

# TELL THIS GENERATION TO MARCH ON!

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**I**t is my task to put into context the slogan of the XXI<sup>st</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Conference of Religious in Brazil. Without attempting to be all-encompassing, I will try to give an overall view and, particularly for such an important gathering as this Assembly, point out some elements designed to deepen reflection on the current situation of consecrated religious life.

The inspiration for our title comes from Exodus 14:15, a verse which carefully records the most critical moment in the Exodus process. The authors gift us with a framework which recalls the most important event in the history of the people of God<sup>1</sup>.

## **The Wider Context**

Migrating for better living conditions or simply fleeing from hunger are millennial and universal historical realities. The people of whom Exodus speaks are made up of *Hebrews*<sup>2</sup> from the Nile Delta in Egypt who seek survival and opportunity. History mentions the Hycsos<sup>3</sup>, a people who inhabited Lower Egypt and whom the Pharaohs had to confront. They were expelled by the Pharaoh Ahmose in 1575 B.C. In their wake, and even before them as well as after them, many groups journeyed back and forth, some not to return. According to history, there were times when the Pharaohs were occupied more with Upper Egypt, and during these periods the Nile Delta was freer for occupation by migrants and nomads.

The reign of Ramses I<sup>4</sup> began in 1308 B.C. He resolved to move his official residence and to build large fortifications in the Nile Delta, a decision which resulted in great investment. Seti I, Ramses' son, continued this work. The Hebrews (migrants and nomads) were located there and were used as

efficient and cheap manual laborers for the projects. As a result, they were oppressed and their oppression continued to grow.

The Egyptians maintained a system for storing food (Gen 41:33-36, 53-57) which resulted in their subduing the inhabitants around the area as well as those at a considerable distance. In times of drought and food scarcity, the local and neighboring populations submitted to the lord of the depositories so as to not perish from hunger (Gen 47:13-26). According to Gen 42:1-5, the people then gathered by the sea shore had come to Egypt because of famine. Famine had brought them there but the land dear to their hearts was not Egypt (Gen 47:29-31; 49:29, and 50:22-26). In Exodus 12:40, we learn that they remained in Egypt for 430 years. Their oppression began to weigh on them in 1308 B.C., however, and it became unbearable fifty years later during the reign of Ramses II (Ex 1:8).

### **The Nile Delta, A Space In Transformation**

Genesis 47:1-12 notes that the people entered this area peacefully and remained for about ten generations, living on the fertile land without being bothered. Ramses I decided, however, to transform the space and occupy the land for mega projects. Because of his plans, therefore, the land was no longer a gift from God but the property of the “Lord of Egypt,” and not only the land but all that was in it since owning the land also meant possession of its wealth and the peoples who lived there. Pharaoh decided to transform the area and put all who were there to work on his plan. What were they to do now? Accept and adapt to the change? Rebel and cry out for a liberator? Create new spaces within that of Pharaoh? Create new spaces in other regions? Participate in the transformation he had decreed? Seek new spaces to continue living in the way they had for generations? Create space within themselves to find a new way of life? The truth was that they could not stay. The world had changed, the times had changed and Egypt was no longer the same. New generations with new attitudes had emerged and they demanded that history move on....

The Hebrews who had entered Egypt were well fed, had multiplied and were perceived as a menace by Pharaoh (Ex 1:8-10). Things changed and the same land that had sated their hunger was now threatening to destroy their liberty and the meaning of life. The Hebrews could survive but not flourish since their growth threatened others.

Oppression grew, leaders disappeared and the deeds of the past were forgotten (Ex 1:8). Events of the past are valuable only as signs and, for them to influence the present, they must be reread and reinterpreted. So it is that, lost in the present of their history, these people cannot abide oppression and have

no recourse but to moan, lament and cry out without knowing to whom to turn. The God who hears the cry of the oppressed is attentive to them but needs someone to be a presence among the people. He calls Moses in order to effect with him the liberation of the people (Ex 3:1-12). God needs someone open to being embraced by God's Spirit in order to bring forth wonders in the present.

## Always Prepare A Way Out

In the first chapters of Exodus, we already see Moses urging the people, in the name of God, to leave Egypt, henceforth to be called a den of slavery, for the Promised Land, a land of milk and honey (Ex 3:7-8). Slavery is a systemic component of Pharaoh's organization and helps explain his *success*<sup>5</sup>. The Promised Land is really a dream to be built in faith and nourished in hope.

This book has a great wealth of information concerning the difficulties envisaged by Moses for not accepting the mission (Ex 3:11,13; 4:1,10,13; 5:22-23), the difficulties Pharaoh creates for Moses in carrying out his mission (Ex 5:2; 7:13; 8:11,15,28; 9:7,12,35; 10:10-11,20,27-29; 14:5-9) and the difficulty the Hebrews have in welcoming God's proposal through Moses (Ex 5:20-21; 6:9). Confronting such difficulties is possible only through God's grace and with God.

The text makes clear that the Hebrews were not to flee by the back door, but through the front, and their departure was to be authorized by the "hard-hearted man," the Lord of Egypt (Ex 3:21-22). This will only happen after the tragic death of his first born, the legitimate heir to his throne who was to continue his dynasty (Ex 12:29-34). Only when Pharaoh perceives that there is no future does his heart soften.

The mission is from God and Moses is called to be God's presence in history, among a multitude of slaves in Egypt. Moses is to guide not only the slaves but also the slave masters in the process of conscientization. In the name of God, he offers an alternative unknown to the slaves and their master but feasible and real. This new venture takes place, without violence, when the enslaved become agents and the master lets go of power a little. God wishes liberation without violence, but the purported Lord of Egypt refuses to give in.

## Strategies

As we study the text, various strategies become apparent: seeking and opening new paths, going as a caravan, living in tents and camping at the borders of the water and the desert.

Liberated by Moses and guided by God, the Hebrews finally leave but,

Tell this generation to march on!

curiously, they do not take a traditional route; rather, they penetrate into the desert by obscure, unknown and unexplored paths (Ex 13:17-18). They always pitch their tents at the edges of the desert, at the borders of lakes and the sea.

Well-traveled routes are known, already explored and offer nothing new. The conquest of the new is not made on such roads but by carving out new ones. Whoever travels old roads must have new eyes to see the invisible and discover the new in the ordinary. Newness is an ongoing construction, a daily crafting, fruit of the “dynamic” of the Spirit of God in the story of those who let themselves be guided by the Spirit and become the Spirit’s agents through grace.

For the “prudent,” the desert and the sea are not good choices for safe encampments. They are frontier places and, while the risk is great and the surprises more frequent in such a “liminal” situation, the opportunities are greater also. The future lies beyond risk taken and confronted. The desert and the sea are challenges on the journey, but they are neither goals nor destinations in themselves. They oblige us to confront ourselves and recognize what lies within. We are more dependent on things than we imagine and we have great difficulty in dealing with liquidity. Water calls to us but also frightens and terrorizes us.

According to the text, it is God himself who leads God’s people: “The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light” (Ex 13:21). The idea of making a journey led by a pillar of cloud and enlightened by a pillar of fire is suggestive of many things. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1Corinthians 10:1-4 that Christ was the cloud or the fire accompanying the people of Israel. Through the mediation of Moses, Christ was guiding them in the fragility of the cloud and the strength of the fire. Although they often appear insignificant, signs are not lacking to invite us to proceed at the right time or remain where we are. We must, therefore, be watchful and move forward with the signs we have, knowing how to discern the permanent in what is passing and fleeting.

### **The Danger Of Returning To One’s Vomit (Prov 26:11)**

The text speaks not only of the Hebrews’ march and Pharaoh’s remorse, along with the ensuing persecution (Ex 14:5-9), but also of the Hebrews’ regret at having left Egypt (Ex 14:10-12). This shows that it is not enough to leave a place or time. We must also put aside the old ways with their mental processes and undergo the change of a heart grown rusty. Our eyes must be bathed with the eyewash of the Spirit.

The writers say that Pharaoh resolved to pursue and recapture the Hebrews whom he had let go shortly before. Their freedom came with the price of upheaval, hard work, sweat and the sacrifice of a comfortable life, but it also cost Pharaoh his powerful reputation and popularity. Those who earlier were masters of their own households now had to provide for their own sustenance, see to their own needs and complete their projects by the work of their own hands and the sweat of their brow. Furthermore, those who had always provided sustenance for and met the needs of others would henceforth have to take responsibility for the direction of their own history. They seemed, however, to lack confidence in themselves and doubt their own abilities. An implicit affective complicity must be ripped apart to make possible an effective freedom. Pharaoh missed his slaves and many of the slaves missed Pharaoh's system.

## **Where Is Consecrated Religious Life In Brazil Today?**

### ***A Choice Is Required And We Must Prepare For It.***

Now the Hebrews are hemmed in, on the one side by the immense sea, mysterious, unknown, terrifying and menacing and, on the other side, by the approaching army inflamed by Pharaoh's anger. What to do? Turn around, beg forgiveness and surrender? Who can guarantee that Pharaoh will act as before and that the slaves will enjoy once more what they had before? Move forward? This seems a collective suicide. Overtaken with fear, they turn against their leader (Ex 14:10-12), and Moses calls out to God (Ex 14:13-15). This happens not because they lack a goal but because they lack confidence and do not act.

It would seem that Moses made a tragic decision, undertaking an enterprise destined for failure from the beginning. To end up in the absurdity of death without burial is actually the most tragic of ends. Such seems to be the prediction of the most realistic among us in a time like ours. We all know that "poking the jaguar with a short stick" can be dangerous. What a strange thing to do, to leave what is certain to seek what is doubtful. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between prudence and cowardice.

In Egypt the Hebrews were not free and their work was very humiliating, degrading, stressful and inhuman, but they had a place to stay, something to eat and a burial site. "Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone,'" said the Hebrews (Ex 14: 12). Even when oppressed by Pharaoh, they felt at peace. Now free from oppression, they have lost their peace. Journeying in insecurity and uncertainty is for them more wearing and painful than being in slavery with its certainties and securities. And this they call peace.

Might it be that consecrated religious life is not satisfied with the peace

Tell this generation to march on!

of Egypt? Can we name the Egypt of today? How do we relate to it? What is our choice: to die as slaves in order to be buried in Egypt or to die free, running the risk of remaining unburied in the desert?

### ***From Passive Trust To Active Surrender***

The response of Moses is a call to walk in faith, in spirituality, to seek what is missing for the journey to have meaning. It begins with a strong “Do not be afraid, stand firm!” (Ex 14:13). Fear must certainly be the most efficacious paralyzing agent in history. It explains the domination of so much evil and the prevalence of so much submission, subjugation and suppressed, stifled and quiet groaning in our history. Moses continues with a prophetic declaration: “The Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you” (Ex 14:13-14). The words of Moses are a two-edged sword since already the Hebrews do not believe in themselves and they do not trust Moses. Will they hope in God? Will God act for them?

Today as well, many people hope in God and beg, pray, wail and look to heaven, hoping that things will fall into their hands. God will indeed do something for them, but it will be *with* them. God does not absolve us from doing our part, contrary to a dominant attitude in our day. It is common to hope in God without giving of ourselves and so allow God’s strength to act through us.

Moses consoles the Hebrews with words, but this is very little in response to the needs of the people he leads. What is needed is guidance through incarnation of the Word and leadership with a boldness that is “fearful and spontaneous.”

### ***The Miracle Of Engagement***

What Word does God provide at such a critical and decisive time? God begins by reproaching the leader: “Why do you cry out to me?” (Ex 14:15). What nonsense is this, always crying out for help from me at a time of danger?<sup>6</sup> In truth, not only are the people lost but so is Moses. The Word, however, confirms the original plan: “Tell the Israelites to go forward!” (Ex 14:15). Tell them to march on, continue the mission already begun and follow the direction given. Tell them not to be discouraged in the face of perceived danger. The future lies ahead, the “land of milk and honey” lies beyond the sea. The Hebrews as well as Moses have known the goal from the beginning. They left Egypt with this goal, but they are losing sight of it in the face of the obstacles which have arisen. They stop journeying, stay in place, become stagnant, lose hope and deceive themselves. They hoped for an instant future but they have to build the future as well as the road to it.

It is necessary to go before those who are led, not just encourage and organize them. “But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground” (Ex 14: 16). The same staff which Moses used in Egypt to convince Pharaoh to let them leave (Ex 7:8-13) must now be used to open a way through the sea. The staff gives warning, encourages and gives the signal. It is the symbol of the power Moses uses as a gift from God for the sake of mission whereas Pharaoh uses power as a ruse to subjugate others and to impose his will. The staff as power is not an instrument of self-help but of service to others, for the good of all. Moses uses his staff to confront “the hard-hearted man,” and convince him to let the Hebrews leave, and he uses it to confront the mysterious sea so that it parts before them and allows them to leave.

According to Exodus 14:21, the uplifted staff brings the east wind which separates the waters, dries the land and opens the way. While the staff is a symbol of power, the wind is a symbol of the Spirit. Power and the Spirit of God in leadership of the people are thus related. The two must go together. Leadership is exercised with the power of the Spirit in order to find alternatives and open the way forward.

Between the alternatives of returning to Pharaoh or jumping into the sea, the latter is chosen because it is the only choice that is coherent with God’s original proposal. Being helped and accompanied by God and doing God’s will does not exempt us from problems but encourages us to face them, to challenge and overcome them. Superhuman boldness beyond the rational is, however, required. We must adopt uncommon attitudes and we pay the price of being a sign of contradiction. The way is easier once many feet have walked it. Life teaches us that we owe whatever has already been accomplished to those who have gone before us.

How does consecrated religious life use the staff received from God? In what places, in what situations and for the benefit of whom? What new paths does consecrated religious life open for society today?

### ***Seize The Moment***

The Hebrews enter into the sea and a new story is born, or, to put it another way, their history will forever be marked by this event. All enter the sea and begin to cross it, both Hebrews and Egyptians. The sea does not open only for the Hebrews but it is they who go ahead and open the way. They are the first, they have the blessing and the grace of breaking new ground in the sea and, because of this, they also make it out in time. The others go after them, in their footsteps, imitating them and making use of what has already been done, and thus living from what has been created. Those who follow are of another

Tell this generation to march on!

time and out of touch, and they lose the rhythm of the water, are engulfed and lost.

Those who live by the water know the meaning of its rhythms and its influence on daily life. The sea is a space in constant movement and transformation.

What sea does consecrated religious life need to cross? What does it need to do to be ready? Might it be that we are dreaming of a Promised Land at the entry point to the Red Sea rather than on the opposite shore? The Egyptians were swallowed up by the water because they delayed in following. As for ourselves, where are we with regard to this crossing?

### ***From The Sea With Moses To The Sea With Jesus***

For those who find the episode of the crossing of the sea to be a marvellous and distant episode, I suggest a reading of Mark 6:45-52 where there is a more up to date telling of the story.

In Exodus, the people pass through the sea and receive manna (Ex 16:1-36). In Mark, the people first receive bread and then cross the sea. In the first case, Moses parts the sea and the people pass through dry shod (Ex 14:21-22). In the second, Jesus “obliges” the disciples to take a boat and go ahead of him to the other side. This may mean that a true leader does not always go before but needs rather to make leaders of disciples.

According to the Exodus text, they cross the sea dry shod, led and protected by the cloud and the column of fire (Ex 14:19, 24). In Mark, on the other hand, even in the boat, they get wet feet and they cross in the darkness of night, against a violent wind and over turbulent water, while Jesus walks in power on the water. The boat is the new way to cross. It was used a great deal by the first Christians as a symbol of church-community. It seems that the power of the staff dividing the waters has been superceded by the simplicity of the boat that is resistant to contrary winds. Jesus also prevails over the water. Today, it is possible to interpret the cloud and the column of fire as the person of Jesus who no longer walks in front but behind. The sea no longer needs to be parted. The Hebrews of today have a boat. Many, however, prefer to jump over the sea rather than cross it.

In Exodus (7:3,13,22; 8:11,15; 9:7,12,34-35; 10:1,20,27; 11:10), the heart of Pharaoh had hardened. In Mark, it is the hard heart of the disciples which prevents them from interpreting the signs (Mk 6:52). Pharaoh does not see God in the actions of Moses and neither do the disciples detect God’s presence in the action of Jesus. A hardened heart prevents one from seeing the needs of others, from welcoming the other in his or her difference.

In the first case, the proposal of God was not adopted by the people. In the second, the proposal of Jesus is not adopted by the disciples. As well as being gift from God, the Promised Land and the new person are also constructed personally and communally in obedience to God's will.

In Exodus, they enter into the sea because it is the only alternative if they do not wish to turn back. In Mark, they go to sea because they must continue on the way. For many, this is suicide. Ironically, it really is suicide since one must accept death in order to be born anew. One must kill preconceived notions in order to birth the kind of thinking faithful to the original spirit.

Crossing the sea, therefore, is a sign, and a mere sign does not nourish. One must welcome and take the direction to which the sign points. Moses lifts the staff, touches the sea, points out the direction and the people continue on. Even after having crossed the sea, the disciples do not understand the sign of the bread.

What makes the passage difficult for this generation or prevents it from moving forward? Fear of the sea, uncertainty about what will happen, nostalgia for the past, lack of leadership, lack of spirit....

## Concluding Without A Conclusion

I want to make it clear that all these questions do not necessarily indicate pessimism or lack of trust with regard to consecrated religious life. They are intended to move us forward since accommodation stifles the good and is the enemy of the optimal. There are such things as a healthy disquietude and a detrimental calm. Even though we value and appreciate what we have and who we are, as pilgrims and foreigners we know that we have yet more to learn.

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<sup>1</sup> B.S. Childs, Exodus, Old Testament Library, 1984, pages 237-238.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews are a social category, more than a group of descendants of only one family. For amplification, see N.K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, Paulinas, 1980, pages 409, 428 and 429.

<sup>3</sup> See N.K. Gottwald, pages 399-402.

<sup>4</sup> The XIX<sup>th</sup> dynasty of Ramesses I and Ramesses II, to whom is attributed the most violent regime of oppression of the Hebrews to the point of their leaving

Egypt, lasted from 1308 to 1186 B.C. and was comprised of seven kings and one queen. See Lehneret and Landrok, Cairo, Egypt, 1981, page 32. This view differs from that of G. Alan, *La Civiltà Egizia*, Einaudi, 1985, pages 226-255.

<sup>5</sup> An ambiguous reality because the success of Pharaoh results in the suffering of the people occupying the territory.

<sup>6</sup> See M. Noth, Esodo, Paidéia, Brescia, 1977, p. 141.