

## **The Ultimate Frontier**

Going through a border post for the first time is not necessarily an easy experience. Entering or leaving a country and having to report to a customs officer can be a source of anxiety for some. The same is true when it comes to the mandatory passages of life, the ones never before experienced and those that will be experienced but once, such as the final passage when we render our last breath to enter a land unknown, even though it is said to be filled with promise of happiness for all eternity.

### **The Border Crossing Syndrome**

How can we live the final crossing and not experience the “border crossing syndrome” that can strike anyone, even those who consecrated their entire life to God? This syndrome unleashes the morbid fear there is someone out to get us, closing in on us to the point of strangulation, a terrible feeling that causes tremendous anxiety. It is the dark cloud of the fear of being condemned, damned, the haunting feeling that we might have been wrong, the quasi-certainty that faith was but an illusion and that we might as well get this done with as fast as possible. And the spiral begins over and over again. Is it right for a person consecrated to God to have such thoughts? And what if God doesn't exist? What if it was just a pipe dream and the whole thing is about to collapse? What if there really is nothing!

We have to admit that we all have, in our religious communities, brothers and sisters who go through this terrible state that little by little becomes all consuming. Often they are persons who had heavy responsibilities to bear or who discreetly dedicated their entire lives to the mission. In their new-found reality as recluse they find themselves dispossessed of everything, forced to face their poverty, with no choice but to go within.

Some of our members experience this as a privileged time to renew their alliance with the God of fidelity, while others live a dramatic struggle with this pilgrimage within. The physical condition that brought them to the infirmary of the congregation or to a long-term-care facility can sometimes cause them to become demanding, bitter and prone to panic, with a tendency to keep their hands on “the call bell” which in the long run becomes like a “clanging cymbal.” I am not exaggerating when I say that this constant ringing ends up becoming an “irritant,” a source of exasperation for all those around. Who could ever imagine that this apparently harmless reiterated ringing is really a call similar to that of the apostle Paul when he asked: “Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (Rom 7, 24)

### **Analyzing the Anguish**

How can we relieve and even befriend this anguish? Who among the team of caregivers is able to grasp the depth of the state of anguish experienced by certain brothers and sisters whose cry is close to that of Jesus in Gethsemane when he prayed: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me!” – veritable night of the senses, true night of the soul.

In the past, our seniors in need of assistance were accompanied and cared for by their sisters and brothers in community. Today, we more and more entrust their care to lay people who, despite being well trained to do their job, are not necessarily capable of providing the spiritual care required by those who have dedicated their entire life to the service of God. These caregivers know what dose of medication must be administered to alleviate pain, but it is beyond their competence to understand the psycho-spiritual suffering related to the end of life, much less the type of comforting required by someone who has reached this stage. Those who

have consecrated their life to God are no different from anyone else; they too need to be accompanied across the threshold to Life without borders.

Within a context where secularism is infiltrating our milieu of life, what can we do to help our members cross the final border in a spirit of “paschal obedience” as expressed by Marie-Ancilla, OP?<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, the ideas of Jean Tauler, theologian and XIV<sup>th</sup> century mystic, push us to an in-depth reflective meditation on this question for, according to him, anguish is not a bad thing but rather the second degree of mystical life.<sup>2</sup> It therefore becomes imperative that we be able to identify the type of anguish being experienced by our brother and sister.

We have to admit that our health-care facilities are not exempt from the influence of the mass media where we promote the ideas of “dying with dignity,” “freedom to choose when to die” or the “I love you enough to help you put an end to your pain.” They are so many different disguises to avoid saying the word euthanasia. Proof of this is the film *Amour* where the last scene places us face to face with this reality.<sup>3</sup>

### **Accompanying the Dying: Service Par Excellence**

It is important to recall the words of John Paul II: “When *the moment finally comes for uniting oneself to the supreme hour of the Lord's Passion*, the consecrated person knows that the Father is now bringing to completion the mysterious process of formation which began many years before [...] At such times, the sensitive closeness of the Superior is most essential. Great comfort can also come from the valuable help of a brother or sister, whose concerned and caring presence can lead to a rediscovery of the meaning of the covenant which God originally established, and which he has no intention of breaking. The person undergoing such a trial will then accept purification and hardship as essential to the following of Christ Crucified. The trial itself will appear as a providential means of being formed by the Father's hands, and as a struggle which is not only *psychological*, carried out by the “I” in relation to itself and its weaknesses, but also *religious*, touched each day by the presence of God and the power of the Cross!”<sup>4</sup>

### **Question for reflection**

I heard a voice saying: “Whom shall I send, who will go for us?” Isaiah answered: “Here I am Lord, send me.” (Isaiah 6, 8)

*Carmelle Bisson, AMJ*  
carmellebisson@yahoo.ca

<sup>1</sup> Marie-Ancilla, OP, *Foi et guérison. Repères et critères chrétiens*, Marseille, Éditions La Thune, 2008, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Tauler, OP “Sermon XL et Sermon XLI” dans *Sermons de Tauler*, Tome II, Éditions de la Vie Spirituelle, Paris, 1927-1935, p. 211-212, 217.

<sup>3</sup> Allusion to the film *Amour* (2012) by Michael Haneke that many said to be “super,” where one of the last scenes is a death by asphyxiation, followed by a suicide.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul II, *Consecrated Life*, Post-Synod Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Montreal, Médiaspaul, 1996, n° 70,6.7.