

Who Do You Say that We Are?



We are contemplative sisters within an apostolic congregation.

What does that mean?

It is one of the questions we live everyday.

Just like Jesus who got different replies when he asked; “Who do the crowds say that I am?” (Luke 9:18-21) we also have varying responses to this question. Our Elders of the last century were identified as *reparatrix* religious, sisters who lived community within a cloistered environment. They filled their austere lives with very hard work and penance; they were focused on intercessory prayer and vicarious atonement for the difficult ministries of their apostolic sisters. As we joined them in the years that followed, we saw women weathered by toil but who still laughed and danced, and who, when they lost their footing quickly got up and started again. *Mercy and forgiveness marked their hidden lives of simplicity and holiness.*

For us today, in a century marked with changes far swifter than what our Elders journeyed through,

What does it mean to be a contemplative sister within an apostolic congregation?

The Essential Elements we drew up a decade ago mapped out for us how we are similar to other contemplative communities and in what ways we differ from them. The Primacy of God in our lives, for example, brands all of us alike. The Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours remain central for us. Like other contemplative communities, we are steadfast in the contemplative practices and disciplines that help us to pray and *rest* in God: silence and solitude, *Lectio Divina*, study, work and leisure. To attend to the attraction and desire to make Jesus’ *Paschal Mystery* the template for each of our lives, we lean heavily on prayer and reflection and that takes time, energy, sacred space and a *letting go* of all that impedes and removes us from inner freedom. We remember Mother Foundress’ words:

“You will effect no good, my dear daughters, you will not possess the spirit of our vocation until you become animated with the thoughts, sentiments and affections of the Good Shepherd of Whom you should be the living images.”
(Conf. 6)

Going back to the episode about Jesus receiving varying replies to his identity question, the story concludes with Jesus' self-awareness: "*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*" (Luke 9:22) And so like our Elders, like other contemplatives and in fact, like Life itself that is all around us, we witness to the contemplative path that embraces darkness and the difficult, is comfortable with uncertainty and the obscure as it brings without fail, the agonizing undoing of the ego. Downsizing the ego permits us to be vulnerable and in solidarity with others who suffer. Yes, and when fully allowed to have its course, transformation teaches us ways of Peace and Non-Violence because we know that after push follows shove, and without fighting back, *Resurrection happens on the third day*. Our world today desperately needs this assurance. It is a contemplative task to be bearers of this good news.

It is important to note that this line -- *Once when Jesus was praying in solitude, and his disciples were with him ...* precedes this particular Q&A event in Luke. Thus, when we also say, "We are different from other contemplatives" when asked this question: *What does it mean to be a contemplative sister within an apostolic congregation?* POSSIBLY, what makes us 'different' is how *huge*, how *all-encompassing* community life is for us, -- even when we are praying, even when we are in solitude. We are accountable not only to one another but to a world we are responsible for. Already mentioned above was the practice of Mercy and Forgiveness that our Sisters had for one another, wherever they happened to be, a practice that endures in our present communities.

Here, to help us with our question, we ought to lift up the influence that our apostolic sisters and their ministries have on us and on our life of prayer – on our vow of zeal. Just as the desert solitaries of old asked for a *Word of Wisdom* or *Word of Life* from other solitaries more competent in prayer, so also do we look to our apostolic sisters to help us better understand the needs of our world, those in its peripheries most especially. In our sisters, we see up-close, preference for the neglected and unfailing generosity to those in need. Our sisters for such a long time have known the smell of the sheep. They deal with the hard core of life that nobody else wants to touch. How do they do it? They show us what justice means (inclusion) and we see them engage in *Best Practices* to bring about structural change and partnership with the laity. As they share with us their experiences of heartbreak and the unthinkable things human beings do to human beings, they ask us the difficult questions they ask themselves: "*What hungers of the world do we respond to?*" "*How do we stay in the midst of the horrors and terrors of our world without being lost ourselves?*" -- nudging us out of any sanitized or comfort zones we may be ensconced in. Apostolic and contemplative sisters together, we determine how on-going formation must look like as we welcome our tomorrows *today*. Our *context* has changed and rapidly shifts so the *content* of what we learn and live must also be different; indeed very different from what our Elders long ago knew and lived. How do we live pluralism? Do we personally know someone who has a different religion or is an immigrant or a refugee? How do we chip away at global indifference? How do we live community life when we do not have the numbers we had before or the health to attend to the entire Liturgy of the Hours, for example? Relationships cannot be lived virtually via technology but in imperfect flesh and blood everyday. Without a doubt, living these new questions in proximity to Life in all its divine and less-than-human realities are central to *what it means to be a contemplative sister within an apostolic congregation*.

One additionally wonders: could this question also refer to walking towards one another in a relationship that is governed by the Trinitarian model of radical welcome and loving friendship? The Three Persons give a sacred home to each other where it is safe to be different and okay to be one's self and so, reciprocally united, are eternally *One*. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd is an international congregation because we span the globe and in the midst of diversity, our charism of mercy and reconciliation makes us

a microcosm, a part of the *one field of consciousness*. We strive to give each other a sense of belonging because, the truth is, the Body of Christ is one. There is none other and dualism would be an illusion, a negation of God who is One.

As well, this question perhaps, is an invitation to allow our poor, conditional loves to be transformed and subsumed by the unconditional Love of our Shepherd God so that we become *the living images of the Good Shepherd* much like Mother Foundress herself became. She always said that *“Our institute was founded on love and only if we are united in love will we continue to flourish.”* Scientists and theologians contend that, *“the physical structure of the universe is Love itself.”* Can it be possibly said, then, that to be a contemplative sister within an apostolic congregation is to be so united-in-love with our apostolic sisters and so inter-dependent with them that we can paraphrase (daring to do so only because of the Trinitarian motif that God has encoded into our universe) *“I now live, not I, but my sister who lives in me because the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me ...”* (Gal. 2:20)

Still, the narrative goes on. Then Jesus said to them. “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said in reply, “The Christ of God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you ... for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16: 15-17) So in the end, to the question: *What does it mean to be a contemplative sister within an apostolic congregation?* can we really give a reply that satisfies? Can you? Can anyone? It is only in our relationship with the Father, the Source of all who we are and called to be that we get to know the meaning of our lives as we work with God, with others and the world around us, at the task of creating the truth of our identity. *“Blessed are you ... for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”*

When words dry up, then, let silence come. Let us be still. And at the door of our being, let us keep vigil (as the watchman at the watchtower) for the vision that right now is still curtained off in shadows. We know (in hope) that when the moment is ripe, when the *kairos* time has arrived, the possibilities, meaning and new horizons will spring upon us and our mouths will be so surprised with laughter. We shall know as we are known.

“To everyone who conquers I will give a white stone and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

-- Revelation 2:17