

CONSECRATED LIFE: Mystics and Prophets of the Time

+Reynaldo G. Evangelista, DD

I congratulate all of you, members of the **Association of Women Formators of the Philippines (AWFP)** on the occasion of your 36th National Convention. Your contribution and efforts to form candidates to religious life, although most often daunting and exhausting, are constant reminders that the Lord cares and never abandons the Church. Please know that we, Bishops, priests and the lay faithful, appreciate and esteem your sacrifices in the formation work. With you, I am constantly reminded by His Holiness Pope Francis that, *“we bishops need to understand that consecrated persons are not functionaries but gifts that enrich dioceses. The involvement of religious communities in dioceses is important”*. As Bishop of Imus, I am very grateful to the active participation of religious communities in our diocese especially in the implementation of our Diocesan Pastoral Priorities for Evangelization (DPP-E). Our women religious are involved in various pastoral programs and ministries. We learn so much from their charisms, energy and enthusiasm. They tirelessly minister to prisoners, organize basic ecclesial communities, care for the sick, abandoned and elderly, educate the youth, facilitate livelihood programs for the poor and the marginalized without an air of arrogance or desire for prestige and recognition.

You have peculiar and extraordinary gifts that go beyond yourself and allow you to reach out to the fringes of humanity. Your acts of perfect charity and total availability are amazingly inspiring. You are a gift to the Church! The Holy Father Pope Francis made a wise decision to proclaim 2015 as the *Year of Consecrated Life* on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Conciliar Decree **Perfectae Caritatis** by His Holiness Pope Paul VI which lengthily talks about the Renewal of Religious Life.

I am invited by your Chair, Sr. Glafira Mantes, FMIJ, to share to you on the topic: **“CONSECRATED LIFE: Mystics and Prophets of the Time”**. The topic is an invitation and a challenge for all of you to return to the core of your identity and calling and to open your hearts to renewal and transformation. What binds religious communities together are not the diverse charisms that you nurture and share, but essentially your love for God. The most memorable moment of a consecrated person is the moment when she first falls in love with God, mystified by that love and moved by it. It is a love that energizes and recreates a person. It is a love that allows us to go beyond ourselves and turn towards others.

MYSTICISM: A Falling in Love with God

We are familiar with some of the revered mystics of the Christian world. We know of the stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, St. Anthony, Abbott, Saint John of the Cross, St. Bridget of Sweden and Saint Teresa of Avila to name a few. They dedicated their lives not merely to flee from mere secularism and worldly allurements but to search for the One they truly love, the Lord. Their lives were meaningfully spent falling in love with God.

Mysticism comes from a Greek word 'mustikos' which means, "to conceal". While it has gained limited definitions, it also has broad applications. In Early Christianity mysticism has so many dimensions:

1. Biblical: This is the type of mysticism that searches for the hidden or allegorical interpretation of biblical texts.
2. Liturgical: This is the type of mysticism that yearns for the presence of Jesus in the sacraments especially in the Eucharist.
3. Spiritual or contemplative: This is the dimension of mysticism where a person unites with the Lord in prayer and contemplation.

For this closing address today, our discussion will be on this third dimension of mysticism, that is, the SPIRITUAL or CONTEMPLATIVE. Bernard McGinn, STL, PhD., a scholar, theologian and expert in the field of Spirituality mentions that mysticism is not merely the "sensation of God as an external object" in prayer or contemplation, but more importantly a "consciousness of God's presence" at work in our lives. Thus, he concludes that contemplation should "lead us to new ways of loving and knowing based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts".

God is not an object to be dissected in the laboratory of prayer, but a person who comes to us and shares His life with us. It is not a magical moment when grand visions and miraculous apparitions occur, for they seldom transpire except for some extraordinary cases. It is a moment when God, in all simplicity and gentleness, comes to us and becomes part of us. A true mystic, in the proper sense of the word, is someone who is transformed by God's love. Day by day, she learns a new dimension and art of loving. She does not grow weary, regretful or grumpy. Bernard McGinn adds that, "the only test that Christianity has known for determining the authenticity of a mystic and her or his message has been that of personal transformation, both on the mystics part and-especially-on the part of those whom the mystic has affected".

I invite you now to ask yourselves these questions: If religious life is primarily growth in loving consciousness of God, do I draw my strength and inspiration from Him? Am I transformed daily by prayer and contemplation? Is my growth in the degree of loving affect and permeate my way of living, relationships, community life and apostolates?

Sometimes, mysticism becomes a fad nowadays. It has become seasonal and fades in the ebb of time. For some people it is a tool to de-stress, detoxify and alter the state of a troubled mind. Some religious even fall into the trap of New Age 'spirituality' hoping to achieve tranquillity and well-being through deeper self-awareness and appreciation of the cosmos. And so they commune with nature, the wind, the sun, the soil and perhaps even with grasshoppers to experience serenity and peace. It has no relational and communal dimensions. I remember what the Canadian Dominican Jacques Lison said, "*The essential concern of theology is to say 'God'*". In the Christian tradition true mysticism is contemplation and solemn recognition of God's presence. A true Christian mystic is drawn to God, energized by God, transformed by God and loves the way God loves.

Who is this God that we should constantly commune with? Who is this God from whom we draw our strength and inspiration?

THE TRINITARIAN LOVE: The Source of Authentic Christian Love

Christian Mysticism is essentially the contemplation, appreciation and participation in Divine Love. In the context of Christian tradition, when we say God, we mean the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In prayerful disposition and contemplation, may I invite you to marvel and learn from the enduring love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The word "Father" is mentioned 11 times in the Old Testament and 170 times in the New Testament. It is a revelatory name. It originates from the Aramaic word "Abba" that means "Papa" which evokes basic trust, intimacy and closeness. It is through the Father that the Son, Jesus, experienced the nearness of Love. The words "papa" or "mama" are baby-talks. But, in the world of infants and children, these intimate words are terms of endearment, comfort and security. These are the first affectionate words that we learned as children. That is why when we do not feel secure, when we are hurting or ill, the mention of these words somehow comforts us. I can imagine the pain the fallen soldiers at Mamasapano, Maguindanao endured. Perhaps, in their agonizing and slow painful deaths amidst cornfields and marshlands, both Muslim and Christian soldiers cried, "Papa! Mama!" In death, the contemplation of love becomes more vivid, stronger and dearer. When Jesus was left hanging on the cross he cried, "*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*" (Matthew 27:46). This is the cry of a human person looking for the gentle touch and presence of a caring Father. As He struggled in the darkness on the cross, a certain feeling of security and letting-go transpired when He cried, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (Luke 23:36). Even in death or seeming abandonment, the enduring bond between the Father and the Son continues. This love story and mystical reality abides through the presence and union of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the force that forges love as strong as steel. The "Pneuma" or "Spirit" occurs 20 times in the

Gospel of John. Known to be invisible, the Spirit can be felt through awe-inspiring effects. He/She can overthrow buildings (Ezekiel 13:13), wreck ships (Ez. 27:26), carry clouds filled with rain (1 Kings 18:45) or descend like tongues of fire filled with love and hope to all peoples and cultures during Pentecost (Acts 2:3). Love indeed goes beyond human strength and imaginations. It shatters boundaries and recreates a new community of love. The notion of the Holy Spirit crushing divisions is true in the Gospel of John where there is a clear boundary between the world of God and human abode. The evangelist is heavily influenced by Hellenistic, Greek or Platonic, dualistic paradigms. The universe is divided into two halves: the upper sphere which is the realm of God, and the lower sphere which is home to created realities. The Holy Spirit then is our connection to the reality of Divine Love. This interplay of love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is so overwhelming that in its power it explodes throughout humanity. Their mystical experience of love results in the emergence of light and life. Through the Holy Spirit, even the *"Word was made flesh and dwelt among us"* (John 1:14). The Son, Jesus, is the transforming gift of mystical love that affects and transforms the whole of creation.

I am sharing this Trinitarian love story not because February is the month of Love but because this is the essence of our vocation, that is, being attracted and being mystified by the love of God. Pope Francis reminds us that, *"religious life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction. The Church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of looking at things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world"*. But, we can only look at things differently and love uniquely when we allow ourselves to be engulfed by God's abiding love through prayer and contemplation. Like Jesus, mystics are passionate lovers that can paint the gloomy canvass of a weary world into a colorful mixture of joys, new beginnings and transformations. They do not flee from the darkness, crosses and sufferings of the world. Instead, they open their eyes and fashion the world as God wants it to be. They are the new prophets of our times!

Prophets: Looking at the World with Loving Eyes

We have learned that mysticism is basically the contemplation of love, and the core of Christian Mysticism is no other than God himself. To contemplate God is to contemplate on love, and when a person is fully immersed in love, her vision is altered and she looks at the world with fresh, loving eyes. Mystics are new prophets who are on fire with love! This is true when Saint Paul talks about his musings of being an apostle of God: *"And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge... but do not have love, I gain nothing"* (1 Cor. 13: 2-3). If we desire for joy in religious life and yearn for fulfillment in our apostolates and ministry, we need to be transformed in love. For mystics and prophets, the contemplation of love necessarily leads to conversion. Bernard Lonergan, SJ, philosopher and theologian

mentions that, religious conversion "...becomes an actuality when one falls in love. Then one's being becomes being in love. Such being in love has its antecedents, its causes, its conditions, its occasions. But once it has blossomed forth and as long as it lasts, it takes over. It is the first principle. From it flow one's desires and fears, one's joys and sorrows, one's discernment of values, one's decisions and deeds...." It builds in us an unquenchable thirst not only to love God but a passionate stance to love the poor. Let me share with you one particular incident in the Gospel when Jesus looks at a poor person with an unquenchable and undying love:

The Proclamation of the Gospel according to Luke (21: 1-4)

**"Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasure box;
he also saw a poor widow dropping in two small coins.
And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow put in more than all of them.
For all gave an offering from their plenty, but she, out of her poverty, gave all she had to
live on."**

In the Protestant biblical tradition, this is called the "Parable of the Two Mites" because their edited version of the bible, the King James Version, was revised in the 16th century when the smallest currency at that time was called "mite". But, in the Catholic biblical tradition we call this the "Story of the Poor Widow's Contribution.

The setting was on an ordinary day of Jesus accompanied by his disciples. They were near the treasury located in the inner part of the temple. Let us take note: the treasury was located in a conspicuous part of the temple. This is very symbolic. When we say "inner part" in Tagalog, we mean "loob". "*Makikilala mo ang isang tao sa pamamagitan ng kanyang loob*". It is in the inner room of our deepest selves that the Lord comes and encounters us. Inside the treasury, there were treasure boxes where monetary donations were offered. Here comes the poor widow who is considered part of the lowest class in society and puts two small coins. Widows were economically, emotionally and materially poor. They have no one to depend on but God himself. Perhaps, everyday she goes to the temple to pray and ask the Lord to always take care of her and her children.

The exact interpretation of this Gospel narrative is quite vague according to some biblical theologians. Some say this is Jesus' prophetic critique of the unjust structure of society. For some moral theologians, Jesus did not actually intend to praise the impoverished condition of the woman since poverty is evil itself. This story is indeed open to varied interpretations.

But, I think the most important moment in the story is when Jesus noticed this poor widow amidst an overwhelming crowd of wealthy people bringing their highly valued wealth. He looked at the poor widow with so much love, mercy and compassion. When you notice

someone in the crowd, he/she becomes the center of your attention. Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* remarks that we need to develop a “*loving attentiveness which entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their culture and in their ways in living the faith*”.

Prophecy is accomplished by words, actions and the very life of the prophet. Christ, more than by His words and deeds, proclaimed the kingdom of God by His very life. In the same way, religious life is a form of prophecy at the level of life. It is a form of Christian life that signifies the gifts of the kingdom in the present age and in the future.

This is what the world needs now: Mystics who are daily immersed and converted by the love of God, and Prophets whose loving gaze and attentiveness to the signs and nearness of God’s Kingdom particularly to the poor and the marginalized become a turning point for social transformation.

CONCLUSION

As you return to your different ministries after this conference, always remember that our celebration of the *Year of Consecrated Life* and the *50th Anniversary* of the publication of the conciliar document *Perfectae Caritatis* happens as the Catholic Church in the Philippines also devotes the year 2015 as the

Year of the Poor.

As you can see, there had been volumes of researches, statistics and publications in our libraries and academic institutions that update us about the plight and the conditions of the poor. We can always browse, study and learn from them. But more than scholarly researches, I am touched whenever priests and religious share stories of their love affair with God expressed concretely in their love for the poor. I always thank God when priests and religious, after moments of religious encounter, share their unquenchable sensitivity, attentiveness and love for the poor that are not just found in scholarly work and research. The Church yearns for your love, mystics and prophets of our time.

As we end, let me share to you a beautiful poem by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ:

Nothing is more practical than finding God,
that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.
It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekend,

what you read, who you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in love, stay in love,
and it will decide everything.

I pray that you will all continue to fall in love with the Lord and discover peace and fulfillment in your apostolates as you passionately serve the poor as prophets of our time.