

**STATIO CONFERENCE**  
**CONVERSATIO MORUM AND NEW EVANGELIZATION**  
**( 12<sup>th</sup> General Chapter 2012, Direction 1)**

**Introduction**

In one of our committee meetings in the recently-concluded General Chapter, we asked - what more can we say about *conversatio morum* that has not been said yet? This direction has always been there in all the past chapters and will be there in chapters still to come. In our Priory Chapters we have also said, “*paulit-ulit na lang yan*”, “*pareho pa rin yan*”, *ano ba ang bago dyan?*” Apparently there is some sense of disappointment and impatience at the recurrence and repetition. Maybe we are thinking that nothing has happened to our efforts at conversion or we might be thinking that conversion is a finished product. Like the chosen people, we have set our eyes on the promised land and could not understand why we have to go through the long journey to reach it.

Our Constitutions tell us that conversion is lifelong, more a process than a product. The Christian’s journey towards transformation is one great adventure of conversion for a lifetime. We are never done and over with it.

This *statio* conference revisits what I wrote way back in 2007 on Solid Mission Formation. In that reflection, I posited that our goal in religious life is to be formed in the heart and mind of Christ and the pivotal process and the central dynamics involved in this transformation is CONVERSION. Moving on, we will reflect on the 12<sup>th</sup> General Chapter’s first direction that links *conversatio morum* with new evangelization.

**The goal of the Christian life: Transformation into Christ**

A closer look at this goal of our Christian and religious vocation shows that a lifetime will not be enough to achieve this. The Religious Formation Conference held in Chicago in 2002 by the Center for the Study of Religious Life calls our journey of becoming a religious a process of lifelong transformation, a living of the Emmaus story. Ours is a spirituality of being “on the way”, of abiding in the present and yet being on a pilgrimage. We are always on the road to Emmaus, challenged to live the sinful and yet graced realities of our lives. There is also on this road the opportunity to realize what is living among us and of receiving the burning heart that

is available to us. The conference document concludes by saying that our formation programs cannot be just informational, not just rational, not even just inspiring but transformational, geared toward transformation of consciousness, a liberation of imagination, memory and committed caring. However, the document did not explicitly mention the “horizon” of this transformation. The goal of conversion is not only some humanist undertaking or involves only human change, development and liberation. Rather, we are called to conform ourselves into the heart and mind of Christ – how Christ thinks and how Christ loves.

It is clear to us that upon embracing the Christian and religious life we committed ourselves to be trans-formed. We all mentioned some sublime motivations when we entered the convent – to serve God and the poor, dedicate our lives to the mission of Jesus, give ourselves to the building up of God’s reign. We radically separated from family, ties, career, attachments, all sorts of possibilities. All of us were captured by the invitation to write a new story of our lives where the divine is an all-consuming concern and where we become new persons capable of a new way of thinking, being, loving.

We are told in the Rule of St. Benedict that the novice who wants to assume the monastic way of life promises stability, *conversatio morum* and obedience (RB 58:17). The newcomer renounces the former “worldly” way of life and strives towards assent to Christ. The definite goal in the monastic journey is to progress in loving union with God which to St. Benedict was possible in this life.

So the newcomer takes on the monastic lifestyle that includes the traditional external practices related to community living, prayer, work, meals, sleep, holy reading and leisure. Conversion in the sense of “leading a monastic life” also includes the life and practices of poverty, chastity, obedience, humility and the traditional asceticism specific to the monastic community. We give up the old habits, ways, behaviors, even values that are not aligned to the ways of Jesus. We are given ample time through initial formation to assume the monastic life patterns and still more time after profession to root ourselves to the monastic way.

Religious life is an entirely new orientation – direction and horizon of meaning have to be changed to the highest ideal of the total self-gift for love of God and neighbor. Formation to this way of life involves paradigm shifts – from apathy to the paradigm of compassion, from individualism to community, from materialism to simplicity of life, from noise to silence, from self-centeredness to altruism and service, from self-gratification to self-transcendence. We have negotiated these shifts, in small and big steps, successful at times but also falling short many other times. To remain the same, to hold on to the same ideas, beliefs and practices or to have the same set of behaviors and system of valuing betray the conversion we have vowed

ourselves to undertake and shows that we are impervious to the Spirit wanting to break forth into our lives, wanting to re-create us in the heart and mind of Him who we declare to follow and to love. Are we more self-giving and more dedicated in our vowed life now compared to the time we were novices? Are our relationships getting more expansive? Are there cherished ideas that matter less now? Are our superiors having an easier time to assign us to any mission work? Are we better able to handle our temper and stay calm? Can we tolerate more ambiguity, mistakes, imperfections? Are we more forgiving and less self-righteous? After initial formation, are we more concerned about our living of religious life and make efforts to grow as persons and as followers of Christ? Are we growing in grace and wisdom, in fidelity and enthusiasm? The answers to these questions gives us an idea where we are in our conversion journey and whether we are drawing people to God (the basic evangelizing activity), or drawing them away from the Church, away from the faith.

### **Direction 1: *Conversatio Morum* and New Evangelization**

The text in our General Chapter document reads,

“ Our *Conversatio Morum* is the key which opens to a new paradigm of evangelization. Centered in the Eucharist, fortified by the richness of our Benedictine tradition, and fired by the Spirit’s enthusiasm for a new call to mission, we strive continually to become vibrant communities bringing peace and hope to a divided world.

*Conversatio Morum* impels us to radiate this peace when we truly care for others, especially the poor and the sick. It makes us receive in friendliness and warmth all those who knock on our doors. It helps us to look at leadership not with the secular eyes of dominance and power but with the eyes of faith. The exercise of our leadership concretizes the monastic and missionary Benedictine values of humble service and faithful living of our charism. Thus, imbued with the spirit, we commit ourselves with new fervor and joy to proclaim the Good News of our salvation to those who are in search for meaning and communion” (Message of the 12<sup>th</sup> Gen. Chap., p. 7).

The text links four aspects of our life to *conversatio morum* -- new evangelization and mission, peacemaking and hospitality, exercise of leadership, and formation of vibrant communities of peace and joy. The Eucharist, our Benedictine tradition, and the Holy Spirit’s inspiration make this conversion come about.

The bishops in their message to the faithful at the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops on October 26, 2012 state that first of all the personal encounter with Christ is the foundation of new evangelization:

“Before saying anything about the forms that this new evangelization must assume, we feel the need to tell you with profound conviction that the faith determines everything in the relationship that we build with the person of Jesus who takes the initiative to encounter us. The work of the new evangelization consists in presenting once more the beauty and perennial newness of the encounter with Christ to the often distracted and confused heart and mind of the men and women of our time, above all to ourselves. We invite you all to contemplate the face of the Lord Jesus Christ, to enter the mystery of his existence given for us on the cross, reconfirmed in his resurrection from the dead as the Father’s gift and imparted to us through the Spirit. In the person of Jesus, the mystery of God the Father’s love for the entire human family is revealed” (Concluding Message from the Synod of Bishops, October 16, 2012, #3)

New evangelization is proclaiming the Gospel truth with courage. However, this proclamation is only an outflow of the new life received from the encounter with Jesus. To lead others to Jesus or help them encounter our Lord, it is necessary that we must encounter him first.

Our bishops tell us that evangelizing ourselves means opening ourselves to conversion. This makes new evangelization a personal thing.

“The invitation to evangelize becomes a call to conversion. We firmly believe that we must convert ourselves above all to the power of Christ who alone can make all things new, above all our poor existence. With humility we must recognize that the poverty and weaknesses of Jesus’ disciples, especially his ministers, weigh on the credibility of the mission... We know we must humbly recognize our vulnerability to the wounds of history and we do not hesitate to recognize our personal sins. We are, however, also convinced that the Lord’s Spirit is capable of renewing his Church and rendering her garment resplendent if we let him mold us” (Concluding Message from the Synod of Bishops, October 16, 2012, #5)

The conversion necessary for new evangelization is, above all, God’s work. God takes the initiative to invite people to change and God’s love creates the environment for people to face themselves. In the story of the prodigal son, the father’s awaiting embrace makes possible the return to his grace. In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5-52), Jesus initiates a conversation, creates a safe space for the woman to articulate her deepest need

and acknowledge who she is. This encounter was humanly liberational and spiritually transformative such that the evangelized became an evangelizer, bringing her townsfolk to believe in Jesus on the strength of her testimony.

In this task of new evangelization, we are told that we position ourselves as recipients of God's initiative because it is not us who are to conduct the work of evangelization: "The first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by inserting ourselves into the divine initiative, only by begging this divine initiative, will we too be able to become – with him and in him – evangelizers" (Benedict XVI, Meditation during the first general Congregation of the XIII General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Rome, 8 October 2012).

The word of God in Scriptures, prayer and contemplation, and the events of daily life are the privileged loci of encountering our Lord. We rest on this certainty that the strength and inspiration of the Spirit breaks forth to reach us and makes us **renewed and renewing evangelizers**.

There is a big temptation to think right away about methods, strategies, new ways and means of doing evangelization. In fact, many Sisters have asked how we can next proceed to implement the General and Priory Chapter directions. We are thinking now of programs and projects, of going here and there, doing this and that. That's not bad, on the contrary it can be a sign of apostolic enthusiasm, but it is not enough. There is the person of the evangelizer as the starting point – the evangelizer who will transmit the faith and lead others to encounter the source of life and living water. If new evangelization carries with it a necessity for a paradigm shift, this will mean becoming first convinced proclaimers of the Gospel, authentic witnesses to God's love and models of continuing conversion to our faith community.

### ***Conversatio Morum* and Peacemaking, Hospitality, and Service of Authority**

"Evangelization refers to every aspect of the Church's activity" (*Lineamenta*, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops). Our General Chapter document invites us in this first direction to consider the aspects of peacemaking, hospitality and the service of authority as areas for conversion and evangelization. The *Lineamenta*, on the other hand, identifies the sectors calling for new evangelization as follows: culture, social sector, social communications, economy, scientific and technological research, civic and political life. Within these sectors are changes and shifts that gave rise to new situations which are immensely challenging to Christians.

Our text tells us that *Conversatio Morum*

- impels us to radiate peace when we truly care for others, especially the poor and the sick
- makes us receive in friendliness and warmth all those who knock on our doors
- helps us to look at leadership not with the secular eyes of dominance and power but with the eyes of faith; the exercise of our leadership concretizes the monastic and missionary Benedictine values of humble service and faithful living of our charism.

These three areas of peacemaking and option for the poor, hospitality, and Benedictine exercise of leadership are also repeated concerns in our General and Priory Chapters. Why these concerns continue to come up again and again is mainly because of changes in contexts and with it the emergence of new problems and challenges. The changes and advances in all parts of the world today have created new phenomena of poverty, new leadership forms and organizational arrangements, new social groupings, new forms of exclusion and marginality. Christians find themselves face to face with these situations and are challenged to discern what they can offer, what they can share, how they can bring the Good News to such new contexts.

“The new sectors which call us into dialogue require turning a critical eye towards our manner of life, our thinking, our values and our means of communication. At the same time, the occasion must also serve as a self-evaluation of Christianity today, which must repeatedly learn to understand itself, beginning from its roots” (*Lineamenta*, #7). What monastic perspective shall we bring to situations of migration, new technology, ecological destruction, complex systems of organization, new family arrangements? The world has changed but with what set of eyes do we see it? Do we embrace these new situations with discerning minds and not with fear and defensiveness?

We can embark on new evangelization if we are open to see the promise and not only the threat of new situations. Our General Chapter document on information technology (Part II, #12, p. 11) calls us not to demonize technology outright but to have a critical attitude that values its good use but sees its potential harmful effects in our monastic life as well. Migration causes the formation of inter-cultural communities and realities but the displacement of peoples at the same time. What form shall our hospitality take given this situation? We have seen the devastating effects of abuse of our environment but do we believe that care for the earth is an urgent concern? Our conversion to this way of seeing things and our assent to take on the task of proclaiming the Gospel message to these new situations is the utmost Christian agenda.

## Conclusion

The continual call to conversion and the lifelong task of transformation into the Christ-life and the new situations that demand new responses place us in a state of “creative tension”. The task of new evangelization places in us a great responsibility. The most critical one is our conversion into being evangelizers “who are not dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious ... but whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world” (*Lineamenta*, #25).

It is said that the first stage of the Emmaus story consists of sadness, discouragement, looking back and resignation to the status quo. The next stage of journeying with Jesus is filled with listening, asking questions, being open and receiving new energy. The third is recognition of Jesus in the breaking of the bread and the last is the setting of hearts on fire, the return, and proclamation (The Religious Formation Conference, Chicago, Center for the Study of Religious Life, 2002). The conversion story places us in much the same stages and it is hoped that we can reach the place where our hearts will be set on fire so that we may become renewed evangelizers offering joy and hope to our world.

### Some questions for the faith sharing:

1. What did God ask of you when you were an aspirant/postulant, a Junior Sister, a professed Sister? What is God asking of you today, right now?
2. On your personal encounter with God: What are the ways and circumstances in which your life was opened to Christ’s presence?
3. Before asking the question on what we can do differently, can we ask the question, how can we be different evangelizers?
4. What are the signs of your converted and converting self? Ex: greater flexibility, more harmonious relationships, more forgiving, greater capacity to let go, more enthusiasm for and dedication to the ministry ...

### References:

*Lineamenta*, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

Message of the 12<sup>th</sup> General Chapter 2012, Rome, October 2012

Concluding Message from the Synod of Bishops, Rome, October 16, 2012

The Religious Formation Conference. Chicago, Center for the Study of Religious Life, 2002