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SPIRITUALITY - In this Year of Consecrated Life, each of us need not only return to the prophetic stance and mysticism of our founders and our charisms, but to also unlock the seminal treasures of the gospel story in which Jesus reveals to us his 'Abba' the God of surprises, writes **Marist Brother Robert O'Connor** in his piece for CRA's Reflection Series on the Year of Consecrated Life.

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." [Mk. 14:3-9]

I recall some years ago hearing Fr Tony Gittins cssp break-open this Gospel event, explaining it as a portrayal of the first Christian believer in Marks' gospel; nameless and female she demonstrates profound discipleship: Jesus is scandalously eating and socialising in the home of a former leper – unheard of in the culture of the time; Jesus is seated, she is clearly standing

above him as she pours costly nard over his head, thus assuming the superior position in the story. She is typically judged by "some who were there" probably disciples, who as guests are ungracious and struggling with their understanding of discipleship at this stage! Then, quite dogmatically all are told by them what 'should' have happened. Jesus upbraids them and thanks the woman for the "good service" she has done him and for her courage and risk taking; and proclaims her as one to be remembered for her service – and above all for her deep faith. Both Jesus and the woman challenge the 'status quo', and he affirms her stance and initiative. The event challenges us as disciples to ask what has been/will be my legacy?

Each of us who has been called to live the consecrated life, was captured at some stage of our journey by the 'divine whisper' from the lips of Jesus. 'Come follow me!' he invited and so we have.

Perhaps our initial attraction and subsequent life journey was focussed specifically on following Jesus in our various ministries, as had those giants on whose shoulders we stand, and who in many cases had inspired us to follow their example. Certainly as well as our work in these ministries, there was also our engagement in community life and prayer.

We were passionately committed to following Jesus in the tradition and practices of our Founding 'holy ones'. We helped to create a hospital system, an educational system, an outreach of compassion, a missionary endeavour that has enriched our world.

But with the advent of Vatican II the Church and all of us involved in its life and its soul, faced a groundswell of challenge and encouragement to reach back and to rediscover the foundational spirit and energy that had spawned us. Each of us no doubt could trace the highs and lows of our early halcyon years in ministry and community; and the subsequent tremors of discomfort and encouragement that 'aggiornamento' called us to.

From the outset all of us knew that the call to the consecrated life was a call to discipleship and to evangelisation; to making Jesus Christ better known and loved. The way we did so was by way of our charisms, those treasures of the Spirit, gifted to us by our 'holy ones' – Benedict, Catherine McCauley, Mary MacKillop, Ignatius, Angela, Francis, Mary Ward, De La Salle, Dominic, Edmund, Nano Nagle, Marcellin and a thousand others.

Returning to our roots, brought us up against the seminal question raised by all of our founders: To what does Jesus invite us? In a nut-shell, we saw more clearly than ever before, that he invites us to follow him; to do what he did. The journey to and from Vatican II had allowed a stripping away of much of our preoccupation with the 'doing' as consecrated persons, to a greater awareness of the call to 'being' the face of Jesus to our world; to in fact, learning not about Jesus but learning from Jesus, to really hear him speak to the heart as he reveals to us his 'Abba'.

In this year of consecrated life, each of us who has chosen to follow him, need not only return to the prophetic stance and mysticism of our founders, our 'holy ones', but indeed, to the treasure chest of our charisms, so richly manifest in the story of our founders and their early disciples. But like them, also to seek to unlock the seminal treasures of the gospel story in which Jesus reveals to us his 'Abba' the God of surprises.

It is striking that two of the most repeated statements in the scriptures – "do not be afraid!" and "they did not recognise him!" provide us with an insight and portal into seeking an ever deeper relationship with Jesus and the God he came to reveal to us. Fear and blindness often seemed to trip up the disciples, so it is not surprising perhaps that we too suffer similarly: fear, uncertainty, confusion, missing the point, blindness.

The scriptures show us Jesus as pilgrim and wayfarer, constantly on the move. He is radically itinerant. "Indeed the son of man has no-where to lay his head" [Lk.9:58]. So often in the scriptures [eg. Lk.4:1; Jn.1:28; Mt. 3:13; Lk.8:26; Mt. 8:5; Mt.14:34] he is seen taking his disciples to places beyond their comfort zones and often to places they would rather not go.

"In the gospels we see that Jesus accompanies the disciples across the mountains to the north, to Tyre and Sidon, to the Mediterranean sea, exposing them not only to sea breezes but to new horizons in every sense. We see Jesus entering with the disciples into the 'no-go' area, the place of heretics called Samaria. Jesus guides the disciples up Mount Hermon to get a glimpse of heaven itself and a sighting of the passion. On his final journey Jesus leads the disciples across the desert of testing – there is no other way from Jericho to Jerusalem except through the desert of the Judean wilderness, the primordial liminal space. Jesus takes his disciples across the numinous threshold of the Mount of Olives, the brink of Jerusalem." [Mayes, Andrew D. *Beyond the Edge*]

In many of Jesus' parables and encounters, it strikes me that he seeks to emphasise what he is

saying to us with a challenging call: 'Behold!', 'Listen!', 'Watch!'. His voice, as it were, demands to be heard, [Deut. 6:4-9; Ps.29:3-11] and we are challenged to really listen, with the ears of our hearts. This call to hear the Word, the voice of God, is powerfully told in the stories of Samuel: [Sam. 1:3] "...speak Lord your servant is listening..."; Isaiah: [Isaiah 6:4-9] "...say to the people, keep listening, keep looking"; and Mary of Nazareth: [Lk.1:26-58] "...how can this be...my soul magnifies the Lord..".

In each case the voice of God is heard, listened to, allowed to gestate and then acted upon.

How well do we, who have chosen to follow the Word of God, hear, ponder and act, even when called to do so courageously at times?

Let us consider for a moment Jesus' encounter with Mary of Magdala after the resurrection [Jn.20:1-18]. The event places before us another reminder of how easily we can lose sight of Him, who is the very purpose of our lives. Mary's fear and anxiety at his loss is evident in her tears, and Jesus' poignant questions to her "why are you weeping?" and "who are you looking for?"

These are relevant, indeed universal questions for all of us too: what causes me to 'weep', to be hurt, to lose confidence, to trip-up? And have I inadvertently and too often been looking for the 'what' instead of the 'who' it is that will fulfil my deepest desires? "You have made us for yourself, Lord and our hearts shall never rest until they rest in you!" [Augustine]

Jesus teaches us the measure of our discipleship, of our on-going call to evangelisation. It is a call to learn from him. Let us consider four simple but profound ways in which Jesus evangelised: He encountered real people in real time eg.[Emmaus (Lk.24), the Samaritan Woman (John 4), the ten lepers (Lk.17)]. He frequently ate with others, and engaged with them around a table at which everyone was on an equal level; [Matt.9; Mark 1] no head was above another. He knelt below head level, to wash feet [John 13]and constantly drew his disciples to follow him - crossing borders into new places, sometimes uncomfortable places of ministry and encounter.

ENCOUNTER: the Emmaus story in Luke 24 is a story of disappointment, of failure. It manifests disciples 'running away'! It is in this very act of desertion that they encounter Jesus, though they

did not recognise him! He invites them to retell their story of disappointment. As they listen to him and hear with new ears, their hearts are opened to the scriptures. They 'rush back' for they have 'seen the Lord!' Jesus encounters people one by one, by one, not in categories, not generically but individually and personally.

What is my story of encounter? Who have I encountered today and do I know their names?

TABLE FELLOWSHIP: sharing a meal as Jesus so often did, all are seated at the one level; all are equal, all are welcome. Jesus' arrest and death essentially resulted from his frequent commitment, as one writer puts it 'to eating with all the wrong people, in all the wrong places at all the wrong times!' Jesus demonstrates radical inclusivity! No one is omitted. His "scandalous" behaviour becomes the norm.

What is my story of radical inclusion? With whom would I not be prepared to sit at table?

FOOT-WASHING: To do this service you must go down on your knees to serve. Your head must be lower than the one you serve. Jesus' gesture in John's Last supper event clearly demonstrates that his act of service and deep love, is essential to any who would follow him. And equally such servant discipleship requires that you then wash each other's' feet.

Whose feet am I prepared to wash? Whose feet would I never dream of washing?

BORDER CROSSING: Jesus was always on the move: 'looking for troubled people, with troubled lives and troubled bodies'. People such as lepers, marginalised women, prostitutes, tax collectors, the blind and lame and deaf, are his focus.

The main boundaries Jesus crossed apart from the obvious geographical ones, were boundaries of: inclusion, privilege, security. Always radically inclusive Jesus opted always for radical equality. "...we can find ourselves in a space where we may long with nostalgia for old, familiar certainties and securities, for the traditional safe and sound. But we find instead that it is precisely here, in the risky and dangerous place, that Jesus waits to meet us, to reveal himself to us." [Mayes, *Beyond the Edge*]

How open am I to crossing into new and challenging, even frightening experiences? When did I last reach out beyond my comfort zone to people I do not know and have yet to meet, as Jesus so often did?

The Year of Consecrated life, will give each of us the opportunity to ponder, as Mary did, all that the Lord has done for us and where he would have me 'follow him'. Her insight "Do whatever he tells you" demonstrates her mature discipleship at Cana. She, like us, has grown: from feisty teen with searching questions, to confused pregnant young woman, to anxious parent, to our sister in the faith at Pentecost. May our fidelity to our charismatic cultures and commitment to Jesus, The Word of God, continue to enrich our communities and our Church.

Sir Francis Drake, explorer and mariner [1540-1596] wrote this prayer before departing for the west coast of South America. It may be an evocative reflection for us as we embark on the Year of Consecrated Life.

Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wilder seas

Where storms will show Your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push back the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.
This we ask in the name of our Captain,
Who is Jesus Christ.

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