

## Living the Present with Passion

..... invited me to reflect with you on the challenge issued by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter to Religious opening the Year of Consecrated Life (21 November 2014): of “looking to our past with gratitude; embracing our future with hope; and living the present with passion” in our challenging context of apparent personal and institutional diminishment, decline, and perhaps imminent demise. And in particular to articulate my reflections in the context of the pericope in the Gospel of John ch. 20, the encounter of Mary Magdalene with the Risen Jesus in the Garden of the Tomb where Mary went in the darkness of the first Easter morning to weep in hopeless desolation over the death of Jesus, only to encounter the Risen One and become the first apostle of the Resurrection.

It does not take any major imaginative effort to see the relevance of the Mary Magdalene episode to our present situation as women Religious. The passage, in John 20, is very familiar to us so I won't take time read it here. But it begins with Mary coming, on the first Easter morning, to the place of Jesus' burial, blinded with grief at the tragic end of all she and His other disciples had come to hope in and for. The One who had turned her life around, indeed resurrected it from the grave of hopelessness the Synoptic Gospels suggest, when he was at the height of his own remarkable career, is now swallowed up in his death.

Like Mary faced with the erasure of Jesus from her life through his shameful Crucifixion, we are faced with what seems the imminent end of the flourishing Religious Life we entered, most of us, only a few decades ago. The huge entrance classes, ever expanding ministerial projects and institutions, seemingly limitless scope of needs stretching before us, and our increasing influence in Church and world did not prepare us for today's reality of ever fewer, if any, candidates, the closing or surrendering of our institutions to others, harassment and even persecution by Church authorities who accuse us of error at best and infidelity at worst. In this context It certainly is no challenge for us to be grateful for the remarkable past of our life, the history of the life we entered and its contribution to our own personal growth and development and the flourishing of the Church, here and elsewhere. But given the diminished present and dim future that seems to be rapidly becoming our present it is becoming more and more difficult to look to the future with paschal hope, the hope that would engender continuing passion in the present. The purpose of my remarks today is to stir the embers of that passion. Only if we can truly live the present with passion can we realistically live into a future full of hope.

In a sense, it should not be difficult, really, for us to see ourselves and our current historical situation as Religious in the Jesus story, especially that of the passion and its aftermath. Jesus, from the human perspective, although he started his mission riding the crest of a wave of popularity and appreciation, was not a success by any human standards. His best efforts ended in his execution as a common criminal, the dispersal of his weak-kneed disciples, and the collapse

of his life project. Out of that wreckage God raised Jesus in glory, empowered his despairing disciples to risk sharing Jesus's own destiny to keep His message alive and even to spread it, and they have carried His word and work into all succeeding history.

That pattern of death and resurrection, destruction and re-birth, has characterized RL itself through the centuries as one form after another of the life has seemed to perish taking the life itself with it to the grave, only for the life to re-emerge, in a new form, for a new chapter of life, in new historical circumstances. The solitary life of the consecrated virgins who embodied the Paschal Mystery in all its single-hearted nuptial intensity in the context of the local communities in the first centuries of Christian history gave way to desert hermeticism in the next couple centuries and re-emerged in the communitarianism of stable monasticism beginning in the sixth century, which itself gave rise to the holy homelessness of the mendicants in the Middle Ages, and so on, into our own form of apostolic Religious Life, born in the modern period, which embodies and enriches the ideals of all these forms with a mobile apostolic efficacy of very recent vintage. Our form of apostolic Religious Life, especially for women, is barely 300 years old.

This cycle of growth from inauspicious beginnings through expansion and flourishing into diminishment and even apparent death giving rise to another rebirth, often in a new shape or form, is evident in our own form of the life, namely, mobile, institution-centered so-called "apostolic Religious Life", which seems now to be experiencing its own decline, which raises the question of what could it, does it, should it give rise to, if anything? Or is this the end of Religious Life as we know it?

I want to put my reflections on Pope Francis's threefold challenge to us -- to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion, and to embrace the future with hope -- into the context of the pericope in the Gospel of John 20:11-18 on the encounter of the despairing Mary Magdalene with the Risen Jesus in the Garden of the Tomb on the first Easter morning.

What Mary said to the stranger she met at the tomb who inquired why she was weeping and asked whom she was seeking, and whom she took to be the gardener, expressed so well both the passion of her attachment to Jesus and the limitation of her religious imagination, "Tell me where the body is so that I can take him away." Her equation of Jesus (already, although unknown to her, risen) with his dead body, as well as her pathetically unrealistic project of removing a grown male's corpse to some place of safety -- and for what? -- shows the reader how totally disoriented Mary is in the face of Jesus's death. For Mary, it is all over. She can look back to the last couple years of companionship with Jesus with deep gratitude; and she is living what remains, her sorrow and despair, with profound but futile passion. But she sees no future in which to hope because the new life, what she had experienced during her short time with the living Jesus, died with Jesus on the Cross. For her, as for some Religious today, there is no future, just a stretch of empty time before she joins Him in death -- a death preferable to life without Him.

This post-Crucifixion, pre-Resurrection Mary Magdalene is a virtual icon of some Religious and some Congregations today. They look back on the glory days of the Religious Life they entered in the 1940's and 1950's in which Religious were not only the splendor of the Church militant but its most visible and efficacious agents in a struggling world, and icons of the glory to come. What they see now is near empty houses of formation, once flourishing institutions closed or handed over to others, Congregations merging or coming to completion, and the elderly remnant waiting for release by death from a moribund version of community life.

But what the Evangelist shows us is startling. The Risen Jesus calls Mary by a name that is her own, "Mary," but new, as Jesus had promised He would call his own sheep by name and they would hear his voice and recognize Him, and choose anew to follow him. And Mary responds by calling Jesus by a new name, "Rabbouni", my [one and only] Teacher." The Old Dispensation has been superseded by the new Covenant. And immediately Jesus commissions her, a woman, to deliver a new message, one it has taken the whole of world history since the Garden of Eden to come into being, "Go to those who are now, finally, truly my brothers and sisters, children of the One I alone could heretofore call "Father," to deliver the message that is only now available, namely, "my going away is not my destruction nor the abandonment of my own but my initiation of you, my disciples, into a new life, the life of my Father who is now your/their true parent, my God who is now the God of the New Covenant sealed in my blood into which you, my disciples, are born."

This is not a resuscitation of what they had already experienced, much as they would no doubt have wished for that, but genuine Resurrection, a genuinely new life they had never before experienced, continuous with the past because they are the same people who lived that past, and Jesus is still their true Shepherd, but a radically new life because this Life has never been lived before except as the life of the only Begotten in the bosom of the One True God.

What can this suggest to us, today, who look back to a past incarnation of Religious Life, a life that looks more glorious the more it slips away from us, the only incarnation of the life that we have ever known by experience, like Mary looking for the only Jesus she had ever known, a young Jewish male she had thought immune to death, the one she wanted to touch as she had touched him in the past? I would suggest that we will discover the answer, an answer that can enable us to truly face into the future with hope, precisely by living the present with passion.

What might be some of the features of a truly resurrected Religious Life, not the resuscitated corpse of forms from the past, but a new reality that we need to embrace, as Mary needed to respond not by trying to grasp a resuscitated pre-Easter Jesus, a young Jewish male of first century Palestine, but to this "stranger" who stood before her, calling her by name, into a truly new future? A relationship with him she had never experienced or dreamed of.

Let me make a few suggestions, not by way of prediction, much less prescription, because I don't know any more than any of us what the future holds for the development of Religious

Life, but by way of suggestion on the basis of what we have been experiencing in the last half century or so since the close of Vatican II. If God provides what we need to do God's will, it would seem that we do not need the huge numbers who flocked into our Congregations between the 1850's and the 1950's to build and staff institutions needed for universal education and social services if humanity was going to survive and the Church to flourish. It would seem that what we need is not more bodies to reach more needy people but a corps of deeply committed, well-prepared (in every sense of the word) individuals who, like Jesus' original band, were totally committed to Him and therefore could learn what that meant for their commitment to those He came to call, and find ways to provide it or help people provide it for themselves. Perhaps the decline in numbers is less a tragedy bespeaking imminent disappearance as an opportunity to examine and refine our ministerial commitments in radically new religious and cultural contexts.

I chose to put these reflections in the context of the Mary Magdalene pericope because I think, in a way, Mary's attempt to deal with the death of Jesus, and His revelation to her of the wrong-headedness of that attempt, and indication to her of a better direction, is not unlike some of our own --and I use "our" to speak of us women Religious in today's context -- our efforts to face our own historical situation of apparent diminishment and perhaps impending congregational death. I would locate our challenge, in terms of Pope Francis's exhortation to Religious with which I started, not in the arena of the *past* which we certainly look to, as Francis exhorted us to do, with gratitude; nor even in the sphere of the *future* which we have every reason to hope God will bless at least as abundantly as God has blessed us (even if we and our congregation or even our form of RL are not around to see it). I think our existential challenge is to live the *present* with passion. To surmount the temptation to resign ourselves to what so many call "diminishment," and quietly exit the scene with a weak hope that something will replace us some time in the future with what will be needed for a new time.

So, I want to reflect with you, briefly of necessity, but in some depth on that scene in the Garden of the Tomb when the risen Jesus calls Mary Magdalene out of her backward-looking and despairing grief and her futile search for the corpse of what she had known, into a new future, one she could not have imagined and probably/ perhaps might not have chosen if she could have imagined it. I think this is the only context in which, like Mary Magdalene entering a new era, and we in the new era we are confronting, can live not regretting a bygone era of glory nor accepting a diminished present and perhaps a non-existent future, but confident and energized by a future we cannot imagine but can passionately and confidently help bring into existence.

So what I propose to do is to move through the brief passage, Jn. 20:11-18, highlighting what it might have in common with our own contemporary experience and how it might enlighten that experience. But let me say at the outset, this pericope or short passage, is not a verbal tape recording or film clip of the first Easter morning. It is not a news clip but a work of art, based on and about, as all good art is, reality in its existential depth. So we will listen for its OT resonances, its scriptural allusions, its existential reverberations.

It begins with the desolate Mary (and such despairing desolation, as all good spiritual directors know, is a dangerous spiritual condition) weeping disconsolately as she peers into the tomb she is convinced is empty. She sees an amazing revelatory sight but is not able even to appreciate its extraordinary, much less revelatory significance. She sees only that what she sought, a corpse, is not there. What she sees, the evangelist tells the reader, should have amazed her and enlightened her. She sees two angels in white sitting at either end of the shelf-like indentation in the rock wall where she had helped lay the dead body of Jesus on Friday afternoon. She misses completely what the reader is helped to see by the Old Testament resonances in the description of the scene. What Mary is looking at is not a banal burial place but the New Ark of the Covenant described in the OT as being flanked at either end by carved angels upon whose wings, joined above the Ark, the numinous Cloud of God's presence would descend when Moses and God conversed face-to-face. In other words, Mary is in the place of revelation and what is being revealed, which she wrongly interprets as the theft of Jesus corpse, is that Jesus' corpse is not in the tomb because He is not dead. Mary interprets his absence as the theft of the meager remnant of him that was available, his corpse, when what she is being shown is that he has triumphed over death; he is alive.

Mary's misinterpretation of the seemingly empty tomb is not unlike the despairing interpretation of many people today, many Religious themselves, of the seemingly bleak ministerial and communitarian scene that is current Religious Life. Where is the "body", the large institutions, the over-crowded novitiates, the successful corporate works, the economic solidity, the respect and admiration of the laity, and even the grudging dependence of the hierarchy on the work of Religious? Mary does not hear the reverberations of the Old Testament covenant theology any more than so many Religious today hear the reverberations of the paschal mystery, the mystery of divine life coming through, not in spite of, death.

"Why are you weeping?" the angels ask and she says because her Lord has been taken away. She is so right – she does not know "where" Jesus is because knowing "where" in this Gospel is equivalent to knowing "who". Her equation of his physical corpse with Jesus himself says it all. She ironically identifies her own spiritual state perfectly when she adds "I do not know where he is". Indeed, spiritual blindness is the result of spiritual desolation – the land of Satan.

As she turns around she is confronted with the Risen Lord himself who repeats the question of the angels, with touching elaboration, "Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" In John's Gospel there is a whole theology of spiritual seeking. It is Jesus' first question to the two disciples who followed him when John the Baptist pointed him out as the Lamb of God, "What do you seek?" The answer to that question is the key to spiritual identity in John as it is for Jesus' disciples of all time. It is the question being raised for us as we try to plan, read the meaning of our times, decide what to do in the face of all kinds of institutional death. What do we seek? Jesus is the One who seeks only the will of the One who sent him, even when that will takes Him to Calvary. And only those who seek Jesus as He sought the will of the One who sent Him, will find eternal life.

But Mary Magdalene repeats her benighted question: “Have you taken Him? Where have you laid him?” and her desperately benighted proposal that she would “take him” away, thus equating “Him” with his lifeless corpse – as some Religious equate Religious Life with quantitative indications of past successes. Mary’s desperation and despair are wrapped up in the meaningless proposal that a single woman could carry off the dead weight of the corpse of a full-grown man – and to where? And for what purpose? Again, the unreality of spiritual desolation is evident. Clinging to a past that is no more suggests a present that makes no sense in the service of a non-existent future. But if our Religious imagination is shaped by the cultural norms of success (money, prestige, power, institutional approval, etc.) the decline or disappearance of these markers are signs of death.

Jesus wakes Mary up, snaps her out of her culturally constructed ideal of “success”, “life,” meaningfulness, by calling her by her true name, the one God gave her, “Mary.” He snaps her back into her true identity which is her relationship with him, not her relationship with his body, with their past, with the version of humanity they had heretofore shared. “Mary”, he says. And she leaps out of the past into the present of their relationship, stronger than death, and recognizes Him, “Rabboni” which the evangelist makes sure we readers understand, “Which means Teacher” he translates. Jesus, the Truth, is the only source of valid interpretation of what seemed to Mary sheer disaster and which Jesus reveals as God’s plan of salvation.

But Jesus does not let Mary, who now “gets it”, settle down in her Easter joy. He tells her that their relationship has changed, deepened. It is not just Jesus and Mary. But she must go to his crushed disciples, announce the Easter message to them, galvanize them for mission by their assurance, based on her revelation, of Jesus’ Resurrection in which they will participate.

And Mary goes, “proclaiming” (angelousa) the word from which we get “angel”, “I have seen the Lord” and he has revealed to me all that we need for the present and the future.

What Mary experienced in the Garden of the tomb was the reality of the Resurrection which is not the resuscitation of a corpse, not the past (even a spruced up past) revived. Rather, it is genuinely new life, life we cannot imagine much less construct. Life which we, like a pregnant woman, cannot imagine but must help emerge. The resurrection of Jesus is not the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus does not resume his pre-Calvary life among them. It is bodily, experienceable, effective in this world of time and space. But it is deathless, unlimited by space and time even as it lives and works in space and time.

This is, I think, what is being revealed in and to us as we live through the death, perhaps the disappearance, of Religious Life as we knew it when we entered. Even if we could resuscitate the life as it existed when we entered, it would not be what is needed today. We cannot anticipate the future, esp. the future of the life itself much less the life of our own form of Religious Life or perhaps our own Congregation. We cannot carry off the corpse of the life we entered, revive it, raise what has or is dying. We are the proclaimers of the Resurrection,

something that we must experience in ourselves, individually and personally, but also communally, as did the first disciples, to see the Risen Jesus. We don't know what this new life will be like. We know it will be continuous with the life that has been born, died, been re-invented, and continued over nearly twenty-one centuries from the time of the first virgins who renounced human progeny in order to bear the life of the Risen Lord into history. But what we are helping to birth is no more clear to us than is the child in the womb. As the mother knows her child will be human we know that the form of the life that survives or succeeds us will be Religious Life. There will be some deep continuity with the life we have lived. But it may be as different from our life as the Risen Jesus was from the One Mary Magdalene was mourning. Only a vibrant faith in the Resurrection, the bodily Resurrection, of Jesus as it will be realized in time and space while transcending historical limitations can provide us with a model, a shape for our hope – which will enable us to live not just with gratitude for the past and hope for the future, but a vibrant passion in the present.