

BEING SIGNS OF COURAGEOUS HOPE

(Association for Mission)

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It is so good to be with you today! I thank you for the privilege of addressing this chapter, which comes at a pivotal time, not only for the life of this Institute, but also at a critical seam in the history of the Church and of the human community.

I come to you as a brother, as one who like you has been summoned by God, and strives by grace, to respond to the inner fire that urges us to spend our energies for the sake of the Reign of God. The “Reign of God.” Such a pregnant phrase! I will meditate upon it later in this address.

The principal question I place before you as you begin your deliberations about the future of this Institute is this: *What does it mean to be a sign of courageous hope in a time that we do not know how to name?*

Note that I give as the location for my address “Pattaya, Thailand.” In the letter announcing the difficult decision to relocate this Chapter meeting away from the peripheries to the Generalate, Brother Superior General emphasized “the importance of maintaining the hopeful, daring and inspiring spirit that was present when Pattaya was

chosen.” It is in that spirit that I composed this address, seeking to discern a vision of our times from the peripheries, to hear what the voices of the marginalized from the edges of life and the world’s concern might be calling out to us.

In this address, I want to share with you intuitions that have been haunting my prayer for the past two years. What I offer is more of a reflection than a fully worked out thesis. Therefore, this is an invitation to dialogue and communal discernment. Indeed, this is a major reason for my eagerness to accept the invitation to be with you: the opportunity to share the fruit of my contemplation as we face a world and a church on the brink of unprecedented transitions and changes. A world and a church that demands of us *courage*. Courage for an interim time.

The inspiration for my reflections comes from a poem that may or may not be familiar to you. I invite you to listen to its initial stanzas as we move our minds, hearts, and spirits into this time together (the emphases are my own):

For the Interim Time

by John O'Donohue

When near the end of day, life has drained
Out of light, and it is too soon
For the mind of night to have darkened things,

No place looks like itself, loss of outline
Makes everything look strangely in-between,
Unsure of what has been, or what might come.

In this wan light, even trees seem groundless.
 In a while it will be night, but nothing
 Here seems to believe the relief of darkness.

You are in this time of the interim
 Where everything seems withheld.

The path you took to get here has washed out;
 The way forward is still concealed from you.

**“The old is not old enough to have died away;
 The new is still too young to be born.”**

You cannot lay claim to anything;
 In this place of dusk,
 Your eyes are blurred;
 And there is no mirror.

I want us to dwell in this notion of being in an interim time, an indefinite time, a time unnamed and for now unnamable. We could use other words to describe this state, words such as “liminal” and “transitional.” But these terms have become perhaps too familiar through casual use in our religious and formation discourse; they have become co-opted with meaning that may prejudice our conversation and thinking.

Interim. Gap. In-between. You can’t go back, but you don’t know where forward is. The collapse of security and certainty in the midst of the unknown and unknowable.

In a 2015 address to a national Italian Catholic conference, Pope Francis declared,

“We are not living in an era of change, but a change of era.”¹ It’s one thing to live in a time of rapid and momentous changes. That is dizzying and disorienting enough. But a change of era! To live on the cusp of something that marks an exponentially different way of being, thinking, living, praying, doing: this is a challenge of an altogether different order. This marks a time when “the old is not yet old enough to have died away, and the new is still too young to be born.” A time that calls for courageous venturing into the unknown.

I offer “the interim time” and “a change of era” as apt descriptions of the season in which we live. I will discuss several “signs of the times,” that is, seismic developments or sites of disruption that illustrate how and where I see a “change of eras” occurring, specifically looking at the phenomena of climate disruption, sexuality, populist nationalisms, the scourge of war and the global pandemic as protean events that challenge established ways of thinking and being. I then will turn to the Christian tradition to retrieve its wisdom concerning *courage* as the grace and virtue needed as we live in the midst of this time of change and upheaval. I conclude by offering some discussion of what such courage requires of you as the inheritors of the mantle of John Baptist De La Salle – namely, becoming courageous signs of hope for a new humanity – as we live into an era that does not yet know its name.

¹“Catholicism can and must change, Francis forcefully tells Italian church gathering,” *National Catholic Reporter* (November 10, 2015). <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/catholicism-can-and-must-change-francis-forcefully-tells-italian-church-gathering>. Accessed May 27, 2020.

Part One: The Signs of the Time and Sites of Eruption

A. *Climate Disruption*

I call our attention to several events: (1) The major forest fires in the Amazon, exacerbated by the refusal of Brazil's president to accept offers of outside assistance to address the global threat to the planet's "lungs," to our lungs, to humanity's survival. (2) The declaration of the Secretary General of the United Nations, declaring the climate crisis a "code red" for humanity. (3) The failure of the Paris Accord agreements that aimed to curb global warming and toxic emissions. And (4) the continued reliance of the economies of the major developed and developing nations upon fossil and extractive fuels. We are witnessing moments where single individual and national actors can make decisions that imperil the survival of *homo sapiens* and compromise the flourishing of the planet itself.

Now note the drastic decrease in arctic ice, the melting of Greenland's glaciers, the steady retreat of South polar ice, the catastrophic increase in magnitude of hurricanes and other natural disasters: indeed, scientists sound the alarm and tell us that the earth's ice caps have melted faster in the last twenty years than they did in the previous 10,000. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of living species have already gone extinct, with many others much imperiled; we are already in an age mass extinction.

These developments indicate that we have reached the limits of what a political paradigm of national sovereignty based upon independent nation-states can do in the face of a planetary crisis that endangers the survival of humanity.

As for the “peripheries” that claim our privileged attention? These and their peoples are the most endangered. Indeed, island nations in Asia and Micronesia are already bracing for the catastrophic impact of rising sea levels. And yet, who or what will constrain our behavior so that we can live together in what Pope Francis calls, “our common home?” We can’t imagine the new forms of government and human organization needed to cope adequately and effectively with this crisis.

The magnitude of the changes needed for natural and human survival, especially for those of us who live in the Global North, are frightening to contemplate. We dimly recognize that we cannot continue as we are. For the simple truth is that the earth does not have the resources to sustain everyone in the lifestyles that the privileged sectors of the Global North enjoy. Yet we lack the will, maybe even the ability, to entertain or envision the new ways of life and living that are needed. We are in an interim time. A change of era.

B. Sexuality: Beyond the “Sexual Revolution”

The challenges entailed by environmental disruption and ecological devastation can seem remote, as they do not impact most of us directly – yet. But the major developments underway in the arenas of sexuality and gender impact us far more personally and intimately. By a “change of era” in the realm of sexuality, I mean something much more momentous than what is often referred to as the “sexual revolution,” where behaviors that were previously taboo have become more widely discussed and even accepted. I mean something more far-reaching than the casual acceptance of heterosexual cohabitation

before marriage or the legal recognition of same-sex relationships and partnerships. I mean that our very understanding of sexuality itself is undergoing a radical change.

I realize this is a fraught and sensitive topic. Yet I come to you fresh from meeting with the theological faculties of De La Salle University of Manila (very adjacent to Pattaya), the Ateneo de Manila, and the Religious Educators Association of the Philippines. They asked me to address the topic, “Conversations on Sexuality and Gender in Religious Education.” Why? Because their students – *our* students – are raising deep questions concerning human sexuality, questions that are not easily addressed in the frameworks that we have inherited. These are not questions solely from the privileged places of Europe or the Americas. These are the questions from the periphery.

Human sexuality traditionally has been understood in a binary fashion, that is, as a system of two polar opposites that exist in a pure or fixed form and which cannot co-exist in the same person. For example, one is either male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, masculine or feminine. But now the human sciences understand that human sexuality is far more complex. For example, one’s sexual orientation can be more or less fluid, and can range on a *spectrum* from exclusively, to mostly, to incidentally homosexual and exclusively, to mostly, to incidentally heterosexual. Moreover, the range of sexual expressions has expanded to include bisexuality, pansexuality, polysexuality, and asexuality – and this isn’t an inclusive listing.

Moreover, the range of gender identities and expressions is now far more contested and pluriform, including identities such as intersex, transgender, transsexual, non-binary, gender-fluid, and queer. Add to this the ways in which traditional expressions of sexuality have become contested and even controversial, as evidenced in the #MeToo movement and the debates over toxic masculinity. We are interrogating what it means to be a man, and what exactly is healthy masculinity. (Indeed, a major question going forward is how an all-male Institute of Brothers creates warm and genuinely collegial relationships with La Sallians who are women). All of this points to how we are living in the midst of radical shifts in our understandings of gender and sexuality – indeed, of human *sexualities*.

Such major shifts in social attitudes and human understanding starkly reveal the limits of our (that is, the Church's) traditional sexual ethics. Our traditional sexual ethics has been – and too often still is – concerned with the regulation and appropriateness of sexual behaviors or sexual acts such as masturbation, premartial or nonmarital sex, and same-sex activity.

But the discipline of sexual ethics is evolving from an analysis of sexual *behaviors* (e.g., an ethics that focuses on the questions of: Who can do what with whom? And under what circumstances?) to a reflection upon ethical *sexuality* and sexual *authenticity*, which leads to a different set of questions: What does it mean to be a sexual person? What is human sexuality for? What does it mean to be an authentic sexual being? What is sexual discipleship? How does being a sexual person embody the image of God in the world? What

does it mean to *em-body* God, to be the *body* of God, in the world? Indeed, what does it mean to be a man or a woman in the image of God?

These questions are unsettling and even profoundly disturbing. They move us far beyond what our traditional ethical reflection and teachings – and religious formation in sexuality – can account for. For example, we no longer live in a world where we can presume that candidates coming to us – or those who remain – are heterosexual virgins. (Actually, we never could, but we did our best to pretend – and sadly, too often still do). Moreover, few of us have the training or skills for this kind of honest exploration of a core dimension of our being. Our formation in the call of celibacy is, when we are honest, often inadequate. This has implications for religious life and community living that cry out for spaces for safe and healing discussion.

The paradigm shifts in our understandings of human sexuality shape fault lines and fractures present in our educational ministries. At the Manila meeting, two students who identified as “queer” or non-heteronormative spoke of the pain they and fellow students felt by the lack of open and honest conversation on the gap between their life experience and their formation in the faith. They longed for a spirituality and for ways of praying that would enable them to integrate their sexuality and their desire for God.

And they are not alone. For example, at the conclusion of the 2018 Synod on Youth and Young People, the gathered bishops reflected upon what they had experienced, including pleas from many young people for a more realistic sexual ethics that takes

account of contemporary trends and expresses a greater acceptance of LGBTQI persons and their relationships. In their “Final Report,” the Synodal participants made this observation:

There are questions relating to the body, to affectivity and to sexuality that require a deeper anthropological, theological, and pastoral exploration, which should be done in the most appropriate way, whether on a global or local level. Among these, those that stand out in particular are those relative to the difference and harmony between male and female identities and sexual inclinations.

This statement aroused great concern and unease among some in the Church, including from high-ranking and influential figures. Cardinal Pell of Australia and Archbishop Chaput, then the ordinary of the see of Philadelphia (USA), were among those who realized that present in this call for deeper examination was an admission that the current teachings were somehow deficient or inadequate. Paraphrasing their concern: Why would you have to explore or examine teachings that are already clear and certain?

Others, including myself, agreed that this summons for deeper exploration clearly suggests that the Synod reached a consensus that the current teaching on human sexuality is, in fact, problematic. *Religious News Service* cited me (accurately) noting:

Massingale said it is clear that the bishops know that something needs to change, but he said it is equally clear that they are not sure “what that change would or should entail; that is, they are uncertain about what should

be the new shape of Catholic teaching on sexuality.”²

Something needs to change in our engagement with new understandings of human sexuality. But we – and not only the bishops – are unsure about what such changes should be. We are living in an interim time, a time that cannot yet be named, where “the old is not old enough to have died away and the new is still too young to be born.” Such upheaval and uncertainty is all the more traumatic because sexuality is the realm where we are most vulnerable, and an arena in which seismic shifts are experienced as most confusing and personally threatening.

C. *The Rise of Populist and Exclusionary Nationalisms*

One of the most significant sites of social upheaval and destabilization in this changing era is the resurgence of global populist nationalisms, especially in response to unwanted or undesired changing national identities. In many places, we see a disturbing and growing appeal of populist nationalist political movements, for example, in Hungary, Brazil, Poland, France, the United States, and the Philippines. In other areas, ethnic conflicts simmer and at times erupt in violent divisions, such as in the Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria – to name a few and the list is not exhaustive.

Nationalisms are characterized by the exaggerated importance of a social in-group, usually defined by racial or ethnic criteria (e.g., language, religion, skin color). Groups that

²This account of the synodal summons and the subsequent debate was reported in *Religious News Service* (October 30, 2018).

differ are seen as threats to a desired social order marked by a so-called uniform identity (e.g., “European” vs. “Muslim”; “white Christian” vs. “secular Marxist”; pure vs mixed). Those deemed outsiders are cast as threats to social order and stability, and accused of taking benefits away from those deemed entitled by a mythic sense of belonging.

Nationalism can be defined as that nonrational, instinctual, and visceral conviction that the country – its public spaces, political institutions, and culture heritage – belongs to one group in a way that it does not and should not belong to “others.” Populist nationalisms are not always, or even principally, motivated by hate. Acts of hatred may be a consequence if the threat to a social identity cannot be resolved in other ways. But at their core, nationalisms are more about belonging, and anxieties aroused by rapid demographic changes: “Whose country is this?” “Whose land is this?” “Who belongs here?” “Whose church is this?” These are the key nationalist questions and concerns. And they lead to reactionary responses to undesired social change such as restrictive immigration policies and the prohibition of religious practices.

For example, in the USA, the rise of white nationalism cannot be accurately understood unless we see it as a response to the anxiety aroused in many white Americans over living in a fundamentally changing social and cultural environment. Changing demography signals a changing national identity. To put it bluntly, we are no longer a “white Christian nation,” and many white Christian Americans are nervous and angry. We can see an expression of such sentiments in the reaction of the influential political

commentator, Bill O'Reilly, to the results of the 2012 presidential election. After it became apparent that President Obama was re-elected, O'Reilly lamented, "The demographics are changing. It's not a traditional America anymore. . . . The white establishment is now a minority."³

O'Reilly's views are a perfect illustration of what I have called a sense of "culture shock" that has gripped some nations as they respond with confusion and anger at the changing national and cultural identities now occurring in their homeland. Culture shock describes the anxiety that one experiences when in an unfamiliar, foreign, or strange environment where the social rules, customs, and expectations are different from what one expects or experiences as "normal" and one doesn't know how to act. For culture shapes what we view as normative – the way things should be – and even more, culture shapes our identity and self-understanding. When such culture shock takes place in one's homeland, it is experienced as an existential threat that undermines one's self-identity and the foundations upon which some believe the country was built (for example, as a white Christian nation, or a nation for white Christians).

Populist nationalism also affects our church, including our religious communities. We are not immune from anxiety over a changing demography or "browning." There is a deep Catholic ambivalence that parallels the concerns of secular nationalisms, manifesting

³As stated on FOX News, November 6, 2012.

itself in anxieties over: “Whose church is this?” and “Whose community is this?” Who really belongs? Who really counts as one of “us”?

Nationalism, whether in church or society, is not always or even principally about hate. It is about longing for a mythical utopia by aggressively asserting belonging and dominance out of a sense of anxiety over demographic and social change.

D. The Scourge of War

Nationalisms tend toward exclusion and xenophobia. In the extreme, they erupt in war. War is now ever-present in our minds, as our souls ache with the tragic images of human suffering and the barbarous cruelty that has erupted in “civilized” Europe. The attention of the world is fixed on Ukraine. But we cannot forget the many other armed violent conflicts in the world: in Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We are seized with a new form of anxiety, as veiled threats of nuclear war and annihilation are heard with an urgency and frequency that most of us had hoped would remain forgotten.

The Popes have taught that war is a “failure for humanity.” The costs of human displacement bring new forms of marginalization and vulnerability. Centers of culture and learning have become the new peripheries. People once privileged have become traumatized terror refugees. The clamor of war challenges our faith in the Prince of Peace. How are we to minister in a world newly aware of the fragility of life and the capriciousness of its leaders? How do we minister in an age of such acute vulnerability and precarity?

E. The Global Pandemic

Our changed meeting place testifies to the continuing disruption of the COVID pandemic. When it first erupted, I wrote in my personal journal expressing the hope that with the entire global and human community being afflicted with a common threat at the same time, this would lead to the realization that we are one human species, bound together in solidarity. That hope now seems naive. Rather than bringing us together, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the social divides between wealthy and destitute. Low wage workers were deemed “essential” and were sacrificed to serve the needs of the socially privileged who could afford the safety of isolation. The global disparities in education and health care access became starkly evident, with little done to close these gaps.

For example, in New York City, a sense of crisis gripped civil leaders as they realized that 300,000 school children lacked access to the computers needed for remote instruction. Overnight, the funds were found to provide them. But this raised the questions, “Why weren’t they provided from the beginning? Why only now?”

The pandemic has unsettled and disturbed us, revealing our mortality, our pettiness, our vulnerability, our propensity for denial, and our helplessness in the face of forces that we cannot control and do not understand. We are starting to understand that we cannot “go back to normal.” And we have not yet arrived at a “new normal.” We are in a new age. An age we cannot yet name.

Ecological crises; upheavals in sexuality; ethnic conflicts and nationalist resentments; the displacement of war and the terror of disease: these pivotal signs of the time reveal something indisputable when we consider them in the aggregate. We are living in a change of era, a new time, a new age, that does not yet have a name or know how to name itself. Ours is an age of anxiety and fragility. A fragility experienced personally, interpersonally, socially, and culturally. An anxiety over actual and impending currents of momentous change and the fear that reality – that we – can never again be the same. To quote O'Donohue's poem:

No place looks like itself, loss of outline
 Makes everything look strangely in-between,
 Unsure of what has been, or what might come.
 The path you took to get here has washed out;
 The way forward is still concealed from you.
 "The old is not old enough to have died away;
 The new is still too young to be born."

Pope Francis, in an address delivered to vowed religious in Mozambique, gave an apt description of the challenge and summons that confronts us in this interim time: "[W]hether we like it or not, we are called to face reality as it is. *Times change and we need to realize that often we do not know how to find our place in new scenarios: we keep dreaming about the 'leeks of Egypt' (Num 11:5), forgetting that the promised land is before*

us, not behind us, and in our lament for times past, we are turning to stone.”⁴

Do we have the courage to dream, the courage to discover new paths for a new time, the courage to go confidently into the future that the present is but an interim, an interlude?

Part Two: The Courage to Face the New and Move into the Unnamed

How, then, are we to live in this interim time? Our faith tradition offers us valuable wisdom for navigating and living within this dawning new era that is upon us. I reflect upon this wisdom by discussing four insights particularly relevant to our situation: courage, hope, *gnome*, and YHWH.

1. Courage

I begin by quoting a giant in the Catholic tradition, not only because of his sage insights but also because you can never get into trouble as a Catholic by quoting Thomas Aquinas: “Courage is the precondition of all virtue.” That is, to exercise any virtue, you must possess courage. He continues by saying that courage is not the absence of fear, but the fortitude to endure hardships and fear for the sake of doing right in the presence of injustice. Courage stops fear from paralyzing us into silence or inaction in the face of resistance. *Courage is the virtue that translates our convictions into action.* We need to create a new church and new structures of religious life where obedience is not the primary

⁴Pope Francis, “Address to Mozambique’s Priests and Religious,” (5 September 2019).

virtue, but courage.

Your preparatory documents summon you to boldly go into the peripheries. That was the inspiration behind the original choice of Pattaya. To answer this call, you need courage – the courage not only to go to the peripheries, but the courage to dwell there and to make the peripheries your home, and *the courage to risk becoming peripheral yourselves*.

By definition, the periphery marks the edges of life, the frontiers of human adventure, the limits of human concern, and the borders of human compassion. By definition, the periphery is the opposite of what is the privileged center; it lies beyond what is settled and safe. To live in the periphery means to make those consigned to the margins the center of your life and the focus of your ministry.

And yet there is more. To dwell within the periphery means that you must have the courage to challenge the marginality of those who live there without choice. And to use your ministry of education and evangelization to name the forces that render those living in the periphery marginal. You need courage – the gift of the Spirit – to name the social evils that make God’s little ones marginal to the concern of the privileged and powerful. I dare to say that La Sallian Brothers cannot educate well if they are not also agents of justice for the poor. Justice and education – justice and evangelization – are inseparable.⁵

⁵Here see especially the declaration of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, “Justice in the World,” and the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975).

We need courage to answer Pope Francis's summons to act with *parrhesia*, that is, with holy boldness and passionate honesty, to meet the summons and arrival of the new.⁶

2. *Hope*

Our faith tradition has valuable understandings of hope to retrieve. Hope is that inner orientation of the human spirit that sustains one in the quest for a *non-guaranteed* future in the face of formidable obstacles.⁷ Hope keeps us moving toward the future when all we can see and experience are the severe challenges to its realization.

But we have to be careful. "Hope" is not the same as "optimism." Hope is not a belief in inevitable success. After all, if success is guaranteed, you don't have to hope for it. As the Czech essayist and former president Vaclav Havel puts it, hope "is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."⁸

To put it another way: Optimism is the mindset that good *a/ways* triumphs over evil, and sooner rather than later. Optimists believe that victories are low-cost. Optimism

⁶"Pope calls synod to speak 'boldly'; cardinal defends current teachings," *National Catholic Reporter* (October 6, 2014): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-calls-synod-speak-boldly-cardinal-defends-current-teachings>. Another source notes that *parrhesia* is a "favorite on the lips of Pope Francis"; see *The Catechetical Review*, <https://review.catechetics.com/editors-notes-parrhesia>.

⁷Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 147. Here I develop a fuller presentation of this important virtue.

⁸Cited in Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 147.

believes in quick solutions, easy victories, and happy endings.

Hope is very different. Hope believes that good *ultimately* prevails over evil . . . but not *always*. The ultimate victory often comes at a terrible cost; many of the righteous will pay a very high price. This kind of hope is expressed in the words of Arthur Falls, an African American civil rights activist and a member of the Chicago Catholic Worker in the 1960s who, when asked what gave him hope in the struggle for justice, he replied: *“When you work for justice, you don’t always lose.”*

You don’t *always* lose. That’s Christian hope. Christian hope is grounded in the resurrection. The resurrection was not the last minute rescue of Jesus; it is not a narrow escape from death or a close brush with tragedy. Jesus died. Full stop. Good did not prevail on Good Friday. The resurrection is about what God can bring forth out of tragedy, failure, and death.

Hope sustains us in the dying that is necessary to rise to new life. A general chapter marks a new moment in the life of the Brothers. But to answer the summons to go to new places, to answer the charge given to Peter in last Sunday’s gospel “that another will lead you where you would not go” (John 21), you need hope. There is a risk in going to the periphery. There is a risk in creating new structures, new ways of living and thinking. You need to surrender the former things. Resurrection hope sustains us where facile optimism fails us. Resurrection hope enables us to risk new understandings of religious life knowing that human failure is not the end, but the prelude to possibilities beyond our ability to

dream. The resurrection is the basis of our hope.

Hope comes from realizing that we are part of a “relay race,” part of the tradition of justice-seekers. You are but a part of a chain of Brothers, a tradition that began over 340 years ago. You inherit the baton from those who have gone before. We do our part, running our leg of the race as it were, making our contribution, and no more. We may not cross the finish line. We most likely will not be the runners who break the tape. We may not see the future that we long for and act on behalf of. And yet we act now for the sake of those who ran before us and for those who will come after us. We run our leg of the race; we do our part; and then we trust in those who will come after. That’s hope.

3. *Gnome* (a Greek word, pronounced, “no-may”)

Gnome is a strange word, another one that I borrow from Thomas Aquinas’ insights. *Gnome* is the ability to reason well in the exceptional situation.⁹ As Aquinas puts it, “Now it happens sometimes that something has to be done which is not covered by the common rules of actions.”¹⁰ *Gnome* is the ability to respond in the novel situation where the given rules don’t work and are no longer adequate. In other words, because of the infinite variety of human situations, and because we confront situations without precedent, *gnome* is that graced virtue that works with imagination and creativity in the face of the novel, the new,

⁹“The virtue of higher discernment (*gnome*) is able to discern when a particular rule must be set aside for some higher principle.” Cf. Steven J. Jensen, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82:3 (Summer 2008) 411.

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 51, a. 4, corp.

and the unprecedented. It enables us to invent new tools and approaches for new situations. It enables us to recognize the new, and to not use worn out solutions for entirely new problems.

We need *gnome* to live in this interim time and to dwell in the periphery. For the enemies of “frequenting the future” and “anticipating the needs of a new generation”¹¹ are *nostalgia* and *despair*. Nostalgia longs for a bygone era that is no more. Nostalgia says that things would be better if we could only be as we were. Longing for the days when Brothers ran the show; longing for huge numbers of new members; longing for settled certainties and comfortable dwellings. On the other hand, despair says, “Why bother? Nothing’s ever going to change. We tried that before. There is no future worth working for. Let’s just make our dying as painless as possible.”

Gnome gives us the ability to move into the new with neither nostalgia nor despair, trusting that we have the capacity to reason well in the face of the unknown and unknowable. *Gnome* is the graced ability to embrace new solutions and new mindsets, the grace to be creative in the face of the unknown.

4. *YHWH: The Ineffable Sacred Mystery*

Recently, in my Centering Prayer, I have focused on a new title for the Divine: “You Who Birth the Future.” It led me to research that enigmatic and mysterious personal name

¹¹Brother Robert Schieler, FSC, *Joyfully I Behold Your Enduring Hope: Pastoral Letter to the Brothers* (December 25, 2021), p. 7.

for God, the Tetragrammaton, the four unpronounceable consonant letters that are the name revealed by God to Moses: YHWH. Often translated, “I AM,” or “I Am Who Am,” I discovered that Jewish authors have translated the Divine Name with a more future orientation: “He who causes to be that which is to be,” or “I cause to be what will become,” or “The God who makes new and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”¹²

I cause to be what will become. God, the Holy One, is present to us as the future that is coming to be. The Divine Mystery is present and active in the unfolding of the new era that is dawning upon us. The upheavals and dislocations that attend the arrival of the new era are but the currents and eddies of the advent of YHWH – this mysterious, dynamic, and passionate One who acts in a “future present” tense. (I know that there is no such verb tense in English. This shows the limitations of human language to describe the reality and activity of the Deity). The coming future, even though disruptive, is yet trustworthy, full of the mysterious, awesome, dynamic, passionate, even erotic reality of YHWH. And we who are YHWH’s witnesses are to be co-creators of the new: “Behold, I make all things NEW” (Revelation 21). “See, I am doing a NEW thing! Even now, it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43).

But even more importantly, YHWH is the Faithful One who sustains us in the interim time, during the in-between time between promise and fulfillment. The eminent biblical

¹²Walter Bruggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 185.

scholar, Walter Brueggemann, relates that Israel's constant and consistent testimony is that YHWH is the God who "brought us out of Egypt and brought us into the land."¹³ This confession of faith declares that YHWH sustained God's people in the interim time between Egypt and Canaan, in the wilderness that spanned between their departure from the old and their arrival in the new. Thus the Holy One also leads, comforts, sustains, and accompanies us in our sojourns and our wandering through the wilderness. God provides food, drink, and provision in the daily, everyday, quotidian "stuff" – the unromantic trials of moving into a new place and making a new beginning. This is YHWH, who accompanies us in the risky in-between, when the old has not completely died and the new is not fully born. YHWH is the source of our hope, our courage, our ability to be vulnerable.

Part Three: Becoming "God-Possessed" Forerunners of a New Humanity

So what does this mean for you, my brothers? How do you live fraternity in this interim time as you prepare to embrace the call to move beyond the center into the peripheries of human concern? I believe that our future, especially as vowed religious who are witnesses to the reality of YHWH, depends upon our deeper adherence to the ever-creating, ever-sustaining God who births the future. We are called to be "God-possessed."

I call to mind a statement attributed to Albert Einstein: "The world we have created is the product of our thinking; it cannot be changed without changing our thinking. If we

¹³Walter Bruggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 202.

want to change the world we have to change our thinking. *No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it.* We must learn to see the world anew.”

No problem can be solved from the level of consciousness that created it. We need new ways of thinking, living, and loving. This is the call of religious life. We need to be witnesses of the possibilities of human transformation. We need to be witnesses of a new humanity, of new ways of being human, of becoming *homo spiritualis*. We are called, I dare to say, to be among the vanguard and pioneers of human evolution.

Now I can hear some of you saying, “Whoa!” You may be thinking: “Uh, Bryan, don’t you know that we must be ‘reasonable’ and ‘responsible’? Our numbers are down. There are fewer and fewer of us. We’re selling property, moving into smaller facilities. Something we are coming to the end of our journey as religious. And by the way, don’t you know that the Church has a serious credibility problem? Some groups are selling property to meet sexual abuse settlement claims. Our financial and emotional resources are stretched thin and depleting. And now you want us to be forerunners of the new, to be witnesses of a new way of being human? To be the blueprints for a new humanity? You’ve got to be reasonable.”

You can be forgiven for such thoughts. They are so reasonable that it occurred to me that you might be thinking them.

But then I recalled another instance when God asked the impossible from the improbable, and the human response that was given: “And Sarah laughed.” (Genesis 18:12)

(And Abraham, we should note, also laughed). Sarah, you recalled, thought that the angelic visitor was talking nonsense. Who is this guy, talking to me about sex and pleasure, and bearing new life and bringing about new beginnings – when we’re 90+ years old! “But YHWH said to Abraham: “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I really bear a child, old as I am?’ Is anything too marvelous for YHWH to do?” (Gen 18: 13-14)

Is anything too marvelous for YHWH to do? The sacred ineffable Mystery who brings forth the impossible out of the improbable? This is why we are called to cultivate mystics – those possessed by God, who are “God-possessed” and passionate lovers of the Divine. For when we become what we are meant to be, we lose our too small identities and become empowered for courageous acts of love and hope and daring on behalf of the world that is coming to be.

This is who Jesus was. Jesus was a man with “fire in his heart.”¹⁴ His life was wholly centered on the Reign of God. The Reign of God is not a place, nor is it shorthand for the afterlife or a reward for a life well-lived. Rather, the Reign of God describes how life will be when God’s will is fully realized for humankind. Thus some scholars prefer to speak of the *Dream* of God, or the *Vision* of God. The Reign of God is God’s vision for humankind. It describes a state of *shalom*: a word we translate as “peace,” but its meaning is much richer. *Shalom* is a state of wholeness and well-being, where no one lacks for essential needs,

¹⁴Brother Superior General, *Pastoral Letter*, p. 11.

where all have what they need for full and abundant life (Bruggemann). *Shalom* is a world where all have what they need to live fully dignified lives as befit those created in God's image; a world where creation and creatures exist in harmony and non-exploitative relationships. That's the Reign of God.

Jesus was a man who was wholly concerned about human well-being, because he was completely centered on the Reign of God. He was God-intoxicated; God-possessed.

And so was John Baptist De La Salle. He was a passionate lover of God. Because he was possessed by God and centered in God, he could take courageous risks. He gave up the comfort and status of clerical privilege. He went to the underserved and neglected and abused – and lived among and with them. He dwelled in the peripheries, among those to whom no one else would go and a world where few would enter. He dared to dream and to create a new thing, risking ecclesial misunderstanding, social opposition, and public failure. He pioneered new ways of being human, of association, because he was possessed by the God who beckoned to him from a world yet to be. And who called him to create that future world right now. Because of his love for Jesus, La Salle became empowered for courageous acts of love, hope and daring on behalf of the Reign of God, of the world that is coming to be. This is what he meant when he cried out, "Live Jesus in Our Hearts!" Forever!

Live Jesus in Our Hearts! That is the passion, the dynamism, the energy that sustains us as we live into a new level of consciousness. And from that deep place within, we find

the courage and the hope to risk creating new ways of thinking, living, praying, teaching, and loving – as we live into this interim time that marks the dawning of a new era.

In the words of the mystical scholar Gillian Alhgren: “The quality of our faith (as well as the quality of our humanity) would be measured in terms of our capacity to ‘enkindle love’ – that is, to participate in and diffuse new life in a dying world, like the phoenix, who, all burnt up, rises from the very same ash. [Religious founders] remind us that the point, not just of faith, but also of being human, is to be drawn into loving activity – godly activity – through our relationship with the divine. . . . [T]hen we are easily and joyfully drawn into the work of renewing the world, working for dignity, renouncing and denouncing all that is death-dealing, growing in truth and love and fidelity, and drawing others into this life-giving creative activity.”¹⁵

This is the opposite of depletion, of a draining away of precious resources. It is a model of “radiant overflow.” When we become more and more deeply centered in that Reality Who is deeper and bigger than we are –the One Who Births the Future – we too become the pioneers and bearers of a new humanity.

This General Chapter is an invitation to dream God’s Dream, to live God’s vision. It is “an invitation to us to be active partners in the work of bringing new life to the human

¹⁵Gillian T.W. Alhgren, *Enkindling Love: The Legacy of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross* (Fortress Press, 2016), 147-148.

community.”¹⁶ This happens very concretely – through the imagination; through creativity; through standing in solidarity and protest; through writing, teaching, and preaching; in praying, holding, and loving; in passionate caring and daring on behalf of personal, social, and ecclesial transformation.

In short, we are called to be passionate lovers of God and humanity – who can live gracefully in the peripheries of human life; who pioneer new ways of thinking, living, loving, praying, and believing – the new ways of being human – that are being born and must be born if humanity is to survive. Our vocation, then, is to become what Carmelite scholar Constance FitzGerald metaphorically called the forerunners of a “new gene” in the human species.¹⁷ To be the pioneers of *homo spiritualis*, *homo amans*, *homo contemplativus*. To make the periphery our center and our heart. This is how we become “signs of courageous hope” for a new era that cannot yet be named.

Let us end with the conclusion of O’Donohue’s poem, “For the Interim Time” with its final exhortations and words of hope (the italics are mine):

As far as you can, hold your confidence.
Do not allow confusion to squander
This call which is loosening

¹⁶Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, *Enkindling Love*, 151-152.

¹⁷Constance FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009) 40.

Your roots in false ground,
That you might come free
From all you have outgrown.

What is being transfigured here is your mind,
And it is difficult and slow to become new.
The more faithfully you can endure here,
The more refined your heart will become
For your arrival in the new dawn.

My brothers: Be courageous signs of hope!

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