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Leadership in a Pioneer Community:  
*Tending the Fires of the Collective Soul*

## Preface

This article is the fifth in a series pertaining to religious life as a pioneer community. Focusing on the emerging life of women religious, the image of being a pioneer community taps into the fundamental spirit and tenacity of founders and foundresses who pioneered life in the United States and beyond. That same energy is needed for the emerging pioneer community of the 21st century as characterized below:

- *Smaller congregations committed to living and sharing the spirit of the charism*
- *Intergenerational and intercultural in composition*
- *Committed to people on the margins especially women and children*
- *Simpler and more intentional community life enriched by faith sharing and contemplation*
- *Interconnected by a network of relationships that are passionate and committed to the congregational charism and the gospel message*
- *Technologically astute*

The challenges facing women religious require a spiritual maturity both individually and collectively if they are to truly become a pioneer community in the 21st century.

## The Collective Soul of a Pioneering Community

The collective soul journey of the pioneer community is a profound journey of radical detachment, of saying good-bye to existing understandings of religious life and opening the communal soul to a yet unknown future. For this to happen, it is to allow the spiritual invitation to intensify the call to both individual and community holiness. Thus, the heartfelt pilgrimage is to support and nurture the sacredness of each member while seeking a common vision and a unified heart. In many ways, this is symbolic of our evolving global society. The community members of this era are the first generation invited to leave the comfortability of their traditional tribal relationships and explore a new paradigm of an interconnected and global society. All of this is happening as long held existing mental models and lifestyles

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are continually being challenged and disrupted by technological advances. With this, the congregation is being asked to walk the fear-provoking spiritual corridor of leaving the safety of their own upper room to seek a new resurrection as a pioneer community. Pedro Arrupe SJ, the Superior General of the Jesuits right after Vatican II stated, "A key characteristic of a truly refounding person is his or her ability to identify with the Gethsemane experience of Jesus Christ." <sup>1</sup>

1. Gerald A Arbuckle, *The Francis Factor and the People of God: New Life for the Church* (NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 150.

The deepening of both the individual and the collective spiritual experience is the essence of what is needed to participate fully in a world that has become more diverse. As we encounter greater cultural diversity and technological advances, our existing mental models and worldviews have been tested and disrupted. These realities significantly reshape how we define sacred subjects like relationships, mystery, transcendence and affiliation to the divine. Illia Delio, in her book, *The Emergent Christ*, says, “Evolution is based on change. When applied to biology, evolution generally refers to change in life forms over time. The same concept of change over time can be applied to the cosmos. Life means change, and the rich diversity of life is based on change.”<sup>2</sup>

The current pilgrimage is a mystical invitation to walk the path of incarnation and new birth, while at the same time, rooting the soul in the paschal mystery of death, grief and transformation. It is an invitation to enter into the richness of the gospel narrative. The ministry of Jesus, His miracles, message of love, and pastoral presence, call us to ongoing transformative change. This is true for both the individual and communitarian dimensions of religious life. We seem to have forgotten as Delio points out, “all of life follows the cycle of birth, maturity, deterioration and death. Change is not only relevant to life but to all of life’s expression in culture, education, politics, economics and history.”<sup>3</sup>

This shifting world and spiritual landscape is the emerging environment that congregations experience as they move

into a smaller, more intentional, pioneer community. It summons them to develop a multi-disciplined discernment practice that interfaces dimensions of personal, collective and global spiritual viewpoints as an integrated spirituality. This demands embracing a contemplative stance in the solitude of the heart while at the same time engaging the world, and living community life.

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The profound question, “Can you drink this cup that I am going to drink?”<sup>4</sup> is the sacred question being asked of religious congregations, both individually and collectively, as they embrace becoming a pioneer community. The acceptance of the “cup” through contemplative stillness opens the heart to the stirrings of the Spirit. These stirrings become the energetic pulsation that affirms and deepens the community’s passionate commitment to the common good of all humanity.

As the community continues to become smaller, the image of a rocket ship helps to illustrate this journey. The large booster rocket is the energetic thrust that empowers the satellite or space capsule to leave Mother Earth (the known). Once it leaves the pad, the capsule becomes detached to allow it to enter the next phase of thrust, which places it in proper orbit.

2. Illia Delio, *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), 34.

3. Ibid., 34.

4. Matt. 20:22, NAB



Then the smaller satellite or lunar module begins its new mission and fulfills its purpose. If all three parts of the initial launch are not in accord, the chances of fulfilling the mission's purpose become impossible. Even though there is a radical letting go of the known and moving into the unknown of the spacious cosmos, the satellite or lunar model remains in contact with mission control. This connection provides the necessary support and guidance to support the capsule on its mission. The tendency is not to recognize this journey as an enlightening process that depends on faith. This illumination begins only when the rocket leaves the security of the known that is Mother Earth, releases and is successfully thrust into orbit. Ultimately, it is a walk of faith requiring radical detachment and trust in the divine. It requires reliance upon the collaboration of an eco-system of thousands and a transcendent belief in the possibilities for good in order to achieve its purpose.

***This collective, spiritual voyage is based on four critical principles:***

- ~ **Respecting and appreciating the historical story of the members**
- ~ **Being a Discerning Community**
- ~ **Grieving and Transformation**
- ~ **Seeing possibilities while being honest about the limitations**

## **Respect and appreciation of the historical story of the members:**

If we think of a community as a space rocket, a segment of the rocket can represent each generation. The largest segment of most communities is comprised of those 70 and older and is represented by the powerful booster rocket. A smaller group in their 50's and 60's comprises the rocket that propels and stabilizes the smaller lunar module. This module represents the smallest number in their 20's 30' and 40's. It is this group whose responsibility it is to explore the indispensable call of religious life for these emerging times. It is vital for the various generations to spiritually dance in harmony as they let go of the deadening parts of the past while embracing transformation so the charism can flourish in a new historical era.

Each generation has a unique gift in this transformative process. The senior members, the largest population, bring a lived wisdom tested overtime (booster rocket). Those in their 50's and 60's bring energy and knowledge about the congregation's critical issues. It is the energy of the younger members in their 20's 30's and 40's that bring the momentum necessary to move into the pioneer era. The unified energy of each generation sharing their unique life-cycle gift enables the capsule to enter unexplored and new terrain.

We understand that all space flights have a supportive and knowledgeable ground control. This ground control for the younger members is the connected spiritual eco-system grounded in the charism. It is this collaborative web of relationships (eco-system) that enables the pioneer community to courageously enter into the unknown for the sake of mission.

*Today, the collective is implored to ask in hope this question, what is our collective, passionate force of love and charism asking us to breathe life into within an interconnected and global world?*



### Being a Discerning Community

For these emerging times which demand transformation, the community of believers must be of one heart and mind.<sup>5</sup> Teilhard de Chardin believed, “Love is a passionate force at the heart of the Big Bang universe, the fire that breathes life into matter and unifies the elements center to center; love is deeply embedded in the cosmos; a cosmological force.”<sup>6</sup> Today, the collective is implored to ask in hope this question, what is our collective, passionate force of love and charism asking us to breathe life into within an interconnected and global world?

As gospel people, we are asked to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>7</sup> This understanding is the foundation for discernment in a diverse world with many perspectives, beliefs and ideologies. To fully engage in communal discernment, there is within every dialogue and decision, a necessary quality of being peacemaker that fosters respect for the members even with those who take issue with the outcome. A

true discernment process is profoundly spiritual and touches us deeply. Because people may have trigger points, issues, words, and/or situations can open unresolved wounds, areas needing forgiveness and held beliefs that surface as absolute truth. The discernment process, led by the Spirit, allows us to hold the other in love and compassion allowing us to respect, to heal and to share a holy presence with our fellow community members. This internal freedom allows for the Spirit to break through the tension, fears and hopes to discern a shared vision.

Discernment is grounded in the spiritual gift of hospitality. Hospitality is the opening of one’s heart to receive and respect the individual or group. This fundamental value welcomes and receives the other in blessing even when that individual or group triggers our shadow. The spiritual summons of being hospitable is a core virtue in these transitory times when so many of the existing structures, long standing beliefs and the meaning of being in relationship are being redefined and questioned.

5. Acts 5:32, NAB

6. Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, 43.

7. Matt. 22:36-39



This hospitable trait is even more important in relation to the congregation's members. The community needs to be an inviting, safe place where people can explore both their wounds, and their hopes and dreams without being judged or negated. This safe setting of welcome allows the Spirit to break through in a spontaneous and often profound manner. As Joan Chittister states, "Hospitality of the heart is what makes the world a tender and lovely place to be. It is what makes interdependence real."<sup>8</sup> Religious, through their charism, have the ability to model this for each of their members and to the larger world.

The community discernment process based on being welcoming and hospitable demands a thoughtful practice of contemplative silence, reverent listening, and respect for the diversity of another's opinions. This depth of presence is not easy because tension and conflicts can internally trigger insecurity, anger and feelings of vulnerability. Community discernment necessitates room to pray from the incarnational perspective, a perspective that embraces the emerging new even as it grieves the loss, opens one's heart to transformation, and opens one arms in receptivity to the Spirit's unfolding path.

### **Grief and Transformation:**

Grief, by its very nature, is a period of chaos and disorientation. Chittister defines it as "that slice of life that takes us beyond the boundaries of our mind and makes us see life new again." She goes on to say "grief grows us up. When we come to understand that whatever we have we can lose, we begin, first to hold everything lightly and

second we learn to squeeze happiness dry."<sup>9</sup> The atmosphere of mourning is to feel both the gift and loss of what is sacred to us. The object of this bereavement takes many forms from buildings, to ministries, to friendships and at times even the loss of the dreams and hopes for our congregation. Grief has a way of piercing the heart and fiber of our existence. It teaches the powerful lesson that nothing is permanent.

The collective spiritual challenge is to enter into the profound mystery of Holy Saturday that affirms and allows the body to grieve these losses. We live in a culture that anesthetizes us from the pain of suffering and loss. Each day a myriad of magical promises called ads tell us how to lose weight; deal with all sorts of physical and emotional challenges; and look perpetually young as a means to deny the pain of suffering and death. We must ask the question how does the congregation anesthetize itself from facing the grief of today and walking into the uncertain and sometimes scary path of an unknown future. Holy Saturday is sacred time that invites us to center ourselves in the depth of our sorrow and become its companion. In doing this, we are able to reconcile the past and allow the new to appear. Grief, at times, can be a period of heartfelt agonizing vulnerability at not having control of the present or the future.

This reality is present in a variety of ways as congregations continue to become smaller with few or no new members. It strikes at the fearful heart muttering the unspoken question, 'Are we coming to completion?' At other times, congregations can feel like a relic of a by-gone era as they experience the next generation's changing perspectives.

8. Joan Chittister, *Aspects of the Heart: The Many Paths to a Good Life* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2012), 46.

9. Ibid., 36.

This is not easy, in periods of chaos there is a feeling of vulnerability. Brene Brown in her book, *Rising Strong*, states “Since the beginning of time, people have found a way to rise after falling, yet there is no well-worn path leading the way. All of us must make our own way, exploring some of the most universally shared experiences while also

navigating a solitude that makes us feel as if we are the first to set foot in uncharted regions.”<sup>10</sup>

This is our collective invitation to lament our sense of loss and missed opportunities while creating an open heart, a space for God to surprise us with the new.

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The painful reality is that the congregational vision, more than likely, will come from facing the deep soul-penetrating sense of loss. This grief, like a knife cutting into our fragile heart, is the very path calling us to develop a future. The denial or repressing of this reality only blocks the Spirit from showing us seedlings that over time through perseverance becomes the congregation’s future. If the painful reality is completion, denial only shelters us from fully celebrating in gratitude the gift of our vocation and sharing the fruits of it with others. Denial and resistance become unwitting companions that lead us to go forward kicking and screaming until the end without embracing the beauty of the journey. In this reality, the collective shadow conceals the hidden fruits of transparent honesty that God may be inviting us to explore.

Often times we forget that as gospel people, without Holy Saturday, there is no

resurrection. After the crucifixion, followers of Jesus hid in the upper room scared, lonely and bewildered as they drank in the starkness of the moment. This agonizing solitary time of grief was prayerful. Strengthened by the Spirit, they had the courage to visit the tomb, walk the path and ultimately accept their call. Their courageous acceptance of this

invitation allowed them to become the first to proclaim the vision of love and hope that Jesus shared during his ministry. As a congregation in sorrow and agony, it is important to understand where the divine is inviting us to become messengers of love, hope and justice in an interconnected and global world.

### **Seeing possibilities while being honest about the limitations:**

The spiritual future is exploring a path that, at times has only the faintest of light. It is being open to new possibilities that demand a depth of intellectual rigor, spiritual maturity and collective risk. This risk-taking guarantees no success. More than likely the early stages of the unfolding direction will test the congregation’s ability to persevere as it meets more failure than achievement. Thus, the new path continually invites the congregation to leave the comfort of the known. This exodus from the comfortable is often met with resistance as we pine for and exalt in the memories and achievements of golden days. For congregational leaders and members, it takes tremendous spiritual courage and discipline to enter this alien space. It requires courage to resist judging the congregation as a failure, feeling less than perfect or blaming past decisions in the

10. Brené Brown, *Rising Strong* ([New York]: Random House, 2015), 6.

journey forward. It calls for collective truth telling at the congregational level as new realities emerge.

This transparency allows the group to hold in tension both the possibilities for a direction while securing the capacities to achieve it. The honest acceptance of internal limitations opens the way to alternative possibilities; windows of collaboration within an ever-widening web of relationships; working together to co-create a future. Holding this polarity of possibility and limitation in tension demands a communal spiritual maturity, a collective wisdom grounded in contemplation, mutual collaboration, reflective dialogue and presence to the mystery of transformation. This is not easy. Often it is filled with conflict and differences in perception that create a messiness most groups work to avoid. This avoidance, however, enables us to hide behind a false sense of inclusion and consensus and often, in turn, leads to paralyzing inaction. Tragically, the group then misses a genuine holding of these values of inclusion and the collective that demand both deep, open reflection and the choice to act. This necessary spiritual maturation calls for letting go of individual and collective stances that feed ego satisfaction rather than a well-discerned, collective risk. This is why seeing possibilities demands a daily contemplative prayer stance as individuals and as a congregation to develop the ongoing spiritual maturity for this pilgrimage.

Working toward spiritual maturity is a daily invitation to a discipline that allows one to see subtle signs that become the embers of a seedling that grow into a mature reality. The historical story of the congregation calls each generation to enter into the mystery of

change for their times. Each respective time demands risk and often is seen as wonderful more in retrospect than in the moment. Congregational archives are filled with stories of projects or concepts started by one generation as seedlings and developed over time such as hospitals like Mayo Clinic, Catholic health systems and Catholic colleges. If those early pioneers who started these systems as small dreams and little seedlings returned, they would be astounded and amazed how their early seedlings had blossomed over decades into profound institutions for social impact.

### Summary:

This quote from Edwin Teller speaks to the spiritual path for congregations:

*“Survival of humanity must also include the survival of human dignity. I believe that no endeavor that is worthwhile is simple in prospect. If, it is right, it will be simple in retrospect. Belief in action will accomplish that which does not exist, but which in the future will be taken for granted.”*<sup>11</sup>

The spiritual question for religious congregations is, what endeavor is beseeching you to risk that in time will be taken for granted? This is the contemplative pathway that God is welcoming religious to walk as they become a smaller and yet vibrant congregation on mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

11. David A Ramey, *Empowering Leaders* (Kansas City, MO: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1991), 14.



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