

**September 21st, 2021 webinar:
“Returning to the source: Charism and the prophetic character
in an evolving consecrated life “**

**Vulnerability and Availability to the Holy Spirit
Nathalie Roberge, O.P.**

With Sister Gaétane, Brother Daniel, we have been reflecting on the charism of consecrated life and its prophetic dimension. In line with their interventions, I would like to delve more deeply with you into two elements that emerged from the General Assembly last May: the observation of the vulnerability of our communities and the awareness that it is more important than ever to be available to the Holy Spirit.

These two realities were expressed in different ways during the General Assembly. I recall one sentence in particular, taken from the compilation of interventions of May 27, 2021, which to my mind sums up rather well the gist of your remarks on the subject: “Our vulnerabilities are touchstones to better advance in and with the Spirit.” The expression is magnificent. It is the bearer of a vitality of life. In just a few words, you managed to translate both your lucidity in the face of reality and the profound hope that dwells within you. It seems to me that it is prophetic to have had the courage to name the situation of vulnerability that we are currently living through and, in the same breath, to have put this situation in dialogue with a call to be open to the Holy Spirit, who is still at work today. So I would like to unwrap this intuition with you, while setting up a major question as a backdrop: How can our vulnerability enable us to be prophetic witnesses of Christ, to the breath of the Spirit?

1. The Bright Side of Vulnerability

At first glance, it is not easy to assert that our vulnerabilities bring life. First of all, what we are experiencing is the negative dimension of vulnerability. To be vulnerable means to be in a situation of weakness or fragility, which predisposes us to be affected, to experience a lack or a certain dependence. It is not at first reassuring, nor even fulfilling.

Moreover, in the history of religious life, consecrated persons have felt called upon to be close to people who are living in a situation of vulnerability in order to come to their aid. These situations have been — and remain — a call to put on service dress, to go to work.

However, in the interventions of the General Assembly, we witness a reversal of perspective. The focus is primarily on the bright side of vulnerability. We are invited, as communities, “to welcome our vulnerability as a grace” (compilation of May 28, 2021). This is particularly challenging! What emerges from that statement is the need to take a look of faith on our vulnerabilities, not to wallow in them but to make them stepping stones into the future. To my knowledge, this is a subject that has not been looked at much in recent decades and deserves our attention. Basically, it matches the meaning of our vows as consecrated persons. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that we took were specifically intended to deepen in us the awareness of our vulnerability, to lead us to entrust ourselves to God and to live, with him, the reality of our daily life.

We therefore see the appearance of one of the main characteristics of the bright side of vulnerability, which is to open ourselves up to God, to make us attentive to his passages in our lives and available to the work of his Spirit. On this subject, Pope Francis said on June 7: “Fragilities must not be left off to one side: they are a theological place. My fragility, that of each of us, is the theological place of encounter with the Lord.” (June 7, 2021)

Other positive characteristics of vulnerability can also be highlighted. Besides the interior disposition to listen to the Holy Spirit, the awareness of our vulnerability disposes us to see the manifestations of Divine Providence and, therefore, to live in an attitude of gratitude. Moreover, the experience of our vulnerability also becomes an opportunity to open ourselves up to others, to establish relationships, to create solidarity. Moreover, it is conducive to stimulating our creativity. It pushes us to go beyond our usual frameworks, to broaden our horizons, to explore new paths. In short, these are some aspects that invite us to welcome our vulnerability “like a grace.”

Obviously, this welcoming process involves taking a step back from events. The work of the Spirit within us usually takes place over a period of time. It is interwoven with our process of trial and error, our hesitations, our resistance and even our mistakes. We know this from experience!

2. Vulnerability in the History of Salvation and in the History of Our Communities

It would be interesting to go through the history of salvation together to see how God reveals himself through situations of vulnerability. Think in particular of Abraham who is without descendants, of Joseph sold by his brothers, of Moses who must flee from Egypt, of Zechariah and of Elizabeth who are sterile, etc. There are many examples. But from one end of the Revelation to the other, a common thread emerges. God makes a promise to these vulnerable men and women, a promise he repeats like a refrain: "I will be with you." This is the only certainty that God gives to those he invites to walk with him. Paul echoes this in the second letter to the Corinthians: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor 12:9)

If we had more time, it would also be worthwhile to revisit the history of our communities. It seems to me that it is possible to say, without being mistaken, that our communities were born in vulnerability. It would be enough to reread the archival documents — chronicles, letters, etc. — to be sure of this. In general, our founders had few means at their disposal. But they accepted to let God open the way for them. It is through their availability to the Holy Spirit, in the soil of their vulnerability, that the charism of our institutes has taken shape. It produced wonderful fruits of holiness and works, which continue to stand the test of time.

I am in particular thinking about all those communities that came to settle in Canada at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, because of a climate of persecution in France. In the short term, it was an incomprehensible ordeal. But in the long term, we can see all the fertility that resulted for our country — especially in terms of education. These men and women risked everything but bounced back from the ordeal and reinvented themselves, relying on the grace of God. What about us today?

As Pope Francis recalled on May 17: Consecrated life is always a "dialogue with reality." Hence the invitation he extends to us: "Do not fear limits! Do not be afraid of frontiers! Do not fear the peripheries! For it is there that the Spirit will speak to you. Put yourselves 'within range' of the Holy Spirit." (*Message to mark the National Week for Institutes of Consecrated Life in Spain*, May 17, 2021)

3. The Vulnerability of the Church and Our Communities Today

Currently, many of us are probably living with the feeling of being helpless and overwhelmed in the face of community and ecclesial realities, to the point, perhaps, of

believing ourselves to be useless or — even worse — insignificant. The crisis situation that has been affecting us for so many months — due to the COVID-19 pandemic, sexual abuse scandals, discoveries at residential schools for Indigenous children, etc. — is causing us to live a time of stripping-down, but also a time of maturation and refocusing on what is essential.

One of the observations that emerge from this troubled period is certainly the awareness that the Church — and each of our communities — is immersed in the Paschal Mystery. Not only does the Church live *from* the Paschal Mystery, but she is living *the* Paschal Mystery in her own flesh! The words of Mary of the Incarnation take on their full meaning in our context: “We taste the fruits of the cross without leaving the cross.” (Letter XCIII, p. 265)¹

What are the calls of the Spirit that arise from this frequentation of the Paschal Mystery? We can undoubtedly give different answers depending on the charisms of our institutes and our personal charisms. To support our process of discernment, I suggest that we contemplate, for the space of a few lines, the event of the Last Supper.

4. The Vulnerability of Christ

Christ himself experienced vulnerability, extreme despoilment. This experience culminates in the cross, which violently seals his death. In human sight, the life of Christ ends in failure. To glimpse the bright side of the scandal of the cross, it is imperative to return to the incredible gesture that Christ poses on the evening of the Last Supper.

As he feels his life is coming to an end, Christ uses all his creativity to accomplish his mission. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he takes bread and wine, presents them to the Father, gives him thanks and entrusts himself entirely to him, in trust. At the same time, he offers his life for the salvation of the multitude, making of every human being a brother and a sister, whom he wishes to unite in one body. At the heart of his vulnerability, Christ shatters the boundaries of space and time to go all the way to the end of love — a going-all-the-way to the end that reaches us today, in our reality. This is what is actualized with each Eucharist.

1. It would be relevant to reread, in the *Écrits spirituels et historiques de Québec*, [Spiritual and Historical Writings of Quebec], the passage in which Marie of the Incarnation recounts her understanding of the Canadian Church, built not of stones, but of crucified people. See XLVI, p.236–237.

How can Christ's attitude at the Last Supper inspire us today? At the heart of our vulnerabilities, we have the opportunity to relive the gesture of Christ. With Christ, we can risk trusting in the Father with confidence. With Christ, by the breath of the Spirit, we can dare to open ourselves to all those around us, to the point of developing a "culture of encounter" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 30). With Christ, we can beg the Spirit to make us creative in how to break the bread of our daily lives, to bring life to the world.

In short, the intuition that you had at the General Assembly to consider "our vulnerabilities [as] touchstones to better advance in and with the Spirit" is consistent with Christ's prophetic gesture at the Last Supper. Your intuition expresses the desire to provide a concrete response to Christ's request: "Do this in remembrance of me...." So one could say that "our vulnerabilities are touchstones to better advance in and with the Spirit" in memory of Him.

Paragraph 285 of the *Aparecida* document takes on a new radiance from this perspective: "Thus life in the Spirit does not enclose us in cozy intimacy, but makes us generous and creative persons, happy in proclamation and missionary service. We become committed to the demands of reality and able to find a profound significance for everything that we are entrusted with doing for the Church and for the world." (*Aparecida*, 285)

Conclusion

It is fortunate that we can help each other in reading the signs of the times and living ever more closely under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The experience of the synodal conversations that we have been having for more than a year now has been, in that sense, a support on the path of our following of Christ.

Certainly, the current reality clearly reminds us that, as consecrated persons — and more fundamentally as human beings — we are incomplete (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no 302). We are part of the creation that groans in childbirth (Rom 8:22). However, the awareness of our vulnerability allows us to increasingly open ourselves up to the gift of God. Our awareness disposes us to welcome the Holy Spirit in our "earthenware vessels" (2 Cor 4:7).

As Pope Francis invites us in the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*: "may the Holy Spirit cause us to contemplate history in the light of the risen Jesus. In this way, the

Church will not stand still, but constantly welcome the Lord's surprises." (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 139)

Together, with hearts open to "the Lord's surprises," may we call on the Creator Spirit, the Comforter Spirit, the Spirit who gives light and strength, to move forward with confidence. For, as Pope Francis says, "The Holy Spirit is the builder of hope." (Pope Francis, June 16, 2019)