

*BAREFOOT BEFORE GOD AND WITH
PEOPLE*

*THIRD NATIONAL GATHERING OF VIDA RELIGIOSA
JOVEN (NEW GENERATION RELIGIOUS).*

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Two years after having experienced the folly of la Cruz, having renounced armour and masks in the outskirts of a Valencia transformed into a medieval castle, members of New Generation Religious who share life and mission in Spain met again for the third time. On this occasion, events took place from the 6th to the 9th of December 2007 in the city of Grenada where we were warmly welcomed.

The opening talk, fifteen workshops on various themes, liturgical celebrations and communal prayer, visits to solidarity projects, artistic creativity and a profound message presented with humour, and intercultural diversity woven into the daily rhythm: all of this occurred with the vocational experience of Moses at Mount Horab as backdrop. The sixteenth century heraldry and candelabra, background to our days in Valencia, were transformed into an ardent flame blazing at the top of the mountain.

With a simple but evocative theme (“Barefoot Before God And With People”) as a starting point, we, some hundred and sixty young people with a passion for God and humanity, shared our anxiety, our difficulties, our desires and hopes. As New Generation Religious at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we tried to discern new paths to take in being a prophetic presence in the world and in living out our mission in Church and society.

Barefoot Before God

God said to Moses: “Come no closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5).

Moses can be a shining icon for the life and work of women and men religious, and especially for the youngest members. While charisms and styles differ, religious share the same solid ground as that which held up the prophet of Midian in his weakness. This solid ground is none other than the knowledge of being enveloped in the infinite Mystery revealed to Moses in the burning bush. In the theophany of Horeb, Moses was overcome by vertigo at the proximity of a God who had thus far appeared so distant. The liberation project marked by a renaming began in the intimacy of a surprise encounter.

Clearly, our point of departure, founding principle and ultimate motive in facing up to the reality in which we live are rooted here. Like Moses, we, the youth of religious life, can look back and delight in the realization that, at the beginning, there was simply the gift of encounter. We may not find ourselves before a burning bush and our daily task may not be taking our father-in-law’s sheep out to pasture. The fact is, however, that our daily routine has been disturbed in a surprising way by a God who, barely asking our permission, undertook to shake the foundations of our particular ground and gratuitously make it sacred.

The transformative encounter with God urges us, as it did Moses, to *take off our shoes*. For going barefoot before God implies experiencing the coldness of the earth beneath our feet, an experience which reminds us of our poverty and weakness. Going barefoot before God means foregoing our disingenuous insecurities and identifying ourselves without compromise as beggars of Grace....

Moses took off his shoes, fearfully covered his face and admitted his littleness, but he would never have imagined by what response God would seduce him: “I will be with you.” Our God goes so far as to invite us into his “carpenter’s workshop,” or, what amounts to the same thing, to put on the shoes of his constant presence. This is a presence often veiled, almost hidden, but one that crushes and enlightens at the same time. The New Generation Religious which has experienced encounter with God in ordinary life, in the day to day, and has found itself barefoot, deprived of its securities and reduced to sleeping under the stars, knows also with certainty that God transforms silence into loquacity, crutches into trampolines, littleness into prophetic cry, cold into fire that burns and embraces.

This is what we wished to experience and communicate in Grenada. We, women and men religious who are beginning to follow Christ as consecrated

persons, have no desire to be forever relegated to the status of “the inexperienced” with the excuse that we obviously need to mature and learn from those who preceded us on faith’s journey. Because we wish to devote all our energy to the cause, we should not be considered superficial activists; because we invest in the new and are caught up in an energizing dynamism, it should not be thought that we do not passionately love both our tradition and our institute; because we dream of a religious life willing to be burned by the fire of the Spirit and we scrutinize the horizon for new proposals and styles, we should not therefore be tagged unrealistic or uninformed.... In the end, the vocation of religious life in general, and of the youngest in particular, may be encapsulated in the same foundational experience as that of Moses: “going barefoot before God.”

Barefoot With People

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters” (Ex 3:7).

The God before whom Moses took off his shoes is not and never was an impassible God distant from the concrete reality of women and men in our directionless society. The God before whom Moses removed the sandals from his feet is also the God who hears and sees the oppression of people. This is a God who has a mother’s womb and so feels the suffering of people as his own that he becomes intimately involved in their situation to the point of calling them *my* people. Moses was certainly neither blind nor deaf, anymore than we are, but in the moment of seeing and hearing God himself his vision became completely clear and his hearing acute.

The mission which God entrusted to Moses was quite clear: he was to liberate his people from the claws of oppressive power and break the dynamic of systemic injustice which was damaging the profound identity of the people, their identity as people of God and not people of Pharaoh. The God who suffers and cries with one who cries asked Moses to make his own the grievous reality of the Israelites. He was to live barefoot with the people.

One point emphasized throughout the Grenada gathering was the desire to hear and see, following the example of Moses, “the *Egypt*s” of today. This is a desire to open the doors and windows of each community and really experience the other as my brother, to be touched and moved by him just as the womb of God was moved by the reality of the Israelites. Living barefoot with people means, in its most radical and concrete sense, putting on another’s shoes and getting involved in the daily struggles of people around us. Heroic adventures verging on the snobbish have no place here. To put on another’s shoes means looking him or her in the eye, abandoning our set plans and

sharing a cup of coffee, agreeing to cross the delicate line between my comfort and the concerns of the other....

Going barefoot before God and with people: such was the leitmotif of this prophet of Median who renounced every kind of privilege and exclusivity in order to share the lot of his people (Ex 32-34). Going barefoot before God and with people is the constant call issued to religious life by a God who is incarnated in a particular individual, a God who has a name and a concrete history.

By Way Of Conclusion Or The Mission Of New Generation Religious Today.

Going barefoot before God and with people means making intelligible the stammering of Moses who prefigured through his words and actions the one who took off his own shoes to put on fully the reality of the other, that is, Jesus. In order to do that, we in New Generation Religious, those who were in Grenada as well as those who were not, proclaim fearlessly, celebrate without embarrassment and affirm without mask or armour that our hope lies in Jesus Christ.

If there is one thing of which we young consecrated persons ought to be convinced, it is that we share the same starting point and the same goal.

Surely a vital communion is created when we realize, as Moses did, that at the beginning of this adventure of hearing and seeing with the heart of God there occurs a profound and transforming encounter with God. This encounter shakes the foundations of our life to the point that we become little ones, beggars of God's grace, barefoot. However diverse vocations may seem, at their origin is the call of God who always sends forth on mission.

That is why the goal, like the starting point, is a shared one. The mission which unites us is that of openly making it clear that Christ, the true Moses, is our great hope, a hope which acts today as a real stimulus in the creation of true communion. It is believing in the "unbelievable" and hoping against all hope, something which makes us stand out. It is enjoying silence in the midst of noise and feeling the shivers in daring to speak when cowardice would demand silence. It is daring to search out in every possible way new languages and paths for prophetic proclamation. It is complicating our life for the reign of God by going barefoot before God and with people. It is entering God's shoemaker's workshop and asking paradoxically to put on the other's shoes.... That is the mission which gives wings to our feet. That is the mission which we shared in Grenada and wish to continue to live out in every corner of our globalized world. That is consecrated life, the mission of New Generation Religious today.