

## **A Renaissance of Creative Fidelity: Releasing the Energies of Love in the Church**

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### **Introduction**

Thank you for the invitation to be with the Franciscan Federation this year in the capacity of featured speaker. Although I have attended several annual conferences, my absence in recent years was due primarily to my responsibilities in leadership for the LCWR. And I suspect that some of my experiences as LCWR president and some other ministry experiences that interfaced with the hierarchical church are at the heart of the invitation to be with you now. The context of such experiences impels us to ponder what to do when obsessions, sin, sensationalism, and out-of-control environments turn into flawed relationships in our church instead of relationships of steadfastness, penance, balance, and constancy in fidelity to the deepest loves of our lives. I have often wondered why hair shirts were ever needed to insure conversion in our lives. Often we have each other in situations that vex us and unravel our nerves. Our own humanity has the potential to stunt our progress in pursuing the ideals of holiness to which we have committed our lives.

I wish to dedicate this presentation to J Lora Dambroski, OSF, Mary Hughes, OP, Mary Whited, CPPS, Pat Farrell, OSF, and Jane Burke, SSND, all with whom I worked closely in the presidency of LCWR during the Apostolic Visitation of U.S. Women Religious and the doctrinal assessment of LCWR. Mary Whited's and Jane's deaths occurred within four months of each other in the past year. When I was informed of their deaths, I felt drawn to listen to the *The Last Sleep of the Virgin* by John Taverner. The music's eschatological character is almost beyond one's grasp. The performers are

directed to play "at the threshold of audibility". The music, without words, is a meditation on the Last Things. The score is headed by words: "still and quiet--intensely tender and fragile", and is reminiscent both of chant, the ethereal sounds of the Balinese gamelan and a series of luminous trills in the strings. One of the sections employs the ancient technique of *cancrizans* (with the motion of a crab) in which a single melody is played forward and backward simultaneously. The strings' languorous solo flights above the sweet tintinnabulations of the bells evoke the image of a soul floating free from the bonds of earth.

This muse with music is my tribute to both Jane and Mary who served LCWR with impeccable love and fidelity and to all women and men religious whose commitments are sometimes discounted at the threshold of audibility. Our ministry strives tenderly and in fragile quiet for its vision. Our dreams for God's reign in our world often follow the *cancrizans* trek of sea creatures in search of deep Mystery. Hierarchical *cappella magna* interventions simply cannot quell the freedom of souls in love with God's call. I think of the time in 2010 when the LCWR presidents were in Rome for our annual report to CICLSAL. Cardinal Rodé, prefect of the Congregation at that time, chided us for "abandoning our mission", and then threateningly asked: "What shall I tell the pope about you when I visit with him soon?" And Mary responded firmly, "tell him that we are faithful"!

This presentation proposes to look at current experiences in our fractured and wounded church through the lens of the call to creative fidelity and how it is expressed within our Franciscan tradition. We immediately think of the Apostolic Visitation of U.S. Women Religious, the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), and what might be considered a side bar to that, the investigations into Elizabeth Johnson's and Margaret Farley's books. And then there are the

excommunications and anathemas over health care decisions and priestly ordination! What to do and how to witness at times like this can be a trying and daunting challenge. Sometimes it feels like we are trying our best to release energies to love in a time of ecclesial comedy and casualty, in “a time when we are about as welcome as adults at a teenage party”?<sup>1</sup> We admit that these hierarchical inquiries seem like we are roaming about in a territory of menace where the reaction between the players in this drama is watched with scrutiny. Adding fascination to this exploration, the theme of this conference “Releasing Energies to Love: Creative Fidelity in the Church”, suggests this is happening in a time when we are reconnoitering and trying to retrieve something. Retrieving what? And how does this relate to creative fidelity?

There is much to retrieve in a time of surprise and challenge – composure, for one thing, but more importantly a sense of spiritual, emotional and intellectual balance, and most importantly the conviction that our Franciscan religious life is centered in the One who calls us – the Christ, the One at the heart of our love.

Thinking about “reconnoitering” at this time in history provides further reflection. A number of definitions carry the day and some have meaning for us, such as: to explore, often with the goal of finding something or somebody; an exploratory search conducted to gain or collect information. The derivation of the word comes from the obsolete French *reconnoître*, literally “to recognize”. This leads us to think of a reconnaissance mission of searching, of looking to see if what we think we know is true. We could apply this idea either to the Vatican’s investigations or to our own response of insisting that we are entitled to be heard in some definite way.

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<sup>1</sup> David Flood and Athena Calogeras. *For People: An Introduction to Franciscan Life*. Chicago: Haversack (1990), 29. The authors used this expression to describe Mary of Oignies, a Beguine who stepped out of a place of material privilege and a world of male control and domination in order to turn toward people and their needs.

Without question, the Vatican inquiries have given impetus for women religious in this country to identify with the aura around these words and to claim the best of their lives as consecrated women in not only the ecclesial environment but the world in general. All of us, women and men, desire to be recognized for living our consecration authentically and with integrity.

We find the idea of creative fidelity in *Vita Consecrata* 37 and in other historical texts, both papal and philosophical. My goal is first, to provide reflection on the call to creative fidelity by specifically addressing this concept found in *Vita Consecrata*, *Starting Afresh from Christ* and other related documents; and secondly to reflect on some pivotal philosophical ideas that can help release energies of love in the midst of what is transpiring in our lives at the present time.

### **An Ecclesial Call to Creative Fidelity**

The words “creative fidelity” are used three times in three Vatican documents about religious life – not a big emphasis, it could be observed or expected, in a church that emphasizes millennial tradition. However, those words are found quite frequently throughout various other church documents of the Second Vatican Council, as well as those just mentioned.

The call to creative fidelity in *Vita Consecrata* 37 is an invitation to respond to the ever-creating God of time and the universe. In a paragraph heading entitled “Creative Fidelity”, it reads:

Institutes of consecrated life are invited courageously to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world. This invitation is first of all a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life. But it is also a call to . . . develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if

need be, to new situations and different needs, in complete openness to God's inspiration and to the Church's discernment.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, another document, namely the *Instruction on Inter-Institute Collaboration for Formation* issued by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) on October 31, 1998 gave a more specific definition of creative fidelity signifying a *harmoniously blending in the life and mission of the People of God, the gifts and experiences which enrich it, as well as taking care that religious not become part of the life of the Church in a vague and ambiguous way*. Emphasis is given in the text to the Holy Spirit's experience in the founders which is to be *deepened and constantly developed by them* as well as harmonized in *the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth*.<sup>3</sup>

The call to *enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness, to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties of daily life, conformity to the Lord, and cultivating their own identity in "creative fidelity"* in these documents have been clear imperatives for the renewal of religious life during the past fifty years. Like their founders, religious institutes are ready to open the way of adventure, peace and compassion for others.

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II. *Vita Consecrata*. Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (March 25, 1996), paragraph 37. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031996\\_vita-consecrata\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html)

<sup>3</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. *Inter-Institute Collaboration for Formation*. (October 31, 1998), Paragraph 7.1. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsrlife\\_doc\\_2002\\_1999\\_formation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_2002_1999_formation_en.html)

Every institute has a primary responsibility for its own identity. In fact, "the charism of the founders, an experience of the Holy Spirit transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth," is entrusted to each institute as its original patrimony for the benefit of the entire Church. Cultivating their own identity in "creative fidelity," then, means harmoniously blending in the life and mission of the People of God, the gifts and experiences which enrich it, as well as taking care that religious not "become part of the life of the Church in a vague and ambiguous way."

In the wake of John Paul II's *Novo Millennio Ineunte* welcoming the third millennium, a third document from CICLSAL entitled *Starting Afresh from Christ*,<sup>4</sup> written to religious in 2002 took its points of departure from *Vita Consecrata*. The intention, the authors note, was not to produce another doctrinal document but rather to invite consecrated men and women in their particular situation and culture *to focus primarily on spirituality. . .(Part I)*, to express gratitude and wholehearted esteem *for what consecrated life is and for what it does (Part II)*, to call for a renewed commitment by living the spirituality of communion in a unique way (Part III), and to accompany consecrated persons *on the streets of the world where Christ walked and today is present, where the Church proclaims him as Savior of the world, where the Trinitarian life spreads communion in a renewed mission.*

Moreover, clear emphasis was given to "constant openness" to the Spirit's action in responding to their times. The document states:

It is fitting to remember the ability of holy foundresses and founders to respond to the challenges and difficulties of their times with a genuine charismatic creativity. . . to live in a constantly renewed fidelity to the call of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

. . . consecrated life itself, of its nature, calls for the constant openness of those who are called to it. . .open to be taught by any fragment of truth and beauty found around them. . . formation must be attentive to the need to plant in the hearts of young consecrated persons those human, spiritual and charismatic values necessary to make them suitable to carry out a "creative fidelity . . . an openness and docility to the Spirit's action, which is always new and creative, is required."<sup>6</sup>

*Starting Afresh from Christ* echoed a pressing invitation of John Paul II at the beginning of the third millennium. The document reiterated his words

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<sup>4</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*. Boston: Pauline Books and Media. (2002), Paragraph 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 13, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 15, 20.

*Duc in altum!* "Cast out into the deep", to enliven new hope and awaken a desire for a more evangelical life that would further break open the horizons for dialogue and mission. It set a context for observations about contemporary ecclesial events that threaten our peace of mind and the confidence that we have lived in obedience to our tradition and the mandates of our forms of life.

The Apostolic Visitation is nearing its conclusion now as we await the final reports from Rome. The doctrinal investigations of LCWR are continuing in earnest. The media keeps us abreast of what is happening with others who are being silenced and investigated. We have experienced these as sentinel events that threaten our balance. It is not my purpose to further comment on these processes, but to propose from contemporary philosophy and our own Franciscan tradition ways in which we can move with balance for the sake of effective relationships in our church.

Inevitably, there will be tensions between theory and practice, between the authentic promptings of the Holy Spirit and her action in the prophetic gifts of the people. Archbishop Joseph Tobin, recently stated. *We do not go to the marginalized and excluded in order to create some sort of parallel Church. Rather, we are willing to live with an often painful, but potentially creative tension with the Pastors, who also must recognize that the consecrated life, if it is to be true to itself, will always be a little problematic for the Shepherds.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Tobin CSsR. *What are we missing? What should we say?* Conference of Major Superiors of Men. Long Beach, CA: Sixth Annual Summer Conference. (August 4-7, 2010) 21. Manuscript.

## Preaching About Creative Fidelity in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century

Creative fidelity is not a concept new to John Paul II in his post-synodal exhortation *Vita Consecrata* of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a recently discovered manuscript, another pope of the fourth century -- Pope Athanasius of Alexandria, a Coptic Orthodox pope -- likewise provides us with a breath of freshness. Athanasius was an avid fighter of the Arian heresies. He did not mince words with his flock. For example, he told the community's most respected members that they seemed willing to dare the crossing of land and sea to gain one single convert only to make this convert twice as much a child of Hell as they were themselves (Matt 23:15). This he deemed folly, arguing that creative fidelity must be centered on the faith shared by the Church from its origins. Any other argument about innovation is simply madness, he declares. A portion of his text reads:

What is this madness I hear about "*creative fidelity*"? For it is actually reported to me that whenever one of you talks about being faithful to tradition, [your] first act is to parrot mad words about how "Being Orthodox has never been a matter of mindless parrot-like repetition of the past, but always a matter of creative fidelity."? *What madness is this?*

Is creative fidelity the fundamental truth about how to be an Orthodox Christian? Then why do we only hear about this at a time when people love innovation, when the madness of too many innovators to mention poisons the air as effectively as the heretic, the Antichrist, Arius? How is it that the Fathers, who are also alleged to participate in this [diabolical] "creative fidelity", did not understand what they were doing, but instead insisted in one and the same faith shared by the Church since its beginning? . . .<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Athanasius. *On Creative Fidelity*. Translated by Christos Jonathan Seth Hayward <http://jonathanscorner.com/athanasius/printer.html> The remainder of the text reads:

There is something the Apostle so much wants you to understand, and perhaps if you understood it better you would not go so far astray as to seek the living among the dead (Luke 24:5) in your quest for creative fidelity. How is it that you seek the living among the dead (Luke 24:5)? Christ is the head of the Church (Eph 5:23), of every man (I Cor 11:3),



In this seemingly harsh approach about innovative evangelization, Athanasius preached vigorously about following the way of Christ in creative fidelity through the essential beatitude life of feeding the hungry, tending the orphan, staying true to prayer and loving one another affectionately.

## **Creative Fidelity in Christian Existentialism and Contemporary Theology**

Let us turn now to Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel and theologian Luke Timothy Johnson. Marcel understands creative fidelity as the solution for the problem of time and change in human relationships.<sup>9</sup> In negotiating interpersonal relationships, he enumerates seven moral and intellectual qualities that are prerequisite for relational effectiveness in any context, be they in the wider arena of ecclesial environments or the internal life of our own communities. They include trust, respect, attentiveness, meditation on the other in silence, patience, suffering, and creative fidelity. Luke Timothy Johnson has taken a particular interest in these virtues as a

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of every authority (Col 2:10), of all things (Eph 1:22), and God is the head of Christ (I Cor 11:3). Christ is the one head, and because of him there are many heads.

If both incorruptible and unchangeable Heaven is the head of corruptible and changeable earth and yet earth manifests Heaven, what does this say about this strange thing you laud called "creative fidelity"? Does it not say something most disturbing? Does the one and the same faith, alive from the days of the apostles, belong to the corruptible or the incorruptible? Is it not unchangeable?

What then of those adaptations you make—even if some are good and some are even necessary? Do they not belong to the realm of the changeable and the realm of the corruptible?

. . . Remember that you are not walking, as you say, the Orthodox System of Concepts, but the Orthodox Way. Remember that feeding the hungry (Matthew 25:35); is greater than raising the dead. Never let the lamp of your prayers go out (I Thess 5:17). Like the Father, be a father to the fatherless (Ps 68:5; Isa 1:17). All the brethren salute you (Rom 16:16; II Cor 13:13). Greet one another with a holy kiss (Rom 16:16; I Cor 16:20; II Cor 13:2; I Thess 5:26; I Pet 5:11).

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Marcel. *Creative Fidelity*. Translated by Robert Rosthal. New York, NY: Fordham University Press (1964), 147-174.

means of learning about the person of Jesus or the person of our sisters and brothers wherever we find ourselves in the world of ecclesial relationships. His insights prompted me to seek out evidence for these moral and intellectual qualities as articulated in our own Franciscan tradition. Here are a few examples which we might think of as essential tools for rebuilding our own relationships with one another and within the church in our time.

### **Gabriel Marcel’s Moral and Intellectual Qualities Prerequisite for Effective Relationships**

#### **TRUST**

**Trust is a fundamental openness to the reality of the other.**

Trust involves a certain basic acceptance of the other – a belief that the other *is*, that the other is *real*, that the other is *true*—prior to any empirical calculation. Without basic openness, no learning about the other can take place. It is clear that having such trust in the other means at some level that the learner is *entrusting* oneself to the other, by relinquishing the sort of control that one normally has over something one might be studying.<sup>10</sup>

Ethicist Richard Kyte emphasizes that ethical relationships are passed along from one person to another on the basis of trust. If trust is broken, it can take years or even an entire generation to rebuild. Trust is a fragile condition in our church and society, a condition and quality of personal demeanor that must be continually nurtured by every individual. As Gabriel Marcel understands it, trust will not ever be established once and for all. Each in its own time, every generation must do what is theirs to do.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson. *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*. New York: Harper One (1999), 59-60.

<sup>11</sup> Rich Kyte. “Are We Making Moral Progress?” *The La Crosse Tribune* (January 29, 2012), D4.

From our Franciscan tradition there is a little story about how Brother Riccerio grew from fear of Francis to a sense of freedom and grace because Francis received him in trust and love.

**Celano: The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul  
How He Set Brother Riccerio Free**

There was a brother called Riccerio, noble in birth and behavior. He placed such **trust** in the merits of blessed Francis that he believed that anyone who enjoyed the gift of the saint's affection would be worthy of divine grace; any without it would deserve God's wrath. He therefore anxiously longed to obtain that benefit of his intimacy, but *he was very fearful* that the saint might discover in him some hidden fault and then he would actually be further away from the saint's good will. These deep fears tormented that brother every day, and he did not reveal his thoughts to anyone. One day, worried as usual, he approached the cell where Saint Francis was praying. The man of God knew of both his coming and his state of mind and called him kindly to himself. "My son," he said, "let no fear or temptation disturb you any more, for you are very dear to me, and among all those who are dearest to me I love you with a special love. Come to me confidently whenever you want, and leave me freely whenever you want." The brother was extremely shocked and overjoyed at the words of the holy father. From that time on, knowing he was loved, he grew—as he believed—in the *grace of the savior*.<sup>12</sup>

This little story confirms that love cannot exist without trust.

**RESPECT**

***Respect is like awe, an intuition of the dignity of all things created and of their preciousness in God's eyes. It acknowledges that the other is equally as worthy as oneself.***

Clare addressed Agnes of Prague as "Lady worthy of great respect" because she was "the spouse, mother and sister of [her] Lord Jesus Christ." According to Abraham Heschel, respect is awareness that things not only are what they are, but also—however remotely—stand for something absolute. What can be more absolute than being

spouse, mother and sister of Jesus Christ? In the Third Letter to Agnes, Clare emphasizes the preciousness of Agnes by reiterating: "To the most respected in Christ and the sister to be loved before all mortals . . ." <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas of Celano. *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* in Vol. II of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents: The Founder* edited by Regis Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, William J. Short. New York: New City Press (2000), 276-277.

Trust involves an element of *respect* as well. The other is not simply a thing to be grasped, measured, corrected, controlled and catalogued. Respect means the acknowledgment of the other, as truly other than the self, as equally worthy as oneself, as having as much interiority and freedom as oneself. Without trust and respect, shared understanding is lost, perhaps even impossible. The other person—the one learned about—is reduced to object only. As a result both the spirit of the learner and the spirit of the one acknowledged are occluded.<sup>14</sup> Our Third Order Rule of Life speaks of respect as one of ways of witnessing authentically as a Franciscan person.

#### **Third Order Rule 20**

*Let the sisters and brothers be gentle, peaceful and unassuming, mild and humble, speaking respectfully to all in accord with their vocation. Wherever they are, or wherever they go throughout the world, they should not be quarrelsome, contentious, or judgmental towards others."*

#### **ATTENTIVENESS**

***is about alertness, receptivity, and "leaning toward the other".***

The word "concentration" would suggest an intense focusing of the mind in order to see or hear something "accurately". Attentiveness is present, however, when we truly listen to the other person, when we contemplate the other person. It does not assume that the other is already known or has been "figured out". Instead, it assumes that the other is always capable of change and surprise and fuller knowledge. The attitude of attentiveness contains within itself space for the other to remain other; it does not rush to change the other or to control the other . . . it is a mental and moral attitude

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<sup>13</sup> The First Letter to Agnes of Prague". *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Revised Edition and Translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. New York: New City Press (2006), 44. The second quotation is from "The Third Letter to Agnes of Prague" on page 50 of the same source.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson. *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*, 60.

that acknowledges and accepts the freedom of the other.<sup>15</sup> In the book of Wisdom, we are told how to seek wisdom.

**Wisdom 6: Exhortation to Seek Wisdom**

*Wisdom makes her rounds, seeking those worthy of her,  
and graciously appears to them on the way,  
and goes to meet them with full **attention**.*<sup>16</sup>

Clare's insistence on continual gazing on the mirror of Christ and contemplating there blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity,<sup>17</sup> without doubt, prompted her to the attentive service among her sisters that the witnesses of the canonization process speak of. For example,

**Sister Pacifica de Guelfuccio of Assisi and  
Sister Benvenuta of Perugia**

*. . . the blessed mother was humble, kind, and loving to her sisters,  
and had compassion for the sick . . . she served them and washed their feet  
and gave them water with her own hands.  
Sometimes she washed the mattresses of the sick  
. . . and at night covered them from the cold.*<sup>18</sup>

***Meditation on the other  
in silence***

***It is in the soil of silent reflection  
that learning about the other  
puts down deep roots.***

***The radiance of existence fosters  
the most genuine meeting with  
another.***

*Where there is inner quiet and  
meditation, there is neither anxiety nor  
restlessness, Francis said in Admonition  
27.4 To truly learn the person of  
Christ or to learn about another person,  
it is necessary to *meditate* on the other  
in silence. Though this reflexivity is*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Wisdom 6: 15-16. <http://www.usccb.org/bible/wisdom/wisdom6.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Clare of Assisi. "The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague" in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Revised Edition and Translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. New York: New City Press (2006), 55. The whole letter is about gazing, contemplating, and considering.

<sup>18</sup> "The Acts of the Process of Canonization of Clare of Assisi" in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Revised Edition and Translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. New York: New City Press (2006). This attentiveness to her sisters was mentioned repeatedly in the Acts of the Process of Canonization on pages 147, 150, 157, 168, 169, 172, 178.

obvious when we fall in love with another person, we often forget how critical it is to all interpersonal learning. Time and space and silence are required to ponder what the other person has said or done in our presence. In such silence we imaginatively summon the other's presence, can picture him or her in characteristic motion, assess what we have just heard or seen in the light of what the other has already revealed of oneself. Without such opportunities to reflect and ponder, knowledge of the other person remains episodic, disconnected, superficial and sometimes suspicious and judgmental. It is in the soil of silent reflection that learning about the other puts down deep roots.<sup>19</sup>

Gazing on another in silence, without exchanging words or touching, one can look at a face and see there the suffering the person has endured. One can feel her triumphs, her regrets, her hopes and dreams. The power of empathy for the other and a realization of an ineffable sameness shining through every person, is something akin to the radiance of existence. This is what is most genuine about us when all is said and done, and the recognition of it fosters the most genuine meeting with another.<sup>20</sup> Clare's own silent reflection on the suffering Christ provided the basis to encourage her own sisters and Agnes of Prague to do likewise.

**Clare of Assisi: Second Letter to Agnes of Prague 18-20**

*. . . embrace the poor Christ.*

*Look upon him Who became contemptible for you, and follow Him,  
making yourself contemptible in this world for Him.*

*Most noble Queen, gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate your Spouse.*<sup>21</sup>

St. Bonaventure once said that God gave us three eyes: the eye of the body, a physical eye through which we see things; the eye of the mind, a

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson. *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*, 60-61.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Ingram. *Passionate Presence*. New York: Gotham Books (2003), 125-126.

<sup>21</sup> Clare of Assisi. "The Second Letter to Agnes of Prague", in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Revised Edition and Translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. New York: New City Press (2006), 49.

capacity to see things through reasoning and thought; and the eye of the soul, a capacity to see, feel and understand the things of God. To engage the eye of the soul is about leaning our head on the heartbeat of another and then turning our eyes out to the world to see things from that perspective.

In 2008 the Vatican Office for Consecrated Life expressed this beautifully in its Instruction on . . .

**The Service of Authority and Obedience 7 (CICLSAL)**

*. . . the authentic experience of God always remains an experience of otherness. . .  
The mystics and all those who have tasted intimacy with God,  
remind us that the contact with the sovereign Mystery is always contact with the Other,  
with a will which is at times dramatically dissimilar from our own.  
To obey God means, in fact, to enter into an order of values which is "other",  
taking on a new and different sense of reality,  
experiencing an unthought-of freedom to reach the threshold of the mystery.*<sup>22</sup>

**PATIENCE**

***Patience is necessary because persons and situations keep changing. Personal learning cannot take place all at once, but only with the passage of time.***

On his electronic newsletter of January 31<sup>st</sup> this year, Fr. Ron Rolheiser said: Our age is characterized by impatience, by an unwillingness to ache, to long, to yearn, to sweat lonely tears in the garden as we wait for new birth. More and more, we are becoming a culture that is incapable of remaining within emotional suffering. This is especially true when we are dealing with difficult people and situations. It would be easier to walk away from it all and simply find a comfortable and righteous place to critique the reality in which we find ourselves. Rolheiser continues:

Frequently we see impatience in our inability to handle tension within relationships and within our lives in general. Because of this, we never give proper birth to anything, love, life or meaning. Pain is a pregnancy. . . Pregnancies must be carried to term. Today, we end most of our pain artificially, by caesarean. Virtually everything in our lives is born prematurely, not fully formed, unable then to survive. That is why our lives are full of infidelities, things gone sour and superficiality. When we are in pain, instead of asking: "Can I stay with

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<sup>22</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. "The Service of Authority and Obedience". (May 5, 2008), paragraph 7.  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccsclife\\_doc\\_20080511\\_autorita-obbedienza\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20080511_autorita-obbedienza_en.html)

this pain? Is there a pregnancy for rebirth in this tension?", we do whatever we can simply to relieve the tension. We never cry enough tears to bring the messiah to birth.<sup>23</sup>

At first acquaintance with another person, we are often tempted to "analyze" the other in an attempt to "figure her out". Generally, though, as the attitudes of trust, respect, and attentiveness continue over a period of time, we come to realize that our initial conclusions are in need of revision. Since the person keeps changing, our learning of him or her must keep pace and we change too. This means that *patience* is a necessary component in personal learning.<sup>24</sup> In Clare's Form of Life is an emphatic exhortation to patience.

**Clare of Assisi: Form of Life 10:9-13**

Let them direct their attention to what they should desire above all else:  
to have the Spirit of the Lord and Its holy activity,  
to pray always to Him with a pure heart,  
and to have humility, patience in difficulty and infirmity,  
and to love those who persecute, blame and accuse us, for the Lord says:  
Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.<sup>25</sup>

Patience was a virtue mentioned by five witnesses in the Acts of the Process of Canonization of Clare of Assisi (AP 172, 173, 178, 184, 187). Furthermore, Thomas of Celano in the 1228 Life of St. Francis articulated patience as one of the outstanding strengths of the Poor Ladies at San Damiano: *They are so adorned with the virtue of patience in all these things, that adversity of tribulation, or injury of vexation never breaks or changes their spirit.*<sup>26</sup> We need to pray to Clare for her spirit of patience.

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<sup>23</sup> Ronald Rolheiser OMI. Electronic Newsletter (January 31, 2012)  
<http://www.ronrolheiser.com/columnarchive/?id=756>

<sup>24</sup> Johnson. *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Clare of Assisi: "The Form of Life of Saint Clare". In *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Revised Edition and Translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. New York: New City Press (2006), 123.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas of Celano. "The Life of St. Francis" in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Revised Edition and Translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. New York: New City Press (2006), 399-400. The other principal virtues of the Poor Ladies were mutual charity, humility, virginity, highest poverty, abstinence and silence, and



Clare and Cardinal Hugolino (later Gregory IX) did not get along as well as we might believe. Gregory IX sought to cancel the "Privilege of Poverty" and in *Quo elongate* (1230), he ruled strictly about the access of brothers to the cloistered sisters. It took Clare years of patience to have officially, canonically acknowledged that she was part of the same family, the same movement as Francis, that he had, indeed, accepted her (RCI 6: 1-5).<sup>27</sup> Clare lived for more than 35 years with the older monastic Rules of Life imposed on her. Finally, in 1247 she began in earnest to write her own form of life.

Moreover, patience was repeatedly mentioned by the witnesses to the acts of canonization and was so prominent in the minds of those who shared her life that it was also mentioned in the official notification of her death.

**Notification of Clare's Death: Verse 22**

The patience of those whose vision springs from a consideration of the Godhead produces the delights of paradise for the one who is patient and will purchase the riches of an eternal reward.<sup>28</sup>

Francis likewise was preoccupied with the virtue of patience. In verse 12 of *The Praises of God*, Francis named God by saying: *You are humility. You are patience.* These praises of God are aspects of God's being and of God's gifts to human beings. This call to praise is the effect of faith or faithfulness which is basic to attitudes of respect and recognition. How well we remember the story of Francis and true joy when he was refused shelter by his own brothers. One can speak of true joy to whom it is given to endure when one's sisters and brothers don't like you at all, but can nevertheless retain one's inner peace. It would seem that joy would be

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contemplation. Witnesses in the Acts of the Process repeatedly name charity, humility, kindness, poverty, fasting, compassion, virginity, prayer, uprightness and prudence as the examples of virtues shown to them by Clare.

<sup>27</sup> David Flood. *Out of the Shadows: Clare and Franciscan Women*. Edited by Jean François Godet Calogeras. Chicago: Haversack (1994), 90-92, 136.

<sup>28</sup> *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Revised Edition and Translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. New York: New City Press (2006), 138.

entirely antithetical when one is rejected, treated with hostility, tormented by cross-examination, and made to feel inadequate. Yet this very quality of “joyful bearing in patience” was attributed to Francis by those who knew him well. Humility, patience and joy are the coordinates of a Christ-follower’s life in faith, and only our Trinitarian God can be the origin this strength.

Francis devoted an entire admonition to patience and emphasized that patience is opposite to anger.

**St. Francis: Admonition 13 Of Patience.**

The servant of God cannot know about much patience and humility [one] has when things are going [one’s] way. When, however, the time arrives that those, who should have helped him, do the contrary, as much patience and humility as [one] has at that time is as much as[one] really has and nothing more.<sup>29</sup>

**Francis of Assisi: Admonition 27: 2**

Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance.

Patience is part of understanding the paschal Mystery. Hopeful waiting or bearing with one another is its natural sister.

**SUFFERING**

***Paschal Mystery as quintessential context for suffering***

***Hebrews: 5: 8***

*Although he was Son, Jesus learned to obey through suffering; but having been made perfect, He became for all . . . the source of eternal salvation.*

The ancient Greeks believed that to learn included suffering and that patience was axiomatic to suffering. Learning demands suffering because it is painful to open the mind and the heart to new truth. Pain results from the need to stretch mental and affective muscles around new ways of viewing others and the world in relationship. When we are learning about another person, there is inevitably emotional pain, for the very act of entrusting our

<sup>29</sup> Francis was heir to the tradition of peacemaking in the spirit of the Gospel Beatitudes. He begins the Admonition On Patience with Matthew 5:9 about the peacemakers and then exhorts that patience and humility must be living realities when one’s life is besieged with betrayal, discord or any kind of adverse experience. See Robert J. Karris, O.F.M. *The Admonitions of St. Francis: Sources and Meanings*. New York: St. Bonaventure University (1999), 137-138, 297, 311.

self to another means a de-centering and displacement of self-preoccupation. Furthermore, the other can violate our vulnerability and cause us pain . . . personal learning is always accompanied by suffering, and patience is the virtue that makes such suffering positive and meaningful.<sup>30</sup> Again, our Third Order Rule of Life provides the ultimate challenge.

**Third Order Rule 30**

“. . . they should be prepared to expose themselves to every enemy, visible and invisible for love of him because the Lord says: 'Blessed are they who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt.5:10).

In her fourth letter to Agnes of Prague, Clare revealed her mystical life by disclosing how she attained union with God (4LAg24-32). She indicated that her vocation was confirmed by praying before the cross. Clare spent forty years before that cross in San Damiano, the cross which also spoke to Francis. Designating Christ as the mirror of God, Clare tells Agnes that she too is a mirror of God. Clare associates the clearest point in the mirror – its center and depth – as the place of charity. Christ's shameful suffering and death on the cross is found there. Using the faculties of the mind in meditation (gaze, consider) and the affections of the heart (contemplate, imitate) was the way that Clare became united with Christ.<sup>31</sup>

Cruciform love is the only way we can navigate the raging energies of misunderstanding, violence, unforgiveness, and redemptive reconciliation. Obedience to suffering is an acceptance that with my sisters and brothers I might discover who I am and who I might become; that I am not the master of my own identity. This is the penultimate necessity for creative fidelity.

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<sup>30</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson. *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*. 61.

<sup>31</sup> Ingrid Peterson. "Clare of Assisi's Letters to Agnes of Prague: Testaments of Fidelity". In *The Writings of Clare of Assisi: Letters, Form of Life, Testament, and Blessing*, edited by Michael W. Blastis, O.F.M., Jay M Hammond, and J.A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv. St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications (2011), 48-49.

## **CREATIVE FIDELITY**

***To be truly faithful,  
one must be creative  
because the other,  
as free subject,  
always changes.***

***Creative fidelity is the  
willingness to trust,  
to be attentive to, and  
suffer with the other  
even as the other  
changes.***

Luke Timothy Johnson, writing about Marcel's idea of "creative fidelity", says this: Because interpersonal learning takes place inter-subjectively over a long period of time, it demands *creative fidelity*. . . Fidelity is the attitude of trust extended through time. To learn from another we must stick with the other (loyalty), be willing to endure with the other through a variety of circumstances. Pulling away, refusing to remain attentive, abandoning the other altogether means cutting off the process of inter-subjective learning. Here again, patient persistence is frequently put to the test through suffering.

The other part of the concept of creative fidelity is equally important: to be truly faithful, one must be *creative*. This is because the other, as free subject, always changes. Loyalty to what a person used to be is not creative fidelity. Loyalty to one's ideal image of the other is not creative fidelity. Not even loyalty to one's own first commitment of loyalty is creative fidelity. Creative fidelity is the willingness to trust, be attentive to, and suffer with the other even as the other changes. It is a living process, because it is a process that goes on between . . . living, conscious, and free subjects.<sup>32</sup>

Ronald Rolheiser emphasizes that, except for bitterness which must be rejected, the faithful response accepts suffering. To be faithful today means to live in pain, in tension, in frustration, in seeming compromise, misery and

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<sup>32</sup> Johnson. *Ibid.* 61-62.

sometimes hatred.<sup>33</sup> It is in such vulnerability that we inherit and inhabit the earth.<sup>34</sup>

Our Third Order Rule assists us in living into creative fidelity, not only within our communities but also in the wider ecclesial environment.

**Third Order Rule 25**

**“To obey one another in mutual charity”**

Let them neither dominate nor seek power over one another,  
but let them willingly serve and obey each other  
with that genuine love which comes from each one’s heart.

Creative fidelity is a commitment of the spiritual journey, the goal being to uphold our accountability in ways that really matter and in ways that honor the unpredictability of life. It is a living process. Marcel would emphasize that life’s problems disappear once they are solved, but life’s mysteries tap directly into our intuitions and linger forever.

Relationships within our church may bring forth a host of problems. They also serve as a never-ending source of mystery and spiritual awakening. The key is to keep a watchful eye on what really matters – not that which requires blind allegiances or public approvals, but the ones that flow from a wise and compassionate heart, the heart of the Christ who calls us daily into loving relationships. Blessed John Paul II writing on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* highlights the critical place of relational life as a moral category, stating:

It is above all a question of interdependence, sensed  
as a system determining relationships in the contemporary  
world, in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements,

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<sup>33</sup> Ronald Rolheiser. E Newsletter. February 7, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> “We share one planet bonded by our vulnerability”, said President Obama in reflecting on the earthquake and tsunami in Japan on March 11, 2011.

and accepted as a moral category. When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as **a moral and social attitude, as a "virtue," is solidarity.** . . . a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.<sup>35</sup>

Fidelity is insufficient. It has to be coupled with creativity for the reign of God to be realized. Our Franciscan tradition offers insights for navigating creative fidelity. Duns Scotus enlightens our understanding of the relationship between creativity and fidelity by explicating how the virtues of justice and prudence can be ways of mediating certain principles in relationships. Prudence, as knowledge and excellence, is a type of moral beauty. It functions in an artistic manner by identifying what elements ought to be present, judging actions according to a whole of beauty or completeness, and then adjusting human response in light of specific conditions present in a given reality. People learn behaviors but through prudence are invited into reflective insights.<sup>36</sup>

The notion of prudence appears four times in Clare of Assisi's writing. In her Second Letter to Agnes she speaks of travelling the path of prudent happiness,<sup>37</sup> inferring the necessity of learning how to compose and re-compose realities in which we are called to be faithful.

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<sup>35</sup> John Paul II. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html)

<sup>36</sup> Mary Beth Ingham, C.S.J., "The Harmony of Goodness: Mutuality as a Context for Scotus' Moral Framework," in *The Ethical Method of John Duns Scotus: A Contribution to Roman Catholic Moral Theology*, Spirit and Life 3 (1993), 60-66, 87-87, 96. Cf. Scotus, *Ordinatio* I. 17, n. 62, V, 163. 13-164.4, 9-11.

<sup>37</sup> Clare of Assisi. "Second Letter to Agnes of Prague", in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. Revised Edition and Translation by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. New York: New City Press (2006), 48.

What you hold, may you always hold. What you do, may you do and not stop.  
But with swift pace, light step, unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir no dust,  
may you go forward securely, joyfully, and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness,  
believing nothing, agreeing with nothing which would dissuade you from this commitment  
or would place a stumbling block for you on the way,

These virtues move persons to desire and to engage in dialogue. Contemplation, or discernment of faithfulness to the Gospel, and formation of one's conscience move a person to options and a plan of action in responding to a situation such as Vatican inquiries or any other flawed relationship in the church or our communities. The process will provide evidence of how it has strengthened us in the formative elements of reverencing the other, fidelity to the Gospel, and the common good.

The LCWR National Board purposefully declared on August 16, 2010:

The real gift to us is around the notions of solidarity and inclusivity. We have experienced a new, deep connection with one another and a sense of real communion as we live our way into new expressions of creative fidelity. We sense bonded energies and a radical openness to what is unfolding. We see ourselves as willing to wrestle with the chaos -- perhaps in very public areas -- cognizant of the possible cost of such discipleship.<sup>38</sup>

God will not be silent as ecclesial tensions are negotiated. Rather than a static or servile obedience, creative fidelity can evidence itself by resisting caricatures and violence, by unyielding integrity and wrestling with our own transformation. Communities of discernment and dialogue can help open us to conversion and take us beyond noxious authoritarianism. In this way the diversity of a religious institute's gifts to the mission will be a public communal testimony to be the Word among complex social situations which cry for the beatitude life of God's reign.<sup>39</sup> It was with this motivation that I turned to Cardinal Rodé in 2010 and asked for his blessing and as well as permission to bless him. It was not easy for either of us, but I was compelled to create some beatitude life between us because it is inscribed

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so that nothing prevents you from offering your vows to the Most High in the perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you.

<sup>38</sup> Leadership Conference of Women Religious. *Update*. Silver Spring, MD (October 2010), 6.

<sup>39</sup> Richard R. Galliardetz. *Contemporary Religious Life's Creativity to the Vision of Vatican II*. Address to LCWR General Assembly, August 12, 2010. Manuscript.

on the heart of fidelity to be in communion with the church. The context for mutual blessing comes from the fact that we are created in the image of God. What we owe to others is profound reverence. A dynamic relationship of personhood means that we must give and receive from others, and faithfully follow Christ who is always on the way with us – truly present -- to the full creativity of Trinitarian life.