



# Heart of Our Call as Religious Today

- Philip Pinto CFC

## *STIRRINGS*

*THERE IS A STRANGE,  
UNTOUCHABLE, UNSEEABLE  
THING IN ME.  
IT HUNGERS  
GRASPS, STRAINS FOR  
SOMETHING I DO NOT KNOW,  
FAR BEYOND –  
IT STIRS,  
TURNS, DISTURBS.  
IT BRINGS WITH IT UNKNOWN  
THINGS, UNIDENTIFIED  
LONGINGS. IT REVEALS A VISION  
HAZY, FAR, FAR,  
VERY FAR AWAY.*

- EDWINA GATELY

## Background

Noting that the Year of Consecrated Life (2015) will take place in the context of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Braz de Aviz said, “We believe that the Council has been a breath of the Spirit not only for the whole Church but, perhaps especially, for the consecrated life. We are also convinced that in these 50 years consecrated life has undertaken a fruitful journey of renewal — not free, certainly, of difficulties and hardships — in the commitment to follow what the Council asked of the consecrated: fidelity to the Lord, to the Church, to their own charism and to the people of today.”<sup>1</sup>

Our own Congregation has been on this journey of spiritual renewal with a certain amount of enthusiasm while at the same time being suspicious about change.

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<sup>1</sup> Braz de Aviz, (2014) Vatican Radio.

We have had three spirituality conferences in the last few decades. The first one in 1982 gave us our Charism Statement. It made us Brothers aware that it was not the work we do that comprises our mission, but the spiritual wellsprings from which the work evolves. We are still struggling to live this insight. It has been slowly shaping our stance as Brothers over the years as we grapple with its implications.

The second Conference in 1988 brought us further down the road. It named two elements that strongly spoke of Christian Brother spirituality: our sense of brotherhood and our stance with the poor. We are 'Brother' particularly when we stand with the excluded and marginalised.

The third Conference in Vancouver in 2007 focussed on 'the Larger God' and opened us to the Universe Story and an understanding of our role within creation's evolving consciousness. We encountered the God who breaks boundaries and barriers. The Chapter in Munnar expanded on this breakthrough.

In 2002 the Congregation developed a new Logo, which spoke of an emerging spirituality marked by the tagline: Presence, Compassion, Liberation.

## **Emerging Spirituality**

"When we let Spirit lead us  
it is impossible to know  
where we are being led.  
All we know  
all we can believe  
all we can hope  
is that we are going home  
that wherever Spirit takes us  
is where we live. "

(When we let Spirit Lead us" Alice Walker)

Our Congregation has embarked on a journey involving three key elements: A new way of living, a new way of being Brother, and a new way of being with people made poor. I want to look at some of the implications of this as we unfold elements of our emerging spirituality.

### *A New Way of Living*

Recall the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life." (c.f. particularly, Mt. 7:21)

It is said that we are witnessing a second Axial Age. The first axial age occurred between 800 and 200 BCE and was so called because it proved pivotal to humanity. Men and women became conscious of their existence, their own nature, and their limitations in an unprecedented way. A few sensed fresh possibilities and broke away from the old traditions. There was a surge in consciousness, a conviction that they were on the brink of a new era, and nothing would ever be the same again. In every instance, the Spiritualities that emerged during the Axial Age – Taoism and Confucianism in China, Buddhism and Jainism in India, and Greek rationalism in Europe – began with a marked recoil from violence, with looking into the heart to find the sources of violence in the human psyche. The conviction that the world was awry was fundamental to these Spiritualities.

Again, today we are confronted as never before with the fruits of our own greed and destructive tendencies. We have seen the eruption of violence on an unprecedented scale, and our ability to harm and mutilate one another belies our claims of advancing in civilisation. We seem to lack the wisdom to monitor our aggression and tame our rapacity. Even religion, which is supposed to help us cultivate the sense of the sacredness of all life, in fact drives the demons of intolerance, divisiveness, hatred and terrorism.

A new consciousness is slowly emerging in our midst and it is being fed by the insatiable human quest for meaning. The revelations of twentieth-century science, now being called the “New Universe Story” remind us that God is revealed in both the book of nature and the Scriptures. In humanity the evolving universe becomes conscious of, and celebrates, itself. These glimpses of mystery both challenge and excite us. Current conversations between mystic and physicist, theologian and cosmologist, are revealing hitherto undreamt of possibilities for our spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

*I was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves rolling in and feeling the rhythm of my breathing, when I suddenly became aware of my whole environment as being engaged in a gigantic cosmic dance. Being a physicist, I knew that the sand, rocks, water, and air around me were made of vibrating molecules and atoms, and that these consisted of particles which interacted with one another by creating and destroying other particles. I knew also that the earth's atmosphere was continually bombarded by showers of "cosmic rays," particles of high energy undergoing multiple collisions as they penetrated the air. All this was familiar to me from my research in high-energy physics, but until that moment I had only experienced it through graphs, diagrams, and mathematical theories. As I sat on that beach my*

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel O'Leary, *Divine Evolution*, *The Tablet* 23 August 2014

*former experiences came to life; I "saw" cascades of energy coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses; I "saw" the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I "heard" its sound, and at that moment I knew that this was the Dance of Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshiped by the Hindus.<sup>3</sup>*

(Fritjof Capra: *The Tao Of Physics*)

At the same time, this consciousness allows us to recognise that the great force that moves us in love has a social dimension. This, say the sages of the Axial Age, is compassion: the ability to move beyond ourselves for the good of the other. All the great religions of that time saw this as the ultimate good.

Our emerging spirituality urges us to live this out in a double dynamic. Outwards, drawn toward relating, toward community, with social concern, dedicated to service of others, attempting to live unconditional love. At the same time inwards, through such practices as meditation, contemplative prayer, transcending to the still centre of our being. Both outwards and inwards nourishing each other, moving us toward humanity's great new evolutionary leap into consciousness. (Adrian Smith, *Tomorrow's Christians*)

*OWITF* is an attempt to formulate this new way of living. We are beginning to realise the implications of seeing ourselves as "creation come to consciousness", and to accept the responsibilities of co-creation this involves. Without this spiritual underpinning, *OWITF* is doomed to fail.

This new way of living calls for a true *Kenosis*, just like Jesus lived it. It involves moving away from a dualistic way of thinking and living, and realising that each of us is called to wholeness and oneness. We attempt to read the life of Jesus through this lens. I believe that *kenosis* is at the heart of reconciling the Jesus Story with the Universe Story. We will struggle to find ways of moving into this consciousness, and this struggle will be what we call 'formation'.

Since the New Age phenomenon has come about without any initiator or hierarchical structure, without any unifying ideology or doctrine or any accepted body of authoritative texts, without any headquarters or membership requirement, we might rightly ask what has brought about this 'spirituality' that has seeped almost unnoticed into so many areas of our present day culture?

I believe, as do many people, that it is just one of many indications that the whole of humanity is entering a new level of consciousness that is being sparked off in the Western World.

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<sup>3</sup> Capra, F. (1992) *The Tao of Physics. An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*. London: Harper Collins.

"All over the world, people are struggling with these new conditions and have been forced to reassess their religious traditions, which were designed for a very different type of society. They are finding that the old forms of faith no longer work for them; they cannot provide the enlightenment and consolation that human beings seem to need. As a result, men and women are trying to find new ways of being religious. Like the reformers and prophets of the first Axial Age, they are attempting to build upon the insights of the past in a way that will take human beings forward into the new world they have created for themselves."- (Karen Armstrong)<sup>4</sup>

### *A New Way of Being Brother*

Our Congregation journey over the recent past has deepened our understanding of what it means to be "Brother". We have been trying to live a 'heart-centred' spirituality and to understand the implications of this. We see ourselves as relational beings first and foremost, and the *New Life in Mission Communities* have brought us to see the possibilities in this way of living.

The validation of the Proposition in OWITF has some interesting things to tell us about the call to Being Brother<sup>5</sup>. I highlight some of these only.

*A Brother aligns his life with Jesus' search for God and his mission to spread the Reign of God. To be a Brother is to engage with and be present to all people with humility, empathy and an open heart. The core of a Brother's vocation is to live the Gospel radically through his search for God. Taking this "search for God" honestly and seriously is a particular gift a Brother offers the Church.*

*The community is the context for our shared spiritual search. This is the dynamic context for experiencing the Mystery we call God in the everyday realities of life. Following Jesus in the spirit of Edmund Rice is the desire of all members. The community will only be genuine if the members are open to being led to a deeper humanity.*

*We will share our personal and communal lives, including our deepening understanding of ourselves, of others, of Creation and of God. It also means that we share with one another what is happening in our relationships, especially what we are learning through our mutual friendship with poor people which connects us more deeply with our own vulnerability and humanity.*

*In living community life the Brothers nurture a presence which touches people's spirits and a curiosity about the world that values mystery,*

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<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, K. (2014) *The Battle for God. Fundamentalism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Random House.

<sup>5</sup> (editor's note: The validations of the Proposition comprise the various aspects of research undertaken to support the validity of the Proposition.)

*transcendence and beauty.*

*Sharing the spiritual search involves personal and community spiritual practice. This will include meditation, daily prayer together, ritual celebrations, including Eucharist and Reconciliation, reflection on daily life and ministry experience, exploring together the New Universe Story. The community undertakes facilitation to help deal with community dynamics.*

*Our Catholic Christian tradition, which we seek to deepen, is the context for sharing our spiritual search. We are also open to the wisdom of other traditions as we embark on this journey.*

*There are going to be challenges to living together that can provoke anger, frustration or hurt. An openness and acceptance of these emotions is necessary. Rituals of reconciliation and other methods of addressing difference are important and will have to be developed if the community is to grow and relationships deepen. Intensive preparation for this new kind of community living is essential, and facilitation will be needed at times once the community moves into its place of living.*

*For a community to be a joyful place, it must seek authenticity. Masks must drop and members must see and recognise the individuality and dignity of each person. This is at the heart of vowed living. "There is no place in such a community for silent, hidden suffering which can alienate and make us strangers to each other" (To Share Our Spiritual Search). Members must feel accepted, cherished and supported and seek to intimately share their lives together.*

### *A New Way of Being with People Made Poor*

*A mission that is going to draw Brothers into a deep and active engagement with poor people will need the solid foundation of personal prayer and time for quiet reflection. It is imperative therefore to provide the necessary skills that allow for theological reflection, and for the scriptures to occupy a place at the Centre of our lives. This initiative will encourage the nurturing of a contemplative stance on life, or what is called "mysticism in the marketplace".*

*Brothers' awareness of themselves and their capacity to address personal issues will enable them to deal with what may arise when working in close proximity with people in dislocating situations. It will create in them the need for, and appreciation of, personal counselling and spiritual direction as regular requirements of their lives.*

*It is essential that the Brothers are skilled, competent and confident in their mission and ministry. In addition, being professional entails having knowledge of professional ethics and boundaries, child protection policies and availing of supervision and regular evaluation.*

*Engaging with poor people as a disciple of Jesus demands an openness of mind and heart and a listening ear. Relating to people as Brothers requires an attitude of reverence, respect and trust.*<sup>6</sup>

Religious carry a passion for Jesus' stance of solidarity with those at the margins, including poor people, people who suffer gender discrimination and those whose participation in leadership and worship is restricted by hierarchical power structures. *"Religious Life must be the thorn, the restlessness, the constant impetus, forbidding the Church to make its peace with the powers of the world"* (Zechmeister, 2012).<sup>7</sup> This stance brings Religious inevitably into conflict with the hierarchical Church and secular power structures.

As his followers, his voice in our world, tomorrow's Christians are called to challenge institutional injustice, as Jesus did, as much in the realm of religion as in society at large. For instance, the right wing of the Church – the wealthiest constituency – is obsessed with sexuality issues, while ignoring what Jesus said about the danger of riches. As someone has said, if Jesus were alive today he would be more concerned with what went on in the boardroom than in the bedroom! Jesus hardly spoke about human sexuality, but he had a great deal to say about the injustices of the system. He was in line with the great prophets of Israel who challenged their people with substituting religious ritual and purity for the concerns of God, which were more about justice to the poor than the collection of religious offerings.

"There is hardly any other figure in the western tradition who has been so thoroughly domesticated as Jesus. He had a lovely wildness in him. Every time religious institutions tried to box him in he danced away from their threats and trick questions effortlessly." (Donahue p.163.)

Our attempts to be with people made poor in a non-threatening and empowering way, will have as its motivating source the Sermon on the Mount – that teaching that tells us how disciples of Jesus behave.

## **Conclusion**

As is noticeable from the above, I have really stressed the call to live in a new way. I believe that this is a call to challenge culture above all things. I also believe that the challenge to dominant culture is what Jesus was about. He was not interested in religion, except as practising this change. A new consciousness demands this. This is at the heart of our call as religious today and is the core of *OWITF*.

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<sup>6</sup> Extracts from the Validation Document

<sup>7</sup> Zechmeister, M. (2013) *Passion for God, and Compassion for the Other*. Lecture at SJU St. Jerome's University.