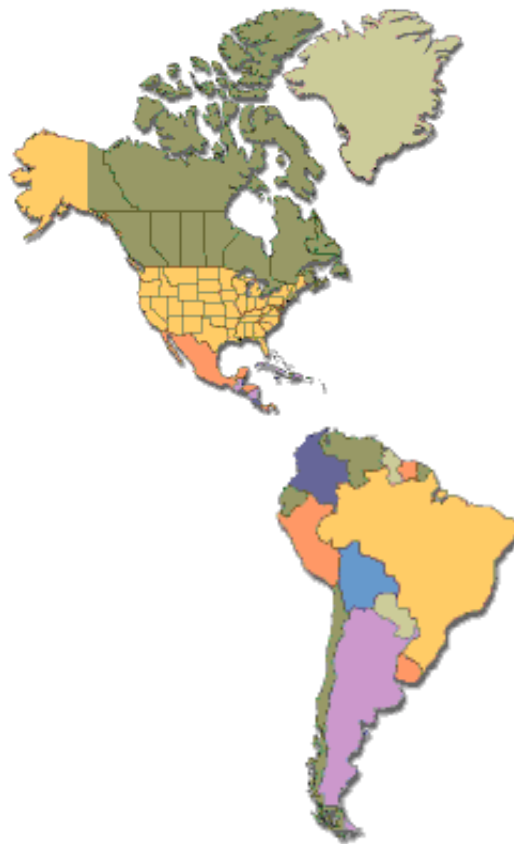


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REFOUNDING *HOLY FAMILY*
RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE
AMERICAS



Holy Family Continental Meeting

Brazil, 05 - 14 October 2003

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Introduction

This meeting has been long in the preparation. There were months of negotiations with experts; there was the task of working out budgets, organising the hire of equipment for simultaneous translation and much more. All of it made us realise the importance of this event, not just for us and the American continent, but also for the Institute and even the church.

After several attempts we chose two experts: Dr. Jung Mo Sung, a lay catholic theologian and religious scientist, very committed to the church and christian values. He is a lecturer at the Catholic Pontifical University of San Paolo (PUC-SP) and the Methodist University of SP. We asked him to deal in general with the historical, economic, social, political, and religious aspects of the Americas.



The second was Sr. Mercedes Lopes MJC, a theologian specialising in woman and gender questions. Her task was to speak on Religious Life in the Americas from the feminine viewpoint as well as its historical evolution with a view to re-founding. The Continental meeting of the Americas was to be short but would have wide repercussions for the future.

The week that preceded it was animated and marked by the arrival of the participants: The first to come were the four secretaries and translators and three General Councillors. Two days later, the Councils from the Latin American countries arrived, then the rest of the General Council and, finally, the Councils of Peru and Canada.

They had a few outings to the city of San Paolo and to the communities to get to know them a little. On Sunday, 5 October, the sisters from the different communities gathered at the community of Alameda Glete for the midday meal and to meet the visitors. In the afternoon all went to the Chácara Sagrada Família, the former novitiate house of the Province, where the meeting was to take place. It is a large property set in picturesque surroundings. The visitors settled in and took time to admire the natural beauties of the place.

Formal Opening

At the entrance to the conference hall there were a few words of introduction. Then there was a brief group interaction with cards on which the names of those present were written. Each one took a card at random and gave it to the person whose name appeared on it.

When that was finished everyone went to the little House of Nazareth where the Paschal Candle was placed. Margaret lit it and then each one lit a small candle from the larger one and gave it to someone else.



The prayer that followed was inspired by the words of the Gospel, of the Good Father and the Constitutions and included spontaneous prayer.

The participants went in procession to the conference hall where Geni dos Santos, Provincial Superior of Brazil, welcomed everyone. Then Margaret, as Superior General, officially opened the meeting.

In a concluding exercise, small groups of three or four people reflected on their expectations of the session and gave the fruits of their reflection in a single word. Words that emerged were:



The Social, Economic, Political and Religious Aspects of the Americas

Keynote address by Dr. Jung Mo Sung

Dr. Jung spoke very freely and spontaneously. The following headings give the main points of what he said though not necessarily in that order.

1. What type of analysis?
2. Evangelisation and life
3. Times of great transformations
 - 3.1 Technological Revolution
 - 3.2 Globalisation
 - 3.3 Culture and consumption
 - 3.4 Ecological crisis
 - 3.5 'Popular' Governments in several Latin American countries
 - 3.6 The religious field

Analysis

Since 1970 we are in the habit of doing situation analysis in our church gatherings. In the beginning it was a biblical, spiritual reflection. This analysis was done by a specialist inserted among the people. It was a very free, very simple summary without revision.

When we are in contact with the poor we feel indignation and rage. We want to know who the culprit is, his/her name. These analyses seek to channel the rage. That is good for the liver; it is a form of therapy, nothing more. Perhaps we want to know what is happening in the world. In that case, a feeling of powerlessness comes from the analysis.

At this stage the speaker invited his listeners to ask questions for clarification so that he could speak of what they wanted to know. He also encouraged them to ask questions during his exposition to avoid the pitfall of giving answers to questions that are not asked or are not very clear.

He went on: there is a big difference between the church and the market. God reveals God's love. If the people do not want to listen, the problem is not God's but theirs. If the church does not want to be faithful to the message it risks having very few people listening to it. Take the experience at Capernaum - after a miracle the Lord said, "I will give you my flesh to eat and my blood to drink." Many went away. The Lord said, "Will you also go away?" We must realise there are two things to consider: what are the people's questions and what are the truths we wish to announce?

Life

The word 'Life' is very much in use these days. When we say: "The God of Life" we might give the impression that there is a god of death. People are caught up by two gods. Take the example of Pinochet; he was a weekly communicant, who had a priest for spiritual director but who killed many people. Had he another god? In the real world there are several gods. It is not like that in Metaphysics because it would be a contradiction. Theologians say that the God of Jesus Christ is the God of life. A theologian writes about life differently from a biologist. What is life? There are cases in which we can choose the God of life or the god of death. The mother who has not enough bread for her five children, only a small piece for all, decides which shall die first... There are also several conceptions of death: cerebral, encephalic, of the heart...

What is necessary for life? How do we live? We have to eat, to be clothed, to drink, to breathe. We have to clothe ourselves according to need. In Canada at 20° below freezing the needs are very different from northeast Brazil where a pair of shorts will suffice. You

don't even need shoes. Is it the same living in Canada as in the Sahara? No! We must know how to adapt to nature. We must know how cultures relate. Some technological, cultural and corporal knowledge is necessary for that. Otherwise, we don't live or we live badly. Even the unicellular animals need to adapt to live. An interesting example is that of the Brazilian journalists who went to the World Cup in Korea and had problems with the spicy food and became ill. The more creative ones solved the problem by going to McDonald's.

Communications

Another sub theme dealt with was that of communication today. Formerly stamped letters were sent by post. Today that is no longer so. There is the Internet. It is fast, efficient and cheap. It is even possible to have good communication free of charge.

*Question: It is said that if you have no Internet access you are not in the world. 80% of the world's population does not have access. Are they not in the world?
Answer: As there is not just one god, so there is not just one world.*

All living beings, even the unicellular ones, need to interact in the world if they are not to die. The speaker gave the example of a red nose when it is very cold. Why does it happen? Because the organism reacts to a signal from the brain that hot air must be sent to the nose. In the case of AIDS the organism does not recognise the signals that it needs to know. If we do not understand we die.



The human being understands and seeks to know the meaning of life. Why do I live? Why is this happening? The animals do not have this preoccupation. They do not have to know or find a meaning for life. To live is to know; to know is to live.

Major World Revolutions

The Technological Revolution changed the work place and the lifestyle. In the history of humanity there have been three revolutions: a) the agricultural revolution; b) the industrial revolution; c) the technological revolution. For 50 thousand years human beings lived a nomadic life; for 10 thousand years they were settled as cultivators. Traditional society does not accept what is new. Religion contributed a lot to conservatism. We do not need to live where we were born. We can look for what is new.

With the industrial revolution machines meant that agriculture became industrialised to some extent. Those who are living in the pre-industrial era can only survive if the middle class buys its products. They are more expensive because of the methods of production

so they are only bought because of their symbolism. The Industrial Revolution obliges us to enter into Globalisation.

The importance of the Information Society, of knowledge

Bill Gates is the richest man in the world. What does he sell? Computers? No. Software? No. He sells the licence for the use of software. That means, he sells accumulated knowledge.

The speaker also spoke of genetically modified seeds and all that it means for the world. We must consider that the Europeans, the Brazilians, the Paraguayans, and others are living in the same chronological period but not the same evolutionary period. That is clear. The difference between life in the country and in industry is really great. To work in industry you need to think logically. Today there are no supervisors; there are written explanations. If you do not know the language well you can do nothing.

Even the Industrial Revolution took place at different dates in different places. For example, in the United States it happened in the 17th century, in Brazil in 1930 and in Korea in 1960.

The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) is a product of the Industrial Revolution. There was a long explanation on this topic.

Globalisation

Rather than talking in intellectual terms around the subject the speaker explained how McDonald's adapted to meat in India. He also took the example of the Paulist publications that printed its bibles in Hong Kong ten years ago because it could be done cheaply. It is impossible to have national economic independence today; we depend on other economies. Money is transferred from one country to another on the basis of trust.

Regional blocks operate in such a way today that there is a single European currency for 12 or 15 countries. In America they are thinking of something similar in the southern market. FTAA is part of this dynamic. Not to accept FTAA is to be left out, isolated. The church struggled against it; we had a plebiscite here. We must think about it. It is foolish to say I don't know what it is; I don't know why it is like that.

We understand why there has to be interdependence. We do not have everything we need and technology can help everyone. If it makes life easier why not use it? Without the participation of Argentina and Brazil, FTAA makes no sense. But can we not create a more equitable FTAA? It is something to think about.

Another view of life

In the past life was thought to be a substance. Nowadays no one thinks that way. The way to defend life is not the same as 50 years ago. Life is a quality of relationship. In the gospel there is the text about the Temptations of Jesus in the desert. The devil asked Jesus to adore him and after he could transform stones into bread. That proposal came from the mouth of the devil. Every temptation appears to bring a benefit. It is the desire to look for a solution without respecting the reality. In the case of FTAA the temptation is to say "No" to it without thinking. Today no one can think of doing anything without the United States. It is said to be an imposition but today the US is the one Superpower. In theological tradition that is the original sin.

Values have changed. Take the example of a young girl looking for a fiancé in days gone by: she wanted a young man from a good family, a church goer with good qualities. Today she looks for someone who has money. Another aspect to consider: television

brought progress to India, technological advancement, knowledge about good nutrition, and so on but it also brought consumerism.

What is it to be a person? It is to take the best of what we have to fight the enemy. A father may give his child expensive toys to show him how much he loves him. He does this because he has no time to play with the child. He has no time because he must work a lot to have plenty of money. He needs money to buy the toys; he needs the toys to show his love for the child. It is a vicious circle.

If we feel we have no motivation or capacity or desire for anything we ought to think of the mystique that motivates us. Mystery does not motivate me because it places me within the limits of my condition. We must redeem the concept of the spirit, the Ruah, the wind, the divine breath. A community can only redeem the spirit to the extent that it is open. But when we open a window, in come the mosquitoes and the dust. We have to clean the dust and kill the mosquitoes. It is for this reason that, after 2000 years, the church finds it easier to close than to open.

What does it mean to preach the Reign of God in today's world? There is the temptation to leave things as they are, to change nothing. We must modify our theories of analysis because those of 20 years ago are no longer of any use. We must recycle and have new ones to look at the world today.

The role of the religious woman in the world is not to change it but to be a sign of God who did not want to be powerful but who came out of love and to show us Love.

Question: Why are the Basic Christian Communities (BCC) dead?

Answer: Because they were good! No one killed them; it happened spontaneously. Often good things finish because they were really good and have lived out their roles. In this sense St. Paul's words, "I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith..." could be translated as "If I could I would do the same thing again".



Presentation of the Provinces and Delegations

Each group had carefully prepared for this day with an exhibition of articles typical of their country. There were works of art, artefacts, music and also statistics. In their presentations they dealt with three common points: the situation of the Church, Society and the Province or Delegation.

Argentina



In the Church

We note a growing religious indifference. This is evident in the corruption at government level and everywhere. A document by the Argentinean bishops "Sail to the depths of the ocean" speaks of this situation. They urge all to pursue new ways of justice and charity. People long for change.

In Society

The social reality has recently been marked by the "pots and pans" demonstrations. This was a way of protesting against the current situation. There was the illusion of belonging to the first world. The situation is complicated. On 1 October there were elections. Because it is a punishable offence not to vote, many people travelled more than 500 km so as not to be in a position to do so. The speaker also dealt with the economic situation. People have confidence in the present President.

In the Delegation

There are six communities, 18 sisters and some young girls in contact with the sisters.

Evaluation of the mission

There is a need to change the mentality of the sisters; there is little consistency; there is no evaluation; there is a lack of dialogue; there are difficulties in working together; there is little self-esteem and many people are hurt; there is immaturity..

The departure of some sisters left its mark.

There is the problem of sisters returning to their home countries, fatigue.

Negative

- There is a fear of the unknown, making people cling to what they know and preventing progress.
- Needs are not being met.
- Competitiveness
- Loss of values
- Conformism
- Adoption of middle-class attitudes



Brazil

Picture posters on the wall and samba music created the atmosphere.



Situation in the Country

We live in a time of fear and powerlessness because of violence, child prostitution and political corruption. In this culture of death there is also a call to life: from NGOs in the towns and districts, projects such as “Zero hunger”, unemployment...

The IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) speaks of the number of unemployed. Many women and men, and even children, work in the street to survive. The government has forbidden this street trading.

Education

The Brazilian Constitution states that education is compulsory for children from 7 – 14 years but in 2001 a great many children were not in school. If they are not in school they are in prostitution in the streets, the markets, in rural areas and even in the workplace.

The exodus from the rural areas towards the towns is a big problem. People come to work in the town. They say, “At least in the town we have something to eat even if it is in the street. Back there, where we were, we had a house but nothing to eat.”

The sisters are trying to help the youth through social projects in the suburbs of the towns. The Province opted to work with women in accordance with what is written in the corporate commitment.

The Church

The CNBB (National Bishops Conference of Brazil) proposed a plan of evangelisation with four dimensions for action. It is an integrated plan.

During Lent they undertook the Fraternity Campaign (CF). The whole country worked on one theme. In 2003, the theme was elderly people. Their number is increasing. The CF would like to draw the government’s attention and that of everyone to the conditions under which old people live. Each month the church does an in-depth reflection on a theme. In August it was Vocations and in October it is Missions.

Problems in the church

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (RRC) is growing everywhere. As a Province we do not know what to do. The movement attracts many. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches that promise prosperity and healing, but also demand payment for everything.

Religious life

The CRB (Conference of Religious in Brazil) animates basic formation in the country. It is 50 years in existence this year and does good work for religious men and women.

Province of Brazil

It is a drop in the ocean of the church: 24 sisters in 5 communities and a project to found another.

Provincial Chapter

The chapter decided on a new foundation to broaden its horizons. They would like to get out of San Paolo but for the moment their project is to work with women there, in collaboration with others. They are also working on the revitalisation of community life.

Challenges

A new way of being in the parishes because the laity are taking over what the sisters were doing up to now, which is a good thing.

Pastoral care of vocations and youth

In Brazil at present there are many people who believe in and want a different sort of country where all will have a life full of abundance and hope. They want to join organisations to bring about this transformation. We ask the Lord not to let us be discouraged.

They terminated the presentation by singing a song about a dream. When we dream alone nothing changes. When we dream as a community we can do things. We are invited to dream together so that the dream will come true.



Canada

Country profile

Canada is a vast country with wonderful scenery. The first colonial power was France and Quebec, where our sisters are, is French-speaking. The country has had its share of political tensions and there are concerns everywhere. Relations with the United States are not the best.



The Church

Catholics are a minority group in Canada. Denominational schools are under the control of priests and sisters. The church feels inadequate to deal with the youth. There is a sense of alienation from the present generation of young people who have a particular mentality of their own and tend to relativise values. They ought to be recognised as people with values. They are looking for autonomy and ways of expressing themselves

Religion has taken on what might be called a nomadic form, where people speak of religiosity and do not belong to any particular religion. There is the question of an increasingly ageing population raising questions about retirement and longevity. While there are pious associations there is insufficient accompaniment.

The Province

The *Holy Family* has been in Canada for a hundred years. The activities of the sisters include a missionary presence among the poor in outlying regions. Sisters aged from 74 to 77 work nearer home in existing ministries. There are sisters, even elderly ones, who do home nursing and they receive a salary.

Corporate Commitment

'Zero poverty' is now a proposal before parliament but it is not known if it will be passed by Congress because there is a change of government.

The decrease in numbers in the Province brought the project they had in Peru to an end. The Family House of PBN in Quebec gives assistance to families and children. There is also a ministry to the Tamil people in Quebec.

The average age of the sisters is 78 years. They also have small communities of sisters in poor health. In the realm of ideas there is still the urge to be committed.

Peru

The presentation was introduced by the music of "Sing my country".

Country

After the elections of 1990 political parties were demoralised. No one wanted Alberto Fujimori for a third mandate. There was a transition to democracy and an attempt to depoliticise the army. Corruption was at an all-time high. Half the population lived in poverty in spite of efforts to combat poverty. Democracy was fragile. Among the people there was great mistrust of government. They did not want Fujimori and Toledo lacked credibility. In spite of all that Peru is a country of hope. The people are creative. There are great natural resources, good leaders, people celebrate, sing and dance.



Church

The church is one of the institutions with moral credibility. It has great power of convocation. In the church even the simplest of people are heard. It works with the poor and is a real mediator whose voice is accepted. On the other hand the conservative element in the church is supported by the government.

What is to be done? The church must confront the scandal of poverty, renew its style of evangelising, enlist the help of the laity and give them their place in the church.

The *Holy Family*

The pyramid of the sisters' age is changing rapidly and rising but there are, nevertheless, some Peruvians together with the 7 missionaries. There are concerns. We feel the need of a work that is essentially *Holy Family* in collaboration with others to ensure greater stability. There are a few young girls in formation.

Corporate Commitment

There are four objectives and a few priorities. There is also pastoral care of vocations in which three sisters participate. Its aim is to "Promote a generous response from those who are called". Many questions arise around basic formation and ongoing formation. There is no organised programme for ongoing formation but the need is felt. "Confer" has good projects and good formation sessions for all stages. They worked on the project "The road to Emmaus" which was very rich. Formative and informative lectures in daily life are a great help. They also studied "An economy of solidarity" based on 2 Corinthians, 8-9, which was very good.



Paraguay

They started with the presentation of a very fine video showing the reality of the communities and the characteristics of each.



The Church

In this simple, poor milieu the church flourishes. It is possible to work in complete freedom and form the Family of God. In the last discernment they heard the cry of impoverished men and marginalised women.

Delegation

There are 40 Associates, a group of *Holy Family* youth, one Consecrated Secular. There is also a missionary sister in the Philippines and another in discernment at the Monastery of Posadas.

They studied in depth the Acts of the Family Congress held at Martillac. Among the laity there is a desire for a stronger commitment. After these studies they intend to elaborate the corporate commitment of the Delegation.

They studied the project "The Road to Emmaus" oriented by the CLAR (Conference of Religious). Good work was done.

Now they are trying to nominate superiors for the communities for a year. That should help in the living of co-responsibility. The need is also felt for good ongoing formation but when one does a sabbatical year the communities are reduced.

Socio-political reality

The new president began in the middle of a political crisis. The country is second in the world for corruption. The country is in the process of urbanisation. It has increased the production of soya and cotton even if this is more to the advantage of Brazil.

Another problem is that 45% of those under 15 years live in real poverty. The consequences are street children, suicides and dishonesty everywhere.

Education

In 1992 a reform of education was begun and instruction in Guarani was introduced but other languages are lacking. Education is free but many do not go to school and there is a 56% illiteracy rate.

They also spoke of the health of the country. It was felt to be a pity that there are illnesses that could be cured but, because of poverty, they remain with a diagnosis and nothing is done.

Each sister present was given a statue of the Holy Family in



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Feminine Religious Life in the Americas

by Sr. Mercedes Lopes MJC

Past

The significance of Medellin for the Church of Latin America

The Episcopal Conference of Medellin was held in 1968 to apply the principles of Vatican II to the situation in Latin America. It awakened the church there to the real state of the population and aroused a prophetic attitude on the part of the episcopate. The church confronted its own life with the gospel. As a result it undertook a form of evangelisation that sought the integral salvation of the human person, that would be in solidarity with the poor, denounce injustice and oppression and encourage those who worked with the poor to help them to help themselves.

Medellin and religious life in Latin America

CLAR (Latin American Conference of Religious) had been invited to participate actively in the Medellin Assembly. This caused a renaissance of religious life on the continent. The main focus was no longer "regular observance" but the person of Jesus giving himself in his mission to the poor. This change of outlook rejuvenated religious life and gave it a new face.

Some Aspects of this new face

A new experience of God

The faithful, merciful presence of the God of life was revealed in the different situations faced by the people. Religious were called to an encounter with the poor, the sick, the hungry, the elderly, the street children, all of whom are the sacrament of the encounter with Jesus.

Solidarity with the poor

Although religious congregations had always been concerned with the poor, after Medellin there was a much more realistic awareness of what it means to be poor, to be on the fringes of society. Rather than helping from without, religious were moved to share their lives with the poor, to change radically their own lifestyles and pastoral priorities.

Community life

From Medellin came a new vision of community relationships that gave more importance to quality times of sharing, celebration of life and expressions of friendship. This new attitude strengthened the bonds between persons of the same community and with others. It created the interrelationship that is the foundation of an evangelising mission. Nevertheless, although encouraged for over three decades, this is still one of the weakest aspects of male or female religious life.

Present

The presence of religious life among the poor caused a new spirituality to emerge, one marked by the contemplation of the life of indigenous people, poor women, black people and all the groups and organisations opposed to the system of domination. God's presence began to be discerned in the struggle of the poor for a more dignified life. This contemplative look urged religious to new action and ever more radical change.

Some aspects of the new spirituality

Lectio Divina

The prayerful reading of the bible is something in which religious have always engaged. It was re-discovered in a new way when the CLAR encouraged religious to pursue biblical formation. Using the four steps of *reading, meditation, prayer* and *contemplation* an effort was made to actualise it by making the links between the Word and the life and history of the people of Latin America. At the same time three criteria were kept in mind: *the reality, the community* and *the text*.

Feminism and religious Life

A project initiated by the CLAR led to an in-depth study of the place, role and conception of women religious in Latin America and the other continents. It aimed to help them appropriate their own history and recognise therein the many signs of God being made manifest in the church of Latin America. Many activities were organised by the CLAR and the enterprise enabled them to discover that "*patriarchal spirituality had crushed christian renewal by making women believe that sanctity required of them submission, humility, tolerance, renunciation and silence even when they were victims of humiliation and violence*".

The challenge to be witnesses of the Reign of God in community

The difficulty of living in community was acknowledged. Many ways have been proposed to create open relationships and communion with varying degrees of success. Perhaps it is necessary to analyse more deeply how each person sees herself and others with their differences and how the relationships of power are exercised in the restricted space of daily cohabitation. The structures of community life, the way of organising life in a religious community should also be analysed.



When people get together to work on projects concerning justice, human rights, ecology and so on, they are engaged with reality. But there is another underlying challenge. It is that the people who realise these projects be themselves convinced, happy, able to live together in peace, accepting each other's cultural, educational and character differences. The same question should be asked of religious. Are they mature, happy people, with mutual relationships that are neither fearful nor dominating, people who keep themselves up-to-date to be able to respond to the challenges of reality, who give themselves to their mission simply and who share and celebrate life with joy like human beings in the process of becoming.

Towards the future

The need to "refound" Religious Life has been an issue for some time among religious men and women who are everywhere trying to understand what it involves and make the necessary changes to bring it about. To "refound" consecrated life, its foundation

must be reaffirmed. That foundation is none other than the person of Jesus and his mission.

The charism of every religious order or congregation bears this fundamental, immutable call to follow Jesus. The way of expressing the charism has to be re-discovered in each place, each circumstances, each epoch. It will be alive only to the extent that religious have the creativity, wisdom, fidelity and flexibility to adapt and respond to the present needs.

Aspects for Refounding religious Life

An integral spirituality

Spirituality arises out of the experience of a personal relationship with God. This experience integrates every aspect of life so it is important to understand what images of God each one has interiorised during the course of christian and religious formation. These images can condition our behaviour very strongly.

A spirituality for the future must be concerned with every aspect of life, with one's own person, a clear awareness of one's body and vital forces in the compassionate acceptance of one's limitations. This new spirituality goes beyond the relationship of domination and exploitation of nature and leads to a loving attention to all forms of life existing on our planet.

A new approach to the bible is imperative if we are to enlighten the search for an encounter with the divinity from our experience as women and a new relationship with nature.

New forms of organisation in community life

Part of the function of religious life in community is to witness to a love of solidarity capable of uniting people and human communities in a world marked by fragmentation. This is how Jesus' call to freedom in Gal. 5, 1-13, is to be understood. Freedom is experienced through relationships of respect and dignity that acknowledge that each person has the right to live in freedom.

The re-founding of religious life requires that relationships between consecrated persons witness that it is possible to be free and to have relations of freedom and respect in the face of differences.

Mission as service of the life of the poor

Since Medellin, religious life in Latin America has been listening to the cry of the poor and true solidarity with victimised people has been their priority. Today, more than ever, life itself is threatened for the greater number of people. It can only be defended by common projects.

It is time to create networks at the service of life, and to enter into those that exist. It is perhaps necessary to go even further, to seek with more creativity, to risk, to struggle, to persevere in hope, from our experience as women and with women, in the search for more life for all people.

Mercedes suggested two books:
Called for Freedom: The Changing Context of Liberation Theology,
by Joseph Comblin
Women Who Run With the Wolves, Clarissa Pinkola Estès

Dialogue with the participants

Mercedes explained a little more the image of community that Jesus presents in John 15.

John begins by saying: "I AM". That is God's name. When Jesus utters these words he is indicating that he is going to say something profound. He uses the image of the vine and the branches and stresses the link between them, between the vine and all the individual branches and thus the branches among themselves.

Applying this to religious life we can see that we have to be totally taken up by him and united to him. To prune is to cut off a part so that it will be even stronger. To follow Jesus in religious life requires us to live with the same love he lived and this same union with the branches.

Religious life seems to be out of step with the world because we are going against the current. How can we walk in step?

It is good that we are going against the current. We do not need to be in step but we need to accept the challenges of the world of our time as Jesus did.

How can we live mercy and sisterly correction when we are very sensitive and have difficulty in accepting correction?

To do this we ask for Wisdom, especially with difficult people. The temptation might be to leave her alone and go my own way. But we must ask ourselves: Where is my sister? Am I going to help her? To be merciful is to accept her as she is but also to help her to be better. It must all be done with love, with a certain art, not just with truth. We should develop relationships of tenderness in these cases.

We have been told to search for a new spirituality. We also know it is important to live in depth the spirituality of the Holy Family. How can we reconcile the two?

A new spirituality can be the same as the one we have already, but lived in a new way. We must read our experience of God today, with other paradigms. New paradigms will make us rediscover our own spirituality and lead us to the original one that the Founder lived.

Our spirituality is a spirituality of family. That is a challenge for us. Can we deepen the relationships of freedom, respect and differences?

Where experiences, persons, cultures, differences are numerous, it is very complex trying to form a community. Freedom is a big challenge and must be respected. It can only be done through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have to adapt to the differences between us and relativise trivial things.

There are difficulties with living in human communities of all kinds. We should try to live in a more relaxed, tranquil, easy way. The image of God we bear in our heart explains our attitudes towards others. If we are aware of that we are less inclined to control, less demanding and have more understanding.

Perhaps we have disagreements but "you know I love you". 'Intercongregationality' and internationality are very important and we need to make progress on this. We also need to be convinced of our own values. If we lack self-esteem we cannot accept differences.

Questions for group work

- ◆ What are the advances and regressions in the process of renewal of Religious Life in Latin America and the Caribbean? What are its characteristics?
- ◆ What progress has Religious Life made in the USA and Canada since Vatican II? What is the new face of Religious Life in North America?
- ◆ Why are the 'promotion of women' and 'proximity to the poor' important aspects for creating a spirituality that is truly evangelical and liberating?
- ◆ In a system of domination where the dignity of the human person in the image of God is not acknowledged, how can new relationships and spaces of freedom be created? How does all this relate to Refounding?
- ◆ What possible and important perspectives of Refounding open up to our Congregation as a result of these reflections?



A Time and Space for in-depth reflection

Using the questions given by Mercedes and drawing on the experience of the previous days, the participants spent the afternoon and the whole day of Thursday, 9 October, in personal reflection, group work and plenary assemblies to absorb what they had lived and begin to chart a path for the future.

The fruit of these reflections and the proposed way forward are expressed in the Declaration produced at the end of the meeting (p. 20).



A breathing space

Before moving to the second stage of the meeting, all the participants enjoyed a free day. An outing was arranged to Embú, a nearby village that specialises in all kinds of arts and crafts. It was a day on which to relax, to be refreshed in mind and body and to know one another differently.

The General Leadership Team takes over

The second part of the continental meetings, 3-4 days, is animated by the General Leadership Team.

On Saturday, 11 October, they began their input on lines similar to what they had done in Africa.

The work of these few days bore fruit in the Declaration that was produced at the end of the meeting, a document that was to be a beacon to remind them of the lights received and show them the way forward as they seek to live their religious life in the Americas in the Third Millennium.



Participants at the Continental Meeting of the Americas,
October 2003

Declaration produced at the Continental Meeting of the Americas

Brazil, 5 - 14 October 2003

To all the Sisters of the *Holy Family* in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Paraguay and Peru.

For the first time in the history of the *Holy Family* in the Americas, the Leadership Teams have met together creating a vital space for communion-relationship that united the North-South borders.

This experience is an encouragement to us to multiply the signs of life and to refound *Holy Family* religious life in this continent marked by the shadows and lights of our different realities.

We are living in a socio-cultural context that is changing rapidly and where the gap between wealth and poverty accentuates more and more the inequalities between people, threatening life and human dignity.

We note that there have never been so many possibilities for communication, for establishing links of solidarity, for creating networks, for supporting initiatives in favour of life in all its aspects and for becoming involved in the promotion of justice and the defence of Human Rights.

We, Sisters of the *Holy Family*, with our vulnerability and our fragility but with the power of our charism feel we ought to commit ourselves to:

- ◆ Reread the charism with creative fidelity so that the Spirit of God Alone may be the source of our identity, strengthen our relationships and give a common meaning to the mission.
- ◆ In community we wish to be happy, consecrated women, cultivating quality relationships, accepting our differences, supporting all that humanises and making discernment a daily practice.
- ◆ Be attentive to all that builds the Family Project of God, giving special importance to our preferential option for the poor and the excluded. Our common mission being to create communion, we wish to reveal the loving face of God and God's compassion for all creatures.

This meeting encourages us to continue to deepen and put into practice the Corporate Commitment and the Decrees of the General Chapter of 2002. We find in them a source of vitality and constant renewal.

We believe that the Spirit of God continues to "make all things new" and puts "ointment" on our eyes (Rev. 3, 18) to enable us to discover the Spirit's action in us and in the world. We are women of hope, not because the power to change the world is in our hands but because, wherever we are, we can be a sign of the gratuitous love of God who, in the divine project of Salvation, chose love rather than logic.

Continental Meeting of the Americas

5 -14 October 2003

Participants

General Leadership Team

Superior General

Margaret Muldoon

General Councillors

M. Carmen Vilardell, Françoise Aubin

Adela Vanaclocha, Genevière Bessières

Winifreda Wasalathantrige, Hyacintha Moopisa



The first name on the list is that of the Provincial or Delegation Leader