

## *Sisters of Holy Cross*

### GENERAL CHAPTER 2017 Fifth Conference

#### ***Women, witnesses at the heart of today's world***

The current world situation possesses all the characteristics of “an approaching catastrophe”. Some anxiously refer to it already as a period of transition. There is no doubt, in fact that the world resulting from the Second World War and the Church of the council which tried to adjust to it, are currently in the middle of a crisis.

Democracy, human rights, and globalisation are caught in the maelstrom of a system which Pope Francis names as intolerable and needing to come to an end. Yes, the world is “taking on water” from everywhere, because of the scandalous inequality it generates and its inability to hear the authentic grievances of the masses left to their own devices and offer them a preliminary response.

But what is troubling, as the Pope also indicates, is that these times of crisis are conducive to the most insane populism. Francis reminds us that Hitler was elected in the same manner as the new leaders of the world. What we believed after the holocaust to be a hypothesis overcome once and for all, has really become plausible once more.

It is in this context that women, together with men, must be witnesses of the Reign of God. You could say that these great political, social and cultural movements which shake up our planet do not concern us directly. This “ostrich policy” approach would be a guilty attitude, as if evangelization were moving in a closed arena, aside from everything else. There is a little Trump asleep in each man and each woman, even in our communities, our youth groups, and our parishes. Yahve had already warned Cain that a lion was lurking at his door, but that he could defeat it.

In the great network where the vast majority of us move today, everything is interdependent. It is in this same network that we are invited to become engaged so as to bring the counter balance of Love and Hope, of the Gospel.

#### **I Witnesses of an unprecedented humanitarian tragedy**

Saint Mathew tells us that “The women looked on from a distance” at the terrible “justice” of men. This justice is summarized in Saint John’s Gospel by Caiaphas’ conclusive sentence: “It is better that one man die for the people”. This really meant “to maintain a small minority’s system of power, and political and religious privileges” built on corruption and exploitation, so often denounced by Jesus.

Indeed they looked from afar because the patriarchal law forbade women from being present at the scene of torture. However, one of them, Tradition tells us, transgressed this prohibition. Veronica took the foolish risk to step out of the crowd to wipe the sweat, blood and tears of the tortured victim. This simple gesture already ensured the victory of humanism over barbarism, as the premise of the resurrected One's victory.

Saint John tells us, of course, that Mary was at the foot of the cross, which is historically unlikely. But what he wants to show us by this icon of the *Stabat Mater* is that the Church – men and women disciples – belongs there and not elsewhere.

In the Gospel, women broke the rules so many times in order to come close to Jesus, living or dead, in view of obtaining “more” life from him . The Canaanite woman accepted to pick up crumbs like a little puppy excluded from the banquet; the Samaritan woman disregarded the prohibition of speaking with a man in order to gain knowledge of the depths of his well, and at Cana even Mary brazenly disobeyed her son. All blithely crossed the frontiers imposed by their sex, their race, their religion or their moral history, with the certainty that with Jesus, the impossible becomes possible. And each of them broke the rules not for her own benefit, but always for that of others (the guests at the wedding, the neighbors at Sachar, the little girl on the verge of death, etc.).

At this point I cannot help but invoke the little girl prophets of our devastating times. I think of Malala, the Pakistani adolescent who confronted death and the shameful prohibitions of her religion to demand women's right to study. And that little blogger from Aleppo in the midst of the bombing who, from her rooftop, described what she saw, and denounced the innumerable violations of human rights. And so many silent children, martyrs of their faith, or simply of the human disaster in which they are caught...

It is there, in this human muck, that our Religious Life is awaited. If it refuses to get its hands dirty, it will soon become a simple marginal, irrelevant anecdote. The challenge of holiness today is to be “in the World”, (I would add “for the World”) without being “of” the World. This impossible equation requires that we be firmly rooted in the Spirit, in prayer, and nourished by healthy and biblical community relationships.

But it is also essential that we give up our routine and insignificant commitments, to give priority to the new assemblies of which John Paul II already spoke. Along this line, the choice of men and women religious in the United States to lobby seems to me to be among the most assertive intuitions of our times. We need to leave our ecclesial courtyards and go out to meet the world.

However, as we will see later, these new assemblies are already very different from those which John Paul II pointed out more than twenty years ago. Today, it is the survival of humanity that is

at stake, and that is where we must invest our resources, even if it costs us to abandon the familiar and secure zones of our pastoral works which no longer have any direct impact on this current trend.

Neither can we separate the healing of our communities from our missionary responsibilities. The first is the condition for the second. Here I wish to repeat an intuition I have shared with you frequently, and which seems more contemporary than ever: our communities must once again become what Jesus' community was: a laboratory of the Reign. We must fashion the prototypes of a new humanity in the ways of Jesus within our communities, before experiencing His ways in the different contexts where we are engaged. From there, communities constructed on worldly preconceptions of power, competition and prestige, far from being missionary, will only justify and strengthen the reign of the evil one which seems to prevail today.

## **II Witnesses of the downfall of the modern world**

The Trump phenomenon at the core of the empire (we do not yet know how far it can lead us) and other similar ones in Great Britain, Poland, Hungary, etc., raises the likelihood that the downfall of the modern system is close at hand. Like at the end of all History's great empires, what awaits us, needless to say, is chaos, the loss of ethical criteria in decision-making and relationships, the trivialization of what is intolerable and the triumph of corrupt untruth in a decaying social arena.

Strangely enough, this crisis corresponds with a resistant and aggressive entrenchment of patriarchy and male chauvinism. It is not by chance that women are those who ring the alarm most vigorously. Tomorrow's world, which should rise up from the ruins of patriarchy, will be feminine or it will not be at all, to paraphrase Malraux's prophesy regarding the XXI<sup>st</sup> century. We must therefore refer to what we have stated earlier about women being those who carry the future in their own flesh.

The intuitions of eco-feminism, which connect the feminine to the Cosmos, is one of these new priorities which rests with you today. Together to be sure, but under your feminine inspiration, we need to save Creation. Faced with the negation of climate change that claims to impose the whims of the rich to the detriment of scientific truth and the survival of our planet, it is time to stand up as disciples of the Son of Man, that is, of the whole Human race.

In this atmosphere of the end of an empire, History teaches us that human thought recedes and that ignorance (often guilty and willful) triumphs. The rejection and oblivion of scientific, philosophical, political and humanitarian achievements express the terrible frustration of the marginalized. This refusal to plan in the interest of those who are irrational and vindictive is then exploited by the fringe of the wealthiest.

I am persuaded that education is the arena we must prioritize today so as to accompany this development. But let me immediately raise a point of clarification. We need to enter into a new expression of Christian faith and thought. In these circumstances our premodern religious language is very dangerous, for it plays directly into the mythical categories used by the new masters of the world to exploit ignorance as a political force. We must denounce all attempts to maintain Christians in infantile conversations of submission and terror connected to false and dangerous obsolete anthropological and cosmological categories (heaven, hell, condemnation, etc.).

To that effect, our catechesis must no longer claim to explain the World. “Creationism”, which seems to find its second wind thanks to the new masters on the political scene, for example, is an aberration we continue to use naïvely and that certain sectors of power take advantage of so as to justify their abuse.

At the end of his life, John Paul II asked Catholics to adopt the theory of evolution, and Francis proclaimed that the Big Bang is not incompatible with faith. Those who hold to “post-religionism”, in fact, speak of a new conversation of faith which essentially seeks to accompany the urgent search for meaning at the heart of the traumatized World. For this reason, it is fitting that we give up “describing” the world and its functioning from the standpoint of religion. Let us leave this up to scientists and researchers.

Recapturing a concept dear to the areas in the United States which protect immigrants, I dream of religious communities offering “sanctuary”, welcoming, protecting humanist achievements, and opening an arena for an encounter between the divine and the human. Sanctuaries of ethical, spiritual and human meaning needing to be preserved, but most of all to be rebuilt together.

Let us let go of our prefabricated recipes of no interest to anyone and of our catechisms where the answers come before the questions. Let us set about building an alternative humanity with believers of all religions and spiritualities, and with non-believers – on the condition that they adhere concretely to the humanism we proclaim and put it into practice, independently of their beliefs. What an enormous and marvellous challenge! What a conversion of our habits! This is what Jesus’ Spirit evokes in the midst of the Church: a world radically recreated from within.

Today, certain people speak of this apocalyptic situation, of a “Post-Truth” era. It is therefore the future of the “Truth” of the Human Race (not an imposed ideology) which is in your hands, yes, especially yours, consecrated women, so as to circumvent the threats cast over the world by masculine power for thousands of years. It is not by chance that certain patriarchal sectors of the Church speak of a so-called gender “ideology”. They know all too well that the change which threatens them will come precisely from there.

Jesus inaugurated a community where women transgressed all the masculine taboos so as to take the place they had in divinity's plan from the very beginning, in total reciprocity with men. Yes, the revolution that we are waiting for will be feminine.

### **III From a trivial evangelization to one that is prophetic, courageous and efficient**

But how can we be witnesses in this world in a state of emergency, before it has to be referred to palliative care, before it is too late? How can we do this if our Religious Life continues to be prompted by bourgeois and nostalgic resignation? That is my question, the question I put to you as well as to myself.

It is no longer time for evangelizing with little holy pictures and pious insignificant hymns, which speak to us of an after-life of evasion or of our society's naive "Christian political revolution". I would like to decry faith as a marginal pastime, or as a comforting illusion, so that together we might review our strategic priorities. It is urgent that we make the Reign visible at the heart of what we have seen and denounced from the very beginning of this retreat.

The debate is situated between really being prophetic and efficient agents of change or risking to be accomplices of the moral and spiritual breakdown of our Humanity by choosing the status quo.

From this perspective, what are our criteria for establishing our pastoral priorities, our priorities of insertion? The idea is to confront our presence and all our commitments once again with this World which waits for God, for Christ and His Reign in a context totally unheard in former years, even recent.

Even Pope Francis, from the beginning of his pontificate, denounced a Church whose point of reference is within itself. On the contrary, he seems to be calling for a Church "out and about!" in the vast world. That applies equally, and maybe most of all, to Religious Life. We need to let go of our self-referring reflexes, notably in renouncing to implicitly consider vocation ministry as a priority in proclaiming the Gospel. We need to stop considering our service exclusively in reference to the needs of the Church turned in on itself. The unique objective, and thus the reference point summarizing them all, is today's world, seen as Christ's crucified flesh towards whom the entire Church feels sent.

Nor can we limit our generosity to treating the wounds of our brothers and sisters, wounds of all kinds. Without a doubt, these gestures of pure charity remain essential and indispensable. But unless they are integrated precisely into a more holistic commitment for change, they risk being only palliative care measures and not a real and great momentum for the Resurrection of Humanity.

What, then, are these priorities for today? I have pointed some out already, like ethical and spiritual reconstruction, working on new questions of gender with all its corollaries: human trafficking, physical and psychic abuse of women and minors; but also the task of re-thinking moral sexuality from the point of view of new social, cultural and scientific knowledge, etc. I also spoke of climatic and ecological challenges in the face of the present risks of criminal and self-interested negation of these realities.

We must also be present where more technical issues on the intellectual plane are concerned: in philosophical, economic, theological and cultural arenas. This presupposes that we give priority to full scale formation beyond the specifically religious. We too need to reconsider socio-political questions as well: human rights, democracy, justice, and respect of differences.

To the extent of our possibilities, even minimal, this is where the Lord expects us to be, obviously without neglecting the areas of immediate assistance and charity. The time has come for a real multi-faceted speaking out by consecrated women in the public arena in the broad and noble sense of this expression.

#### **IV Witnesses of hope**

But getting our hands and our shoes dirty in the muck of the world must not make us lose sight of our utopia, the powerful eschatological dimension of our vocation and our vows. Our hope must once again become the driving force of our faith.

Deep within the thickest darkness surrounding us, let us shed all fear, so as to move forward in the night, like Jesus at Gethsemane, in Saint John's Gospel. The opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. Nothing is further from the path that Jesus maps out for us during his whole lifetime.

But this fear, which we have already analyzed at length, shows up when we are not sure of ourselves. To stem the fear and the conformity it inspires, a deep inner reconciliation is necessary. We need to reconcile our frequently bold words, with our frequently timid attitudes, and our half-hearted actions.

To be a witness to hope implies the coherence of our own life rooted in the deep soil of faith. The letter to the Hebrews expresses this in a masterful way: "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) Fear makes us doubt what we hope for and therefore leads us to a lack of faith. But on the other hand, faith that does not open itself courageously so as to risk hoping, is no longer faith, but a mediocre belief-hideout.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul reminds us that he wants to know nothing but Jesus and Jesus crucified. It is this exclusivity with the Crucified One that should open the closed door of our faith to the pascal adventure of hope. To be witnesses of hope, of a future with God, possible and really different for all Humanity and the Cosmos, requires from us a genuine stripping of all that hides the horror of the Crucified One, the unique way to Salvation for the World.

God's way is the way of vulnerability. That is where he wanted to fully reveal himself to us. Our renewed choice, like his, must turn towards vulnerability: offered, dared, radical and courageous...

All of this would require that we diligently entertain reasons to hope (against all hope?). Like athletes who leave to compete and who come back to quench their thirst in the wings; like David when he faced Goliath; it is in our communities, in their venues of prayer, dialogue and reconciliation, closeness to the poor and the daily sharing with them that this will be possible.

Nonetheless, in muted tones I hear, Jesus' fear: "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" Yes, in our times this is where Jesus laments in our midst like he did before his own death. We need to cultivate an adult faith freed from its infantile attachments; nourish it and make it grow in the beautiful, silent austerity of the desert. Let us be men and women of faith in order to be witnesses of hope.

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