

Last but not Least: The Handiworks of God: Creativity in Religious Life

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“We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:10). St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians gives a succinct description of the nature of our relationship to God when he says that we are God’s handiwork.

The expression ‘handiwork’ means to say something about us as human beings and something about God as the Creator. It implies the creative nature of the relationship God has to the world as well to every human person. It is a dynamic and dialogical relationship. Dialogically, the action of God is to be responded to by human beings in an equally creative manner. The power of divine grace continues to work in us until the plan of God is realized by our participation in creation.

We are God’s handiwork not only in creation but also in salvation. St. Paul narrates how God saved us from death and made us alive with Jesus Christ, by liberating us from the sinful passions and desires of our flesh and the clutches of the disobedient spirit. He raised us made us sit in the heavenly places and bestowed on us the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness and love.

Our whole life, comprising all the experiences of our body and soul, undergoes a process of transformation in the hands of God with a plan and a purpose. “All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he knew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8: 28-29). To be the handiworks of God means that we are chosen by His

foreknowledge of us to be transformed in His hands according to the image of His Son, so that we may be conformed to him to the extent of participating in his glory.

Divine Creativity

It is because of God's plan and action, we are what we are. We have received everything as His gift. He fashioned us according to His creative will and wisdom. We cannot envision our potential in the way God sees us. If we allow Him to work in and through us, we can attain the perfection He has foreseen in us because He is the one who "by the power at work within us can do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph 3:20).

Jesus Christ is the imaginative wisdom of God, which St. Augustine terms as the 'skill' or 'art' of God because it is according to the Christ-Image that he makes everything. The structure and the backbone of everything created are the Christ-Image. It is also the model for restructuring and re-creating the fallen and broken humanity. God's grace continues to renew and remake us as we are gradually conformed to the Christ-Image.

The theme of the Image of God has its starting point in the Book of Genesis. The Biblical narrations of creation describe God as an Artist or an Image Maker. In the Book of Genesis, we read: "God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1:27). In Chapter 2 we read further details of the creative act of God in which the first human being was fashioned by the hands of God. "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7).

There are various instances in the Bible where human life is said to be fashioned by God's hands. The Creator, working with His hands shows an immediate relationship with human beings. God 'knows' what He is making. He is beyond question about anything related to His creation. "Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?'" (Is 45:9). It implies a deep personal knowledge on the part of God. The Psalmist wonders about the deep personal knowledge of God in the creation of a human being. "You [God] made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb (Psalm 139: 13, 15).

Creative Nature of the Divine-human Relationship

Creation is a life-process. It is not a one-sided action as the mechanical production of things. It involves the mutuality of love. It is dialogical, in the sense that there is a correspondence between the Creator and His creation. For the Creator, His activity is the revelation of the fullness of His goodness and love and for the creation, it is the realization of its potential for fulfillment.

The notion of a Creator God offers new perspectives for human life. People have different conceptions of God, which are reflected in their relationship with God. For some, God is a transcendent, distant reality that is not an immediate concern for their lives. Their God is more or less a cosmic power, a God who is up there as an observer of the happenings down here. In the perception of some others, God has an authoritarian image. He is angry and strict, punishing the disobedient and rewarding the obedient. Some would subscribe to a moralist image of God who scrutinizes human behavior and usually carries a critical look of disapproval, at the affairs of the world. The image of a loving and benevolent God who provides things at the request of the needy is for many a comforting and reassuring divine presence. But the vision of an Artist-God is a challenging and exciting vision of God and life. God is one who relates Himself to the world and human beings in a creative manner, transforming the harsh and ugly realities of life into something beautiful with human cooperation and participation.

A handiwork, which is typical creative making, cannot be made mechanically. It is done with love – knowledge, and freedom, as it is done by a painter, sculptor, weaver, carpenter, or craftsman. The movement of the hands of a craftsman is not haphazard or whimsical. It is guided by the creative Spirit. His/her hands are inspired and led by the Spirit. Inspiration perfects his/her dexterity for free and spontaneous movements. Moreover, the Spirit enlightens the imaginative vision of the design, before it is realized in materials. The handiwork of an artist or a craftsman is therefore the expression of his knowledge and freedom, which are essentially the qualities of the Spirit. The movements of the creative hands of God are the actions of the Spirit of God. St. Thomas Aquinas affirms the artistic nature of God's work when he states: "The knowledge of God is to all creatures what to the knowledge of the artificer is to things made by his art [*sicutscientiaartificis se habetadartificiata*]."

Creativity Redeems Human Life from the Existential Chaos

Can we look at our lives as something beautiful created by God? Are we the poems of God? Are we the paintings or sculptures of God? Are we God's handwritten letters? Our responses to these questions reflect our self-awareness as a human being and our perspective of life.

The first step towards creative thinking of life is self-acceptance. We must not be impatient; the divine Artist has His plan and tempo. He chooses the colors and brushes at his will according to the design. We must have confidence in Him. We must follow him "being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you [us] will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). It is the trust of the Psalmist that impels him to sing: "When I consider Your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon, and the stars, which you have ordained, what is the man that you are mindful of him?" (Ps. 8:7-8). Only those who accept themselves as a gift of God can cooperate with the moving hands of God and participate in the divine Imagination.

It is a reality that life and the world are not so pleasant as we ideally want them to be. Human life is exposed to the experiences of ugliness, corruption, vanity, emptiness, and futility. The royal writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes has rightly observed that all is vanity under the sun (Eccl 1:2). It is confirmed by the thinkers and spiritual masters of later times who understand this transient world in terms of all-pervading dukha, nihilistic meaninglessness, existential anguish, or Sisyphean absurdity. They are not able to recognize God as the Creator of the universe and appreciate the wonderful divine design and purposefulness manifested in creation. Only those who can entrust themselves in the hands of God can experience the surprises of life wrought by His masterly fingers.

A Creator God can explain to us the meaning and purpose of our lives because creative work is done according to a plan and design. Nothing can happen accidentally; the Creator knows what is to be done and how it is to be done. The design evolves in the materials progressively until it is perfected in beauty. Transformation of the material reality is indispensable in a creative process. The agent of transformation is the Spirit of God. The finality of creation is the joy of the Creator at the sight of his handiwork. "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). It is the beauty of the work that pleases the maker.

The Creative Attitude Necessary for a Joyful Life

Creativity is the essential quality of a life that is destined to the fullness of joy. The inner core of human life is joy and the entire life of a person is striving after the fullness of joy. It is evident in Jesus' mission on earth. The purpose of all his teachings is to share his joy with those who follow him, so that their "joy may be complete" (Jn 15:11). He asks his disciples to pray for the completion of joy" (Jn 16:24). Joy has to be a habitual attitude of a Christian in all situations of life. St. Paul writes to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ... Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil 4:4-6; see also 1 Thess 5:16-18).

Every creative act leads to the unfolding of joyful human nature. There are different approaches to life, which determine a person's capability to enjoy a satisfied and joyful life. People with uncreative attitudes in life fail miserably to unravel the surprises of life because they have nothing to look forward to in life to be hoped for and to be realized.

Some people consider life as an inevitable heavy burden to be carried on their shoulders until death. Nothing can satisfy or console them. Their life of complaints and impatient emotional outbursts never gives them peace and joy. They do not know the potential of the burden of life, which is the material for a challenging creative life. For some people, everything related to life is an obligation. Their daily chores of life, their professional activities, and even their social relationships are considered as obligations to be fulfilled. They fail to recognize even the lightest moments of their life as enjoyable. Falling into the compulsive rut of an obligatory life, they do not see the possibilities of newness offered by a creative life.

Life becomes stunted and sterile for those people who live with a fatalist attitude. They see themselves as condemned to the existing conditions of their life, without any possibility of change for the better. They are unable to look beyond to a new horizon of hope, a new dawn, new earth, and a new heaven. They are imprisoned in their fatalistic thoughts, sticking to the given conditions, however miserable they may be. It is against this background that we think of religious life as an ambitious creative project for human fulfillment.

Beauty and Joy of Religious Life

Religious life is joyful! Religious life is beautiful! Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have been tirelessly advocating these views on religious life and Christian faith in recent years. In the Apostolic letter to consecrated men and women “Rejoice,” Pope Francis develops the theme of rejoicing as the hallmark of religious life. “I want to say one word to you and this word is joy. Wherever consecrated people are, there is always a joy!” Pope Francis quotes profusely from the Bible to show that joy is the essence of human life and Christian vocation. While meeting the seminarians and the novices he said that the beauty of consecration is joy and joy alone. Pope Benedict XVI says while explaining the meaning of the Way of Beauty (Via Pulchritudinis) that the holiness of Christian discipleship consists in being configured to the beauty of the Son Jesus Christ. Before concluding the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II appeals to all the consecrated people, “live to the full your dedication to God, so that this world may never be without a ray of divine beauty to lighten the path of human existence.”

The aesthetics of religious life as an imitation of Christ is not a new invention. It is the core of the message of Jesus, who invites people to “come and see.” The experience of faith is a matter of seeing, touching, tasting, and breathing the Word of God, not only hearing. It consists of contemplation, action, and celebration. The invitation to the wholesome feast of life offered by Jesus has been always there. Unfortunately, the Church has been serving preferentially the legalistic and moralistic “dishes” for many centuries. Pope Benedict XVI has admitted that there is a widespread misconception in the world today that the Christian faith is a burden or an obligation rather than a joyful and beautiful experience.

Hindrances to a Joyful Religious life

It is a fact that the young generation today is not attracted to religious life. There may be many reasons. But the main reason for the reluctance of the youth is their prejudice to the basic values of religious life, which are projected as negating life rather than affirming and fulfilling it. Religious communities have not been always successful in witnessing their contentment and joy in following Christ. There is also dissatisfaction among the members who do not find life’s fulfillment. Pope Francis addressed on 28th January 2017 participants of the

Plenary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life. He spoke on the theme, faithfulness, and abandonment in religious life. The Pope observed that the theme is relevant to this critical period in religious life. Statistics of this crucial time show the growing number of deserters. We are facing a “hemorrhage” that weakens consecrated life, said the Pope.

Why do many religious people leave their communities even after living many years of religious commitment? Why don't they find their lives fascinating, inspiring, and exciting as a spiritually unfolding experience? Why do they fail to realize their dreams and expectations of a beautiful and joyful life? Many factors affect religious life negatively, but the basic factor underlying all others is the inability of the person to be creative in confronting the various challenges of life. In these changing times, some conditions of life hinder creativity. Pope Francis mentions a ‘culture of the temporary,’ which incapacitates young people for life-long commitments. It is a culture of fragmentation, which cannot see reality as a whole, recognizing the interrelatedness underlying its phenomenal diversity. In the words of the Pope, this culture leads us to live in an ‘à la carte’ way, choosing desired options, and as slaves to changing fashions.

Crisis in religious life is not only due to some outside factors but also due to factors within religious life itself. The incongruence between the actual lifestyle and the professed lofty ideals makes a person live an unhappy life. The vowed life, which offers ‘fullness’ of life to those who follow Jesus, becomes for many a stifling experience. Instead of fullness, many religious people experience constrictions in love, freedom, and joy in the name of obedience, poverty, and chastity.

The monotony of a routine life often impedes the creative spirit of religious life. Spiritual exercises are likely to fall into an uncreative “rut,” if they are not done with proper awareness. Only those actions done with awareness have the creative quality to effect an inner change. For many religious people, life is like that of a pebble lying under the water for years and years, without being penetrated even by a single drop of water.

The weariness of work that does not give any satisfaction to an apostolic ministry is very commonly found in religious communities, tending increasing institutionalization. When the members are burdened by heavy and prolonged works, they do not find any scope for creative

satisfaction. Increasing institutional needs are demanded by the worldly values of expansion and success and the members fall victim to them. The joy in works depends on the relationship of the person to the work. The demands of today's 'work culture' give rise to a business-like relationship among the members in religious communities. Creative community culture is different from an institutionalized work culture, which seeks efficiency in terms of external results such as productivity and success.

In the creative sense, work has to be a means of self-expression of a person. The productions resulting from the work must symbolize the spiritual transformation within the person. When the correspondence between the inner experience and outer production is absent, the work is considered servile, showing the person's lack of freedom and spontaneity. In big institutional structures, individuals are forced to live a mechanical life in unrecognized anonymity. They fall victims to the efficiency and success of the institutions. Unfortunately, religious people have to live like "mice running on wheels" gaining nothing but exhaustion. It is not a happy and satisfying life for those who seek the fullness of life in religious communities.

Many religious women and men are not finding meaning and fulfillment in the life they have chosen. It gives rise to individualism in the place of community relationships. Individualism is a tendency to shrink to oneself, instead of expanding to others with a collaborative attitude. Growing individualism and lack of teamwork badly affect community life. To tackle this problem, strict uniformity is imposed by some communities, resulting in the restriction of freedom and space for the personal growth of the members. It leads to discontentment.

Sometimes individuals feel betrayed in their religious institutes since their spiritual aspirations go unfulfilled. In a study, a religious person confesses to having joined religious life, seeking new meaning for life in a fraternal, trustworthy atmosphere. She sought happiness and a deeper relationship with God. She observes: "With the religious overwhelmed, unhappy, tired, nobody will be attracted. You need happy people. This is the point of the pressure of religious life." When a person feels that his/her preferences and talents are being sacrificed in the interest of the institutional projects and programs, life will become unhappy "for him/her.

There are sometimes structures in communities that resist any kind of change. Insistence on a sterile uniformity is not supportive of a spiritual life enriched by the gifts of the spirit. The ‘tyranny’ of traditions in various forms suppresses the creative sprouts of the members. It can be disciplinary, ritual, cultural, or social. Creative adaptations and innovations with an open mind to variety and diversity are essential for the growth of the community. A creative community needs supporting and encouraging leadership. The proper exercise of authority plays an important role in fostering a favorable climate for creativity. If it is one-sided, without allowing any participatory role to the members, the community is bound to wither away. Pope Benedict reminds, “The service of authority demands a persevering presence, able to enliven and take initiative, to recall the *raison d’être* of consecrated life, to help the persons entrusted to you to correspond with ever-renewed fidelity to the call of the Spirit.”

Is a Creative and Joyful Religious Life Possible?

The problems confronted by religious life today, however, should not dishearten us. Pope Francis proposes an action plan for the future in his Apostolic Letter to all consecrated people on the occasion of the year of consecrated life. He refers to the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* of Pope John Paul II, which points to a glorious future for religious life. According to him, three things are needed: 1) to look to the past with gratitude, 2) to live the present with passion, and 3) to embrace the future with hope. Braving the difficulties confronting consecrated life in various forms, we have to practice hope, which is the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history who assures us: “I am with you always to the end of the age” (Mt 28: 20).

Religious life is supposed to be a life brimming with joy. A gloomy face is not befitting of a disciple of Christ. But joy is not taken for granted; there are troubles, dark nights of the soul, disappointments, and infirmities, and experiences of diminishing enthusiasm with advancing age. But in all these experiences we should be able to discover perfect joy. “For, it is here that we learn to recognize the face of Christ, who became like us in all things and to rejoice in the knowledge that we are being conformed to him who, out of love of us, did not refuse the sufferings of the cross.”

Consecrated life can flourish only by attracting people through the witness of life. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, the Church grows

not by proselytizing, “but by attraction.” It is not as a result of brilliant vocation programs that young people feel like joining religious communities, but because they find religious life attractive when they see religious men and women who are happy! Similarly, the success and effectiveness of various apostolates of the religious people do not depend on their efficiency and output. It depends on their witnessing lives which radiate the joy and beauty of the living Gospel of imitating Jesus Christ to the full.

Can religious life be a creative life? There is a general perception that religious life cannot be creative. How can creativity be attributed to a life of withdrawal to anonymous seclusion and contemplation? How can a life of actions dedicated to faceless and self-negating services be creative? Is there creativity in a life of austerity and abnegation? These and similar questions are raised because of an inadequate understanding of religious life on the one hand, and creativity on the other.

Many people think that religious life, being a life of discipline and routine practices of piety, does not permit freedom to be creative. The three vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity are thought to be demanding a subdued, passive, and joyless life. Can a regulated and strictly regimented community life allow any member to be unique and original through creative self-expression?

It is a misunderstanding that Christian spirituality depreciates the material aspects of life and religious life is practiced through a joyless suppression of mind and body. The truth is just the contrary. Sense perception, engagement in the creative transformation of matter, and enjoyment of beauty are integral to Christian spiritual experience.

Implications of ‘Seeing Jesus’ in Religious life

The very starting point of Christian discipleship is ‘seeing’ (Jn 1:31-42). Apostle Paul attributes his conversion to the “seeing” of the risen Lord (1 Cor 15: 3-8; Gal 1: 11-16). Unlike the hidden face of God in the Old Testament (Ex 19: 16-19; Ps 18: 7-12), Jesus shows his face to the world to be seen and his body to be touched. The transition from hearing the Word to seeing the Image implies a radical change in the God-experience of the New Testament. “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1-2; Rom 16: 25).

In the “New Testament,” revelation is not directly addressed to human consciousness as abstract concepts. The word takes concrete forms

accessible to the senses evoking feelings and emotions. The invisible God has manifested himself in Jesus Christ through his visible and tangible corporeality. The Apostles proclaim their faith in the one whom they have heard, seen with their eyes, and touched with their hands (1 Jn 1: 1). Christian faith experience is not a matter of conviction in any ideology or cause; it is the consequence of a personal encounter with Jesus. That is why Pope Benedict XVI said, “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

Pope Francis said in his sermon on the “World Day of Consecrated Life” on February 2, 2020: “And so you left behind precious things, such as possessions, such as making a family for yourselves. Why did you do this? The reason being that you fell in love with Jesus, you saw everything in him and enraptured by his gaze, you left the rest behind. Religious life is this vision. It means seeing what matters in life.”

Discipleship of Christ grows with progressive clarity in ‘seeing.’ To Nathaniel whose discipleship started after a face to face encounter with Jesus, he promised the highest spiritual vision: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man” (Jn 1: 51). Discipleship in this sense is a progressive movement from imperfection to perfection, from dimness to clarity. St. Paul describes the progressive spiritual realization: “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood” (1 Cor 13: 9-13).

Importance of Imagination in Religious Life

Spiritual life entails a creative restlessness. St. Augustine has expressed it in these poignant words: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” A religious person shows his/her spiritual restlessness through creative actions. If he/she remains lethargic and uncreative, it is symptomatic of stagnation in his/her spiritual journey.

A flame of ‘imagination’ is kindled by the Holy Spirit in a religious person at the moment he/she ‘sees’ the face of Jesus and listening to his words. For a disciple today, it is more than physical ‘seeing’; it is a contemplative vision of faith. Creative life consists of seeking and discovering the rays of this ‘imaginative vision’ in one’s words and

deeds. It becomes a way of following, until the attainment of the final glorious vision of the Lord. “We all, with unveiled faces, are seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3: 17-18).

The imaginative vision of Christ is necessarily enlightened by the Holy Spirit and it transcends the particular and historical knowledge of Christ. Through ‘imagination’ a person attains the ‘vision of Christ in his Spirit-filled, dynamic form, It is a form known by faith, rather than the knowledge of Jesus as “the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon” (Mk 6: 3; Mt 13:55-57). The knowledge of faith is confessed by Peter: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Mt 16:16). Peter perceives in Jesus not a particular aspect or moment in Jesus’ life, but a “continuous condition.” This ‘imaginative’ vision of Jesus, which surpasses the ordinary knowledge, can only be a revelation from above. Jesus tells Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17).

The Christ of imagination is recognized in his powerful, spirit-filled actions and his relational qualities as the Saviour of the world. It consists of a revelatory understanding of what Jesus means to humanity, to the world, and the whole universe. It is a contemplative vision, in which a disciple sees Jesus as emerging from the center of the world-picture, mending the disrupted web of relationships to God and fellow human beings. Until Jesus is not revealed in his imaginal form, imitation will limit its scope to “interesting” particulars.

People are sometimes misled by their private fantasy images, which are not related to reality. They lack the consistency and coherence of inspired images. Fantasy images are erratic and whimsical; they are products of an unintegrated, confused, and dreamy state of mind. To visualize Jesus Christ as a meaningful, revelatory image, one should refrain from fantasies, curiosities, or sensations.

Religious Imitation as an Emulation of the Ideal

Following Jesus in discipleship necessarily demands a ‘creative’ Spirit, because it is an ‘imitation’ in which the disciple strives for self-transformation. Imitation takes place according to a pattern, as in every creative procedure. Creativity does not permit haphazard or whimsical actions. It demands a patterned, methodical approach to

life. It is 'imitative' in the sense that it is an intentional and expressive action. In religious life, the 'model' for imitation is Jesus Christ.

Imitation is not a mimetic movement to become 'like' Christ, but to live 'in him.' More than external 'similarity,' a disciple has to seek 'identity' with Jesus Christ. In mimetic imitation which seeks similarity, one hides one's identity and shows a false identity. But a true disciple does not forgo his/her identity but transforms it into a new identity. It is a creative process that Jesus himself has undergone in the Paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. Hence St. Paul can say, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2: 20).

The formative process of a religious person progresses through a 'death-resurrection' dynamic of transformation. Jesus has demonstrated it in his death and resurrection, in which he showed strikingly the transformation of his wounded and bleeding body into a graceful and glorious body. The parable of the grain of wheat illustrates the power of life over death. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12: 24). It is the presence and work of the Holy Spirit that sustains the dynamic continuity between dying and living. For a religious person, it is a continued experience of newness realized by dying to sin and living to grace.

Inspired by the creative Spirit a religious person should not be biased or limited by the actual but inspired and enlightened by the possible in the materials of his/her life. Imitation of the 'possibilities' of the imaginative model in the given materials is emulation. What the artist as a creative person emulates in his/her materials is universal 'types,' not particular objects. Similarly, by the emulative Spirit, an areligious person looks towards the Christ-Image. He/she is not prejudiced by the actual conditions or discouraged by the physical constraints and hardships confronted in the process of spiritual transformation. What impels him/her is the vision of the hidden potential of the God-given life.

Creative minds can discover great potential even in unfavorable conditions of life. Saints are those who made their weaknesses into strengths since they believed in grace. Paul found assurance in the words of the Lord: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly

about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me” (2 Cor 12:9). ‘Seeing’ the face of Christ is simultaneous, believing in the grace of God and hoping to realize its infinite possibilities.

Creative Transformation of Life and Participation in Christ

‘Dying to sin’ consists of realizing with humility one’s sins and ‘rising to life’ is experiencing the power of God’s grace. When one learns to see God’s grace in all experiences of one’s life, both positive and negative, one looks forward with hope without being discouraged by one’s history. The awareness of God’s grace is the driving force of spiritual transformation. Pope Francis warns against the danger of the worldly way of looking at things, instead of seeing God’s grace in them. Religious life will fall to the temptation of discouragement and disappointment if one’s gaze is removed from grace. A life that cannot relish grace will be deprived of joy and enthusiasm. “When a consecrated life no longer revolves around God’s grace, it turns in upon itself. It loses its passion, it grows slack, becomes stagnant.”

Creative works are ‘self-expression.’ Self-expressions are necessary for a person’s self-realization. What kind of ‘self’ does a religious person ‘express’ as a creative person? The “self” that is expressed by a religious person is not his/her individual, human self. The natural human self is sinful, weak, and imperfect. It is infected and influenced by the “works of the flesh,” as St. Paul would enumerate in his letter to the Galatians (Gal 5: 19-21). The goal of the self-expression and self-realization of a religious person the divine Self of Jesus Christ, raised by the Holy Spirit (Eph 4: 20-24). His/her human spirit is possessed by the divine Spirit who is alive and active in him/her. St. Paul writes, “But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you” (Rom 8: 10-11).

To be transformed and filled with the Holy Spirit is participation in the beauty and holiness of Christ. Participation is the term used to indicate the relationship of finite realities to the infinite reality. The spiritual transformation of a person is intended for participation in the holiness and beauty of the Christ-Image. It is the Holy Spirit who shapes the person in the image of Christ, the model of perfection. It is a process of ‘configuring’ the person to Jesus Christ who is “the model and prototype

of Christian holiness.” At the same time, it is a communitarian effort and achievement, attained through the power of the Spirit. Jesus has explained the nature of a participated life through the parable of the vine and the branches. “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. Just as no branch can bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me” (Jn 15:4).

In religious communities, the members cannot strive to attain fulfillment of life independent of each other. Since it is a communitarian effort of participation, each member has to refer all his/her achievements in the spiritual transformation to the spiritual center of the community, Jesus Christ, from whom he/she derives meaning and beauty in his/her forms with its material limitations. “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone” (1 Cor 12:4-6). Unity in diversity and communion harmony is the finality of creativity. Witnessing the beauty of Christ by the power of the Spirit is necessarily a communitarian experience.

Conclusion: Creativity and Spiritual Fruitfulness

Religious creativity is expressed in producing the fruits of the Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life is an on-going creative process by which life is transformed and made holy. On the one hand, the Spirit suppresses the power of sinful tendencies (Gal 5: 16-21) and on the other, the Spirit produces fruits of a good life in the person. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such, there is no law (Gal 5: 22-23).

The fruitfulness of life is the challenge of creativity in religious life. It does not allow a religious person to rest in self-complacency but continues to impel him/her and infuse enthusiasm to go out to others in service. Pope Francis has made a critical observation on the unproductive lifestyle of some religious persons: “I think sorrowfully of the consecrated people who are infertile ‘old bachelors.’ The restlessness of love is always an incentive to go towards the other, without waiting for the other to manifest his need. The restlessness of love gives us the gift of pastoral fecundity, and we must ask ourselves, each one of us: is my spiritual fecundity healthy, is my apostolate fertile?”

God has not stopped working on us who are His handworks. We are under the process of becoming who we are destined to be through Jesus Christ, whose Spirit continues to transform us by our participation. The Spirit will form us as long we have the breath of life.

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