Voices of Sisters
Spirituality
Religious Life



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Every time I travel towards Panaji-Goa, after crossing the Zuari bridge (in North Goa, India), the natural arch formed by the branches of the trees speak of adjustment, acceptance, communion and healthy relationships. This has a lot to say to a religious!

Being in one family is sometimes a surprising experience of loving relationship and a profound bond with the *other,* different from me — based on the simple fact of being human beings, of being women religious. John O'Donohue says: "There are people whose presence is encouraging. … The sense of encouragement you feel from them is not simply their words or gestures; it is rather their whole presence enfolding you and helping you find the concealed door."

I bear in mind that my identity, motivated and empowered to be a sign and symbol of Christ, demands continuous conversion of heart to grow with freedom and with conviction. To permeate kingdom values and — in whatever I do — to have the fire, to fan the flame like the "fire in the ashes," to move beyond, to new horizons, to dare to be different.

"Rise, and have no fear" (Matthew 17:7), Jesus said to the disciples when he took them up a high mountain and was transfigured at Mount Tabor. It reminds me of *Vita Consecrata* (Paragraph 40): "This is particularly true whenever one descends from the 'mountain' with the Master and sets off on the road which leads from Tabor to Calvary."

How I had that fire burning within when some little children said to me: "Sister, I want to tell you something." They asked me to bend low, and in my ear, one of them whispered: "They [the neighbors] are worshipping another god and lighting a lamp, and also coming to church."

I "put on the armor of God" (Ephesians 6:13-19) and visited that family, with great purpose and a mission to accomplish. They knew me; we had a very good relationship. We spoke, and I saw the place where they had the coconut and the lamps lit, and other indications that they were praying to another god.

I looked at their fallen faces, urged them to be strong, removed the offending materials, put them in a bag, and threw them in a stream. They assured me, "Sister, we wanted to get rid of these but we were afraid, it has been carried on for so many years. Thank you." The news reached the parish priest and also the local bishop.

When the parish priest said with fear that "I can never dream of these daring acts!" I quoted *Vita Consecrata* (49): "For their part, consecrated persons will not fail to cooperate generously with the particular Churches as much as they can and with respect for their own charism, *working in full communion with the Bishop* in the areas of evangelization, catechesis and parish life."

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As parts of the body of Christ, each of us has an important role in keeping our communities in unity and harmony, living a life worthy of our call. The ordinary life at Nazareth actually calls for an extraordinary life, one that innovates in its work, whether in our institutions or personal living. We must move from dictating or commanding to selflessly caring, sharing, appreciating, motivating, empowering — moving from administration to animation! We need to be media active, using modern gadgets for evangelization, and by our living witness of being another Christ, becoming messengers of his kingdom.

A perfect example of union in communion is a tree whose parts are interconnected, intertwined, interdependent as architects of union in communion.

Surely, a tree stands tall against the storm and strong winds because it is well-grounded with deep roots. I remember something I saw from the veranda of our convent at Chisda during the rainy season: a natural arch of trees. The trees seem to make way for the branches to grow: some branches moved to the left, others to the right — the *adjustments* they made, the understanding and acceptance! While some nearby trees were uprooted by the gusty winds, these same trees stood tall with the support of the other branches that were intertwined and interconnected, showing both *communion* and *relationship*. I was lost in a deep reflection about letting go of pettiness and petty things, ignoring the faults and failures of others, and living peacefully and graciously, like the trees — live and let live!

The tree is a symbol of sacrifice — from its roots to its leaves, the whole tree gives itself for others. When I lived in a city, I went with a basket to collect leaves fallen from a tree to warm water; we could use the small twigs that fell as fuel for our cooking fire; and the ashes were used as fertilizer for plants. I remember how many decades ago, we also used those ashes to wash utensils, when nobody had heard of modern detergents!



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Just as the roots of the tree do the "groundwork," the other parts carry on their respective functions of keeping the tree alive and withstanding the external forces of destruction — so does the fraternal communion of the sisters in our community, through regular adjustment of life in prayer, and sharing of apostolate and faith experiences. These sharing experiences enrich our fraternal communion, provide enlightenment and encouragement, foster harmony, and promote healthy growth.

As Pope Francis said in 2021, "How much good it would do for us to discover that unity is not uniformity but a multifaceted harmony. … Consecrated life is expert in communion. Consecrated life is itinerant; it is a promoter of fraternity."

To foster communion in communities, one needs a life without presumption and assumption, for presumption and assumption limit one’s ability to think ahead. And they can malign the image of the other, or hamper growth if they keep you from looking at reality! As the pope exhorted — quoted in the letter to consecrated men

and women "Rejoice!", "Be *servants of communion and of the culture of encounter*! I would like you to be almost obsessed about this. Be so without being presumptuous."

The trees indeed are *radical architects* of union in communion, from whom I continue to learn a lot. Just so, I claim that religious too are called to "walk the talk" as I quote from the apostolic exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* (46): "Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practise the spirituality of communion as 'witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design.' The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a *spirituality of communion*."

The different ways by which I can attain spiritual union or communion with Christ is through contemplation, the Liturgy of the Hours, daily participation in the Eucharist and by repeating my favorite bible quotations! I as a religious need these in order to grow and bear fruit — fruit in abundance — for without him I can do nothing (John 15:5). I need them to promote life lived in common with adjustments, acceptance, and healthy relationships as branches of the one Vine, and — like the trees — to be architects of union in communion, to spell out the fullness of the Gospel of love to all creation.