is why, while we are restructuring for the mission, it is very important to look at the wealth of our own charism. This is where we will find the inspiration to respond to the challenges that present themselves. Felicísimo Martínez, O.P., talks about the importance of revitalizing the charism and the spirituality in order to revitalize the mission. He says: "The fundamental challenge for religious life today is to reclaim its charismatic dimension and to offer prophetic testimony in the society and in the Church (transcendent testimony, radical following of Christ, contemplative experience, mission that evangelizes)³. After all is said and done, structures should give body to the charism.

We need to return to the fountains of our spirituality to reclaim its fundamental intuition and to incorporate it in order to enlighten the new challenges that the world presents to us, and to express it in today's language. "It's all about allowing the vitality of the charism to emerge in order to respond to the challenges and need of our times"⁴.

We can't enter into restructuring at the last minute before abandoning ship into the raging sea. Restructuring is not the desperate movement in a death throe so as not to surrender. For the Christian, there is no final agony end because death is not the horizon of life; it is the resurrection. We know that all life has its own unique value and that it extends far beyond death. We know, as Antonio Machado said, "everything passes" and everything dies, but he also said "everything remains", not only as a memory, but also in the life that does not die, and finds its value in that which was lived, without the necessity of perpetuating itself eternally.

We have to learn to enjoy the joys of having lived as a sign that announces and creates the Reign of God, like the seed of a new and different life. Therefore, we shouldn't worry about whether we will have a long or short life; rather, we should ask ourselves if we are truly a testimony of the Reign of God and the beginning of new Life. The restructuring process is always aimed at the

³ Charla al Capítulo General de los Pasionistas 2 octubre 2006.

⁴ Carta de Miguel Miró, Presidente de la Comisión de Revitalización y Reestructuración de la Orden de Agustinos Recoletos.

growth of the original charism, which was born of the Spirit. To live fearing death is always the beginning of death. We must live life to its fullness in this life that we have received. For that reason, we take on the challenge of restructuring. It is not a fear of failure, but rather it is the conviction that we have found the hidden treasure.

Precisely, that's the reason that restructuring has to help us give new value to our charism and live it with renewed intensity.

4. The essence of religious life as a sign of the Kingdom

This brings us face to face with restructuring as the occasion where we will be able to reinvent religious life for our times and to recuperate its prophetic character to denounce and to announce.

Jesus left us two parables that can help us to understand the significance of this moment. He told us that we had to be like the salt of the earth. The importance of salt is not that one uses a whole lot because too much salt will ruin the food. It only needs a little; enough to give flavor to the food but not to make it taste like salt. Its function is to heighten the flavor of the food; so the salt is there without being noticed and the food takes on the flavor that God gave it in the creation. In that same way, religious life is to heighten in life and history the flavor of the Reign of God which is already there. It is not so that it has the flavor of vows, rosaries or psalms, but rather that it has the flavor of a new humanity, where justice and fraternity can grow and where we might be wellsprings and signs of the Kingdom.

And when Jesus tells us we are light, he reminds us that our function is to illuminate our world; we ourselves are not the Reign of God. It is not necessary for us to dazzle the world, but that we help to illuminate the way to Jesus.

We reorganize ourselves in order to make the meaning of our life more transparent; to be communities that reflect the love that is shared in the dynamics of the mission. Our obedience doesn't subordinate human liberties to the whim of a Superior, but rather, it is to find the will of God and live it with enthusiasm.

In the reality of a world saturated with information but not communication, where not even new technologies are able to diminish conflict and violence, where everything is fragmented—society, family and even our own identity—we want to be true communities.

In a world where the thirst to consume has run wild even to the point of destroying nature and creating a throw-away culture, where humanity's most fragile are excluded, a return to the real sense of evangelical poverty begins to make sense. For that reason, the simple gestures of Pope Francis to live simply (change in his living quarters, his use of cars and refusal to use rich vestments and red shoes) have had such an impact. In the same way, religious who live in poverty among the poor also impact the world.

We enter into the process of restructuring our lives so as to make Jesus come alive as the center of our life and thus we give meaning to existence. In a world that only looks for experiences in the religious supermarket, we should announce with our life, our life style and our contemplation, the

joys of the experience of the Risen Lord. "We restructure our lives not because we are less important or older, but because we want to be better and to serve more"⁵.

We have to find new ways to make our joy, our hope, our love, our confidence in the Lord come alive. We have to overcome the opaquenesses that conceal this experience that at times are hidden even to ourselves.

Pope Francis has insisted that we are all sinners. This means that we all need to put ourselves on the road to conversion. This is a constant process which has no end. Religious life as a sign doesn't have to pretend sanctity: it has to make the following of Jesus clear, humbly recognizing that sometimes things get out of hand to the point that it looks like we are lost. However, we don't give up the search. Restructuring needs to be part of this search.

5. The Ecclesiology of Vatican II

Vatican II restored the image of the Church as the People of God in movement through history--priests, prophets and kings, as the prayer of the anointing in baptism tells us. This image balances out the hierarchical emphasis that the Church had developed when faced with the shock of modern democracy and anticlericalism. The laity regained its ownership in the Church and within the last fifty years this way of understanding the Church has advanced albeit with difficulty. However, it is evident that this idea of the People of God gives us a different perspective. It is walking with others more than walking in front of them; a hierarchy that is closer to the people and a laity that is more involved in leadership.

Religious life is also part of this concept of People of God and Pope Francis has highlighted his role of walking with others. Undoubtedly, by constituting the Year of Religious Life in 2015 he wanted to return to religious life in the Church its identity as both charism and institution.

With the image of Church as People of God we can feel totally we are Church with others who walk with us in the following of Christ; above all, those who walk with the poor, as Pope Francis reminds us, those who have the odor of sheep. The kind of Church that is sensitive to the "anguish and hopes" of the people, who has opted for the poor, as the Latin American Church has reaffirmed in all of its Conferences and, in the following of Jesus, it walks with them with the same closeness that He has taught us.

In this way, the Church becomes a sacrament of the Reign of God, a space where communion and participation are possible, as it was defined by our Bishops in Puebla*.

It is a Church that wants to walk with others, and because of that, it doesn't stay in the churches but goes out to meet the other in the plazas as disciples and missionaries; it was defined as such by the Bishops in Aparecida *. (*Important Latin American church documents)
Perhaps our diminishing numbers have made us stop and question our arrogance, that arrogance that began to believe that we could stand alone. We come to humbly accept that it is God's work, and that we are only collaborators with others. We learn to work with them as companions, sharing tasks and leadership. We are invited to structure our lives for the tasks in new ways that

⁵ Caminar con esperanza, Documento de la Orden de Agustinos Recoletos.

are more horizontal, using more technology-internet, because we humbly recognize that the task is not ours but God's; that it is God who guides his people along the complicated paths of history.

6. The tensions that need to be resolved (or lived)

After all of these considerations, we can return to the hard reality that says: all that is beautiful, but we have to restructure in some way in order to respond to the mission, and restructuring is an organizational process that has its own techniques.

That is true; the process of restructuring should take advantage of the accumulated knowledge about this process. But, we can't forget that it was given in order to accomplish a mission, and that it too, must express spirituality, a way of living the faith which is the same as saying, living life.

The Augustinians, reflecting on their own process, said: "true revitalization takes us to changes of structures and restructuring doesn't help us very much without personal and communal renovation"⁹. We have to live the process of the renovation of structures with these tensions.

"Perhaps, we have to reduce our works and lighten the burden of the properties or the infrastructure that sustains it"¹⁰; that could be a help in lessening some of the burden and allow us to live our vow of poverty more authentically. It would oblige us to opt for the essential. It would test our commitment to the option for the poor in the hour of making difficult decisions where we have to close missions. It would reveal to us our priorities, those where we have put our hearts.

We need to look for ways of deepening our living of the charism with fewer religious personnel; and this obliges us to give more importance to the formation of lay collaborators. This will demand that we hone the evangelical testimony of our lives.

"Restructuring also demands that we lighten the bureaucratic apparatus and update the organization of our works and institutions... (giving us) an organization less provincial and regional, more global, international, intercultural... that lightens the bureaucracy"¹¹. This requires the incorporation of new organizational forms, based on new technology, such as internet, and new virtual forms of communication and participation. To adopt them, we need to think about them in terms of the mission. It is not a matter of substituting old for new organizational and administrative forms. It is a matter of using tools and methods in as much as they serve us and that are adapted to the mission we have and not the contrary.

The greatest universal vision which makes sense in a globalized world cannot be achieved at the cost of the little ones, of local identities and cultures, nor of the riches of diversity. The process of globalization should always integrate plurality without expecting uniformity. This tension between the universal and the particular has to be seen not as a problem, but rather as an advantage.

There is another tension that is eternal, but that today is lived with more intensity; It is the tension between quantity and quality. ¿Do we slacken the vocational demands in order to have more candidates? ¿Do we slacken the demands on religious life to keep the few who come to us? Here, we have to return to the parable of the salt. ¿What good is it to us if it loses its flavor? The

important thing is not to fill the pot with salt, but to put in a little bit, just enough to bring out the flavor of the food we are cooking.

And the same is true of our apostolate. ¿Is it more important that we maintain many works and high numbers, or that the fire that we share really illuminates and warms the lives of the persons and communities that we touch?

The decreasing numbers will eventually force us to accept that we are not God, nor do we need to be everywhere; we need to allow God to be God and we need to situate ourselves closer to the poor.

A society expresses its idolatry of consumerism and shows a lack of solidarity and fraternity when it privatizes all good and charitable acts. For those who think austerity is a bad word and are bent on destruction, it not only privatizes but also scorns what is public (parks, hospitals, schools, sidewalks, beaches, churches, politics, and the environment). In this kind of society, it is a prophetic sign to assume the defense of what is public, to commit oneself to the quality of public education and health, to stand for just social politics, to work to create public open spaces that are secure, clean and beautiful, to care of the environment. These are the free and open spaces that are accessible to the poor. To live with, to work, and to share dreams and struggles with the people could be a form of getting closer to the people and to renew our service.

The testimony of affirming ourselves as brothers and sisters is the best way to affirm a person. Each person is always in relationship and his or her identity is not defined by the rejection of another or by being different, but rather it is defined by the way he or she relates with others.. The creation of a welcoming society for the immigrant and the poor, one capable of building unity where there is diversity is a sign of the Reign of God. Our works, the spaces we create should reflect the kind of hospitality proper to Christian fraternity.

When we change our way of looking at the laity as subordinate and see them as collaborators, together in the mission that Christ has entrusted to us, this will also be a testimony of that kind of fraternity that is integral to the Reign of God proposed by Jesus.

All of these tensions imply that the choice of methodology that we use in the process is very important. It should not be imposed from above in the name of obedience, but rather should be a process in which as many as possible participate.

Consensus should be reached or at least an ample majority. It should not be the result of a vote which can have the bitter flavor of winners and losers. The search to find the will of God through discernment should be done in such a way that we all feel winners with the process.

There should be special attention paid to the young because of their sensibility to the challenges of the present and because they will be the ones to carry forth the task into the future.

The process should not be done with precipitation, nor exert pressure to reach results rapidly. At the same time, the process should not be allowed to bog down. Sometimes, those who oppose the majority opinion try to detain the process because they can see that it is not going where they want to go. This is a way in which minorities can win.

7. Conclusion

These reflections let us discover some criteria for restructuring:

1. We shouldn't separate restructuring from revitalization. It is not only an administrative reorganization. It is about a personal and collective process of spiritual renovation. We look for "government structures that need to speed up, modernize and make as flexible as possible...able to animate life and mission"⁶
2. The process of restructuring has previous work to do: to achieve an attitude of openness, of indifference, in the Ignatian sense and that we enter without preconceived attitudes, but rather are open to the action of God.
3. The motivation of restructuring should be the mission and not ourselves, our comfort or our survival. This perspective takes us toward a more strategic, universal and intercultural vision (not centered in my province, my country, my work, my culture). It helps us to take on a sense of solidarity, at the side of the poor, or the weakest (persons or communities). It gives us an ecclesial sensitivity, and puts us at the service of the Church and its needs.
4. The final creation should, based on gospel values and our own charism, adjust the government and the ways of consecrated life to the needs of the world today, looking for greater efficiency and effectiveness, using the resources that the modern world offers us.
5. Restructuring should consider the actualization of the charism as a contribution to the Church and to the world.
6. It is important to take into account that our life, our community are part of our mission. Consecrated life is testimony for its style: vows, community life. As we restructure we needn't think of apostolic action as the totality of the mission.
7. Restructuring, in an ecclesial sense, takes into account lay men and women who collaborate in the mission and is concerned about their formation and participation.
8. It is important to take into account the method which should include participation and discernment with special attention to the younger members, and including the poor as a theological criterion.

And above all, we have to let ourselves be guided by God, contributing all our knowledge and enthusiasm, all the hope and fraternity of which we are capable.

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⁶ Carta de Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., sobre Las Estructuras Provinciales al Servicio de la Misión