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Spirituality and Ministry: A Religious Perspective

By Sister Barbara Jean La Rochester, O.C.D.

By way of introduction I would first like to set some parameters for my reflections. First, I will be considering ministry as it is related to conversion/metanoia; ministry as it is seen in the gospels; and ministry as an experience of solidarity/communion with others. Because I see all three of these points interwoven in the lived experience, I will not consider them separately.

Secondly, coming from the Carmelite tradition and the doctrine of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, I see the call to conversion as a call to experience the Dark Night. This Dark Night of active and passive purification leads one into the desert of their inner being to confront both the darkness of sin which keeps one at a distance from God and the light of God, at the center of one's being. As John of the Cross states, "the aim of the spiritual life is the state of perfect union with God through love; this is the summit of Mt. Carmel" (Intro. to the *Ascent-Dark Night*, p. 45);—this is the goal that we journey through life to attain; this is the purpose of the dark night or conversion experience.

In this process of conversion one is asked to surrender and abandon those images, feelings, emotions and idols which have become the basis of one's security in their relation to God and in their service to others. This radical conversion will strike at the very root and heart of all that we hold and consider "ours." This journey into the desert, this

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call to conversion is the only sure way of attaining transformation, new life, new vision. This journey into the desert of one's inner self has ramifications on the spiritual and is integrated on the personal as well as social levels. This call to conversion gives rise to wholistic living and credence to our work in ministry.

Basic to any commitment in life, is the awareness or sense of call or drawing by someone to something that is beyond ourselves. For women and men religious, their basic commitment in life came about through a specific call and drawing from God. This call, God's gift to us, is both covenant (promise) and commission (to be something). For as St. Paul says to the Ephesian community:

"God is rich in mercy; because of his great love for us he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead in sin. By this favor we were saved. Both with and in Christ Jesus, he raised us up and gave us a place in the heavens, that in the ages to come we might display the great wealth of his favor, manifested by his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. I repeat, it is owing to his favor that salvation is ours through faith. This is not our own doing, it is God's gift; neither is it a reward for anything we have accomplished, so let no one pride themselves on it. We are truly his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to lead the life of good deeds which God prepared for us in advance." (Eph. 2:4-10)

We read also in Luke 21:32 where Jesus says to Peter, "But I have prayed for you that your faith may never fail. You in turn must strengthen your sisters and brothers." From the above reflections, one can readily see that our response to God is one which grows out of a personal relationship and encounter with Him, and is nothing more than entering into our own personal experience of faith, of the Father in Jesus through the Spirit. This faith experience which we share with all Christians is nevertheless a personal unique experience, within the self-awareness of each individual. In this awareness we discover our own specific vocation to ministry. This call to ministry is an experience of being placed within the presence of God who invites us in this particular to share in His love, his mercy, his compassion and healing and then to minister to His people the gifts we have received. (1Pet.4:10) It is within the context of relationship and encounter that God communicated and communicates His word, Jesus, through his Spirit, through his Church, through his living word in Scripture, through all of our life experiences.

Because faith is essentially God's gift, we become empowered by the Spirit to believe in the Word of God with confidence, certainty and hope. To believe is to receive God's message, take into ourselves, feed on it, and make it our life. This is no mere intellectual exercise, and the simplest can do it. It is the work of love. Many religious people are

afraid to think about the content of their faith, afraid to listen to the questions raised in their own hearts. If our faith is strong, *we can* afford to listen, to think, we can face the enormous problems which confront us. Why? Because we have absolute certainty in Jesus and what he has revealed of his Father. He is the rock on which we stand and from which nothing can shift. When in our hearts we obediently listen to the Word and carry it out in service to our sisters and brothers, we come to know in a deeper way who we are as persons and who we are before God. We come to know that *we are the bearers* of a Christian message—the heart of which is God revealing Himself as Father of all, and through His Spirit, calling us to conversion and new life. This call to conversion is a call to the desert, a call to interiority. It is an invitation to pay attention to and take seriously what one discovers in the inner world of the Spirit. This call to conversion, to new life, is a call to touch in a deepening way our need for healing, for forgiveness, and at the same time experience the unreserved love and mercy of God. When we begin to know ourselves as healed and forgiven, we are in a better position to accept not only ourselves, but also our neighbor. Bernard Lonergan, in his article, *Theology in Its New Context* (in L.K. Shook, *Theology of Renewal*, Vol. I, Montreal: Palm Pub., 1968, pp. 44-45) writes:

... "conversion is fundamental to religious living. When conversion is viewed as an ongoing process, personal, communal, and historical, it coincides with living religion. For religion is conversion in its preparation, in its occurrence, in its development, in its consequences as also in its incompleteness, its failures, its breakdowns, its disintegrations."

This type of conversion of which Lonergan speaks is not merely a change or even a development but rather the radical transformation of our lives, of our whole person on all levels of living. Such a conversion reaches down into the very depths of our being to purify and transform our images of God, our desires, feelings, emotions, and imaginings. This conversion/metanoia helps us to see our unfreedoms, to touch and experience our own darkness, and to know ourselves as sinners. This type of conversion will help us conform ourselves to the values that Christ taught. It will prevent us from "burn out," which many activists today suffer from, because we will see and know our limitations; this conversion will sensitize us to injustices, both institutional and individual, that surround us. This radical conversion will help us have a vision of the way things could be. From the onset, conversion will turn us upside down and only *gradually* bring to consciousness the Truth that is within us.

The conversion process which took place in the apostle Peter is a good example of the radical transformation that *can* take place in all of

us for, in one way or another, we are all very much like Peter. From the time of Peter's great catch of fish as narrated in Luke 5:1-11, to his triple response of love as narrated in John 21:15-17, Peter grew from a stance of self-sufficiency and myopia into a more mature way of loving God and relating to his neighbor. Peter became aware of his limits and faults in his moments of crisis (and there were many such moments), but it was only because of these calls to ever deepening conversions and the results they had in his personal and spiritual life that Peter could once again recommit himself to the Lord. Now, his commitment was not based on his own capabilities, on what he thought he had and knew, but rather on the word of God who called him. Now Peter was ready to serve God in his neighbor with neither illusion, nor self-sufficiency that marked his earlier commitment. Is this not the same process to which we all are called? Is this not the transformation and new life offered to each one of us? Each of us has his/her own time and moment when the novelty and enthusiasm of our initial call grows faint, when through the days, months, years of religious living we come face to face with the demands of what living gospel values authentically really means. No longer filled with youth-full exuberance or naiveté we stand daily on the threshold of life/death choices. St. John of the Cross speaks of this time as one's search for deeper love and truth. He says, "to love is to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God. In other words, love's very function calls for purification and conversion by conforming the human will to the Divine will and directing all the soul's activity toward God." (Introduction, *Dark Night*.) If we are aware of and in touch with our lived experiences, and the many calls to deepen our faith and relationship with God, we come to see and know that we are not sufficient unto ourselves, that it is God who holds all things in his time. We also come to know, that in ministering to others, we will be only as effective as we are accepting of ourselves as limited yet gifted individuals who freely and daily enter into the Paschal Mystery.

In life, more often than not, our choices are filled with ambiguity and paradox and saying "Yes" to these choices becomes one of the greatest challenges to our life journey. Why? Because it means that like the apostle Peter, we become more and more aware of the diminishments and limitations taking place in ourselves and so we must choose. We must choose to step out in faith, to risk that which will initiate death to the secure and familiar ways that we have known. Stepping out in faith means moving beyond the pain and hurt of past experiences to owning oneself responsibly, and facing the present with acceptance and resignation. Stepping out in faith means choosing to see and the willingness to accept the pain and demands of seeing who we are. If we refuse to see, we will go on in our blindness—good people (priests, religious, pastors, lay women/men, seminarians) but blind to the

possibility of what we could become. In short, the process of becoming a fuller, more complete person, capable of ministering to God's people involves our *full participation* in life. This participation, will vary in kind and degree according to the person/s involved but, whether psychological or spiritual, it will involve a degree of integration which will allow us to transcend the now of who we are and look with expectation and enthusiasm to what we can become. Because of our faith which undergirds our belief in ministry, we are able to accept to live in a tension in the present always aware that we are moving toward something better than we already know. This is the process of conversion and transformation at work in our lives, a process through which we all must pass in order to gain new life. This process, however, cannot be brought on by ourselves—it is God's gift and is brought about when He wills.

Being a Christian in today's world places enormous demands on any individual but this becomes even more crucial in our ministry to others. If I could possibly give a word or concept that would best describe the hopes and dreams of our people today, without drawing any conclusions, it would be that of "survival." Survival has many faces—but whether we belong to the struggling class of the poor, the escalating middle class that seeks to move higher, or affluent class of the rich, each segment of society strives to live, to be in relationship, to maintain life of some kind. How *sensitive* then we must become to the forces of good and evil that surround us and especially to the nuances of evil which many times threaten our vision for good and for life. We must be constantly discerning where we are selfishly seeking ourselves and work against it. It takes a tremendous amount of faith and courage to hold on to values which say, "people are more important than things"; it takes patience and a loving compassionate heart to allow ourselves to be *touched deeply enough* by the plight of someone less fortunate than we, and commit ourselves generously to them. The needs of our world, of our people are many, but there is hope in Christ's redeeming grace, in his saving love and mercy. He is aware of our limited human condition, and precisely because of it, he loves us all the more and gives us grace to sustain and keep us growing.

As we journey through life, we many times must find ways of going beyond the limits that are placed in our way. This is often the case when we encounter the dimension of fear in our lived experience. In John's first epistle, vs. 18, we read, "love has no room for fear; rather perfect love casts out all fear." Fear, as we well know, is an emotion which is experienced as part of the human condition. We know of its power to *enable* us to move with God's grace away from sins of self-sufficiency and presumption as well as its power to *paralyze* and keep one in a condition of helpless inactivity. We all crave the security of belonging to and being accepted by others. Acceptance seems to vali-

date and its refusal to undermine us. Unconsciously, we tend to build ourselves up on the good opinions others have of us and feel deflated when they disapprove. Behind this lies the fear of our own poverty and this fear will keep us on the move in a desperate search for reassurance.

Fear, like other emotions, has a way of making its way into our psyche over a period of time and we become fearful of many things. We fear the past because we may have perhaps failed; we fear the present because it is so complex, so new, so over-powering; we fear the future, because it is unknown. How often do we close ourselves off from others, because we fear revealing ourselves and being vulnerable before them? We fear letting go of material goods, because we are afraid that in sharing them we might be left with nothing; we fear sharing our intellectual expertise with others lest they move higher on the hierarchical/socioeconomic scale; we fear celibacy lest we not find fulfillment; we fear honest confrontation with others about societal values because, "they won't do anything anyway!" We even fear prayer itself, suspecting that God might make clear to us the complacency of our lives. In short, we fear the death that comes each day through emptying ourselves and giving ourselves to Christ through and with others. Discerning the Spirit's work implies a certain freedom from fear which allows for God's love to be operative in us.

The times and circumstances in which we are called to live our faith today are complex. They are challenging and at the same time grace-filled. We are called to give public witness individually and corporately, and must be "rooted and built up in Christ" (Eph. 3:17), for only then will we see meaning and life beyond the immediate chaos and paradox in our world. When we as ministers of his Word are steeped in daily prayer, we are better equipped to meet the challenges of our changing world and we can participate in them creatively, with hope in the mission God has given us. In prayer, we come to know that change and growth are the seedbed of God's work, his mission, unfolding through the human. Conversion then is an integral part of ministry for it not only gives rise to life and gospel authenticity, but in the lived experience becomes the proving ground where one comes to realize their unity and solidarity with all people as sinners who have been and continue to be redeemed.

Chapter 12 of John's gospel speaks of Jesus as the grain of wheat which falls into the ground, dies that we might have life. Nourishment, food, bread, all symbols of what He will be for us that we might have a fuller, richer life. Further on in the same chapter, vs. 32 says, "when I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself." Yet, even before his death, Jesus was so identified with us, that he experienced deep within himself a great tension, for he said, "my soul is troubled now." This tension, this inner turmoil, was this not the pain of his own diminishment? Jesus experienced in his own gut, the same kind of tension, the

same kind of pain, the inner anxiety and anguish, that we all experience when and if we allow ourselves to touch our fragile, needy human nature. As ministers, we must be prepared to *participate actively* in the life-giving mission of Jesus. As mentioned earlier, we have to choose to say "yes" and if we do, we will truly share with him in his redemptive mission. If we choose to be like him, then we shall be broken, and raised to newness of life to live, to grow, to give, to be spent, to become food for one another. This is what ministering is all about today. St. John of the Cross in his *Dark Night* says, "for it will please and comfort one who treads this path (conversion/metanoia) to know that a way seemingly so rough and adverse and contrary to spiritual gratification engenders so many blessings." (*D.N.*, Bk. 1, p. 320)

The kind of conversion we have been reflecting on in this paper is one that touches the heart of our inner being and moves us to renewal of our whole person as well as our personality. We must give to our people in and through ministry the gift of ourselves which has been purified and made whole through healing and which our personality reflects. We cannot begin to speak or even think of reaching out to others if we have not touched and reconciled in compassion and gentleness the sister or brother in need of healing within ourselves. Neither can we give this love and compassionate support to others if we have not first allowed ourselves the time and space to *experience* real inner growth, love and healing. This kind of conversion leading to transformation is a slow, painful process which we must allow to happen, because only then will it bear fruit for the kingdom; this kind of conversion takes time and perseverance; it takes fidelity to a belief that God loves and welcomes all to union with him. It takes a constant reviewing of our conduct, holding it if you will to the light of the gospel and really wanting the light to show us where we are wrong. It is of no use putting in a lot of time for prayer and making a big thing of our spirituality if our dealings with others are not characterized by honesty, justice and kindness. St. Teresa of Avila alludes to the same idea when she says,

"It is necessary that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for the virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarfs. And, please God, it will be only a matter of not growing, for you already know that whoever does not increase decreases. I hold that love, where present, cannot possibly be content with remaining always the same." (*Interior Castle*, VII:4, #9)

In the process of conversion, "though we are but clay in the hands of the Potter" (Jeremiah 18), the healing power of the Spirit will teach us to love and forgive; the Spirit will teach us to accept ourselves as sinful

and loved; the Spirit will teach us to be the healers and reconcilers to/for our sisters and brothers; the Spirit will enable us to profess the Truth in love and grow to the maturity of Christ the head. (Eph. 4:15)

Because our world is constantly changing, we need people who will always question and search for authentic meaning as they live out their life of faith. For the work of the Spirit to continue in our world today, we need either Jesus himself or persons who possess his spirit. We need people who are willing to forget their own interests that they may *listen* to someone who is hurting; we need people who will realize that they cannot solve all their neighbors' problems but who, in times of crises are *willing to stand with* them in prayerful support and physical presence. We need people who have become strengthened in the process of conversion, who can grapple with institutions and individuals which perpetrate injustice; we need people of vision who can help others to have a vision beyond what they can see. Finally, we need people who will reach out and touch, and with a smile, a show of interest and compassion, bring a ray of hope, joy and love into the lives of others. We need your presence to give witness to the Kingdom already present among us. St. Teresa of Avila in her concluding remarks on the *Interior Castle* says:

"The Lord doesn't look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done. And, if we do what we can, His Majesty will enable us each day to do more and more, provided that we do not quickly tire. But during the little while this life lasts – and perhaps it will last a shorter time than each one thinks – let us offer the Lord interiorly and exteriorly the sacrifice we can. His Majesty will join it with that which He offered on the cross to the Father for us. Thus even though our works are small they will have the value our love for Him would have merited had they been great." (VII:4 #15, p. 450)