

An Interview with *Maricarmen Bracamontes, OSB* A Call to Transformation

Maricarmen Bracamontes, OSB addressed the LCWR 2011 assembly on the challenges to US women religious leaders in these crucial times of major transformation. She posed the question: How are we to be active participants in this paradigm shift as women religious who claim the Divine presence at the heart of our interior life as the main source of our strength? LCWR communications director **Annamarie Sanders, IHM** interviewed Maricarmen to probe her insights on this subject further. Maricarmen, who resides in Mexico, coordinates the theology team that advises the presidency of the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Religious (CLAR), and is a member of the theological reflection team for the national Conference of Religious in Mexico.

Q In your LCWR assembly address, you spoke of this period being a time of major transformation. You quoted Adolfo Nicolás as saying that this radical change “questions the very methodology that we use to face our problems and see new possibilities.” You also noted that these transforming times permit women re-

ligious to be closer to the fulfillment of our dreams than we were before. Would you speak more about why you believe this kind of radical change can be beneficial to women religious at this time?

Above all, it is evident that our past and present ways of understanding and structuring reality have reached their limits. The way we have thought and acted until recently has been modeled by a unique perspective that was dualistic, exclusive, and hierarchical. In that context our relationships tended inevitably to be relationships of dominance and submission that discouraged respect for human dignity.

We are living in a period of emerging diversity, diversity that up until our time had been contained and controlled. As a new epoch emerges we discover a multiplicity of forms. As that happens the importance of women’s contributions specifically are apparent and refreshing in all areas of church and society. The best that the different feminisms have given us has been egalitarian, inclusive, peaceful, and ethical -- with a more integral sense of justice, a justice that helps others to develop as human beings -- reflecting a true sense of the common good and the good of the planet. These women have created opportunities to make their contributions and the process has been aided by a growing respect for their inalienable rights and the respect they deserve as persons.

This is even more radical from the perspective of our ultimate values, in our

case from the Good News of the Gospel, as Sandra Schneiders, IHM says so well in her definition of spirituality. Women religious have intuited that God’s power is the power of love on which all human equality is based. At the same time we have been entrusted with the care of creation, our common home. This perspective significantly enriches our theological reflection and our pastoral action.

Q You also stated that “to ignore this radical transition, to refuse to assume the tasks that it implies is to give up our identity and to opt for irrelevance.” Do you sense that we are in danger of being no longer relevant or significant to the world?

We will be relevant to the degree that we risk participating in new ways of being and relating. That will imply entering into dialogue with the emerging subjects who are key elements in this time of historical transition. This is one of the gifts and tasks of incarnation. When I use the word “dialogue” I am referring to an attitude of openness to listen and let ourselves be enriched by other’s contributions at the same time that we share our own insights. That is why I insist that if we don’t recognize what is happening all around us, if we don’t go out to meet the emerging subjects, if we refuse to participate in the systemic change that is needed, certainly we will cease to be relevant or significant. When I refer to emerging subjects, I am alluding to those groups of people oppressed and excluded by present structures, who are aware of their unjust situation, and who

seek to participate in a process of change and transformation.

Q You shared with us that the Confederation of Latin American Religious has been looking for more than a decade at the challenges that this time of epochal change presents to religious life and, that among other things, CLAR has simply stated that we need to begin by recognizing and affirming that this cultural transformation includes us. Would you say more about why CLAR felt it was important to encourage this recognition and affirmation, and what has happened as a result?

As we have reflected on the cultural transition in which we find ourselves, we rediscover the importance of our charisms. Our task is to plumb the depths of the best of our own charismatic tradition that was a gift for God's People at the time of our founding. It can be a dynamic expression of the Good News of this time in history that apparently would ignore or exclude it as irrelevant. We have become aware that we can reclaim the action and all the possibilities of the Divine Ruah within us. The Divine Ruah is the hermeneutic of memory, she is the gift of the Risen Christ who reminds us of all that Jesus gave us, of the gift of God's Reign. The Spirit leads us into the fullness of truth.

In the CLAR one of our first intuitions was the call to reflect on two dimensions of our Christian identity -- the mystical and the prophetic -- and to embrace the task of interweaving them. We became convinced that there is no mysticism without prophecy and no prophecy without mysticism. From there we discovered that we needed to recognize the emerging subjects in these new times and find our place in the present historical setting. We have seen and worked with the limitations so apparent in traditional institutions, especially noticeable in their ways of relating and proceeding. That

is why, in my presentation at the LCWR assembly, I mentioned several present day social and religious events that I consider signs of hope.

Q You spoke of the struggle of going between old mindsets and the new and shared with us Giorgio Gonella's definition of faith. "Faith is not something we 'have' or 'don't have'... Faith is a path... it is a journey between light and darkness. It is an eternally unsatisfied desire. It is confidence renewed time and again, a commitment without end." Would you speak more about the need for this kind of faith as we move through this time of great change?

It has to do with entering into the paradox of eschatology: the "now," the present historical reality of transformation, and the "not yet" in all of its fullness. When I shared with you about an exercise of Christian memory I referred to Martha of Bethany: she dared to confess that she believed in Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, the one who was to come; and that he is life and resurrection not only for the end time, but for the here and now. Yet at the same time she made her confession at the decisive moment when Jesus said, "Take away the stone!" Martha struggled between her traditional mindset and the revelation that she had received. "There will be a bad smell, Lord. He has been buried for four days!" Jesus shook those old ways of thinking to their foundations with his response: "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believed?"

There's an enormous distance between a purely intellectual affirma-

tion and an act of loving confidence that envelops our whole being. Often times the new is there, right before our eyes, and we don't see it; at times we hear and say "yes" we believe in the Good News, but we don't really hear it. We need conversion, the transformation that is a process, a way of living, that continually renews our confidence, as Gonella says, and at the same time lets the reality in which we are immersed touch our depths and awaken that compassion that is the power of God's Reign and that transforms conditions of death into life. I think that this is fundamental now more than ever when the insatiable greed and ambition of the few is violently destroying human life and the life of our planet.

Q You reminded us that US women religious are among the most well-educated and powerful groups of women in the world. From your perspective, what are some of the ways in which US women religious may better use that education and power for the sake of the world?

I think it's time that you

- put all of your intellectual resources at the service of life -- dignified life for all humanity -- with a preferential option for those most in need, on the margins, excluded from society.
- dare to admit that we can't continue to reproduce old models which



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may have worked in the past but no longer serve our mission. Our works in the fields of education and health have frequently grown into large institutions that have been co-opted by the powers that be. Often they serve the system rather than the Gospel. We need to keep educating, but let's be sure that the education we give helps to develop mature, critical, faith-filled thinkers capable of dismantling the internalized structures of domination and submission that have held sway for so long. I am convinced that you North American religious can use your resources in an intercongregational and an interdisciplinary manner to try out new ways of living and relating with a preferential option for those who, up to this time, have been excluded.

- use every formation opportunity for transformation.
- dismantle the internalized structures of domination in order to be able to create new life.

At the core of our Christian values we discover personal freedom, the gift of self, to break and share all that we are and have. We need to shout out with our way of living that life is not about accumulating consumer goods or privileges. Our lives are meant to remind others that the Christian way is radically different. It's about kenosis, letting go of ambition based on self-interest that ignores the needs of others. We are called to reveal that there is profound meaning in seeking the good of others before our own good.



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Q For the last two years, LCWR passed resolutions at its assembly to be more attentive to learning from women religious living in all parts of the world. Is there anything you would like to say to US women religious leaders about this resolution? What do you feel it might be important for US religious to learn? What would you like to see happen as a result of this resolution?

Yes, we need to learn and we need to transmit what we have learned.

I think you can grow in your understanding and appreciation of the plurality and diversity across cultures. You may discover new ways of learning that enrich our identity as we build on our shared treasures. For example, I have the impression that the North American mindset is very convinced of the importance of following the law. Perhaps when you come in contact with other cultures where people do not value the law so highly you might think that they are inferior. You may not understand that for some groups within given cultures, the law has never protected their rights or given them opportunities for growth. When laws are just and they help us to grow and become freer as individuals and as a group, they deserve all our respect and obedience; but when the law enslaves, impoverishes, and diminishes, submissive obedience is a dangerous mindset.

There are people in your country who seem gradually to be becoming aware that the laws of the free market are perverse and have condemned millions of people within and beyond your borders to inhuman living conditions, and that under the banner of democracy all too often your government has colluded with dictatorial regimes in many parts of the world for the sole purpose of maintaining an unsustainable lifestyle for a portion of the people of North America. People are becoming aware that they don't have the right to impose their religious interpretations on the public at large and that ecclesiastical practice all too often does not promote mature Christian people with well-formed and critical consciences. This list could go on.

Some people are becoming more critical of practices like

- the death penalty, that is questionable in itself, besides being racially biased and punishing of the poor.
- unjust anti-immigration legislation;
- the massive consumption of illegal drugs and the lucrative sale of arms to drug dealers.

As religious leaders I invite you to become knowledgeable on these and other issues and to reflect on your responses to them in the light of Catholic social teaching. Especially as we approach an election year both in Mexico and the United States, we need the Gospel as our guide and not the sound bites of our favorite candidate.

I think that you can share your wisdom with us regarding the processes that you have gone through to achieve your own cultural identity that has given you a certain autonomy and freedom. Many of you came from European roots and I'm sure it was a struggle and that it took you a long time to become North American religious. In our region, some of our congregations are still going through the process. We need to discover our own way of recreating the charism in our geographical and cultural contexts. You can encourage those who have received your charism in other parts of the world to develop their own expressions of that gift and to continue with their own struggles towards greater autonomy and freedom.

Q You live in a reality that differs significantly from that of most US women religious in terms of economic poverty, oppression, corruption, and violence. What are some of the sources from which you draw to sustain your own hope that something new is being born for the future?

I am strengthened by the diverse people and groups around me who are developing as subjects and making their voices heard. Those voices are peaceful but forceful calls to resistance. I am encouraged by those who no longer accept oppression, exclusion, and mistreatment because of who they are. I hear people saying "enough is enough!" and this can become the inheritance we leave to fu-

ture generations -- and I hear that expression within social, economic, political, and religious institutions.

In my talk I mentioned that the new does not arise out of a vacuum. It blossoms forth out of the best of our tradition. I am convinced that each of our charisms has something to offer to this new period in history. Something new is coming forth ... Can't you see it? I have found hope as I have gone deeply into my Benedictine charism with my community and those who share our life as we have found ways to offer it to today's world.

Q Is there anything that you had hoped to say to LCWR at the assembly that you did not have the opportunity to say?

I would have liked to develop more fully the insight about the biblical interpretation of the passage of Martha's encounter with Jesus at the death of Lazarus. If there had been time, we could have contemplated together, to experience the Good News and how it leads us to let the Divine Ruah act within us. That is Jesus' gift to us. I would have underlined the fact that the dynamism of the Spirit, her recreating power, has its roots in divine

compassion, which is a vital force within us that transforms situations of death into life-giving encounters. That is the sense of life and resurrection for the here and now and not only "on the last day." I would have looked at John 11:33, 38 where Jesus is touched at the level of his deepest emotions because of the death of his friend. From those depths, where new life is conceived, Jesus uses his authority to order the removal of the stone that seals in death. We are all capable of placing the stone in front of the tomb, but to remove the stone and bring forth life is only possible with the power of the Divine Ruah. Here come to mind the questions that I had given you at the close of my reflection:

- Are you willing to risk letting the divine power of Jesus within you roll away the stone from the tomb?
- Are you willing to use that power as Jesus did, in a creative life-giving way, to nourish growth into maturity, confront evil and death in all of their forms, heal and reconcile our wounded world? □

LCWR thanks Patricia Henry, OSB for her translation assistance with this interview.



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