

# **RELIGIOUS LIFE AND FAITH ISSUES**



Presenting:

**On Religious Profession**

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**Recovering Our Initial Love**

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Like the Father**

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Edited by  
**Sr Dr MarySylvia Nwachukwu, DDL**



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## 1

## INTRODUCTION

Sr Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu, DDL

**W**hat you read from the pages of this booklet is fruit of communal reflection, teaching and preaching during the annual retreats of the Daughters of Divine Love in 2011. Many reasons adduce to why we chose 'faith' as the theme of the annual retreat this year. The primary reason is our coming to consciousness, thanks to the grace of the light of God's truth that we need to grow deeper in our relationship with God. It was a discovery that we need to grow more in our knowledge of who we are, religious in the Church, and in our need to place more trust in God, the Father who cares and who knows what we need even before we ask it.

Our experiences in our shared life in communities and in our personal lives reveal to us the enormity of our need for further growth in faith. These experiences are presented as follows:

- We have experienced the manifold and unconditional love of God in the recent events of our life as a congregation and as individuals, especially in our General



Chapter 2010. Many Daughters have shared experiences of God's mercy and love on themselves, their communities, places of apostolate, and on their families. Our response to God's love is a prayerful desire to grow in our relationship with him through Jesus Christ our Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Growing in faith would help us to confront some of our pressing problems which are the following:

- ☐ Living in the world, we are faced by many problems. There is the worry that when confronted by these problems, some of us begin to exhibit behaviours that appear as signs of lack of faith. 'Like infants in faith, we are tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine' that keep us in 'spiritual bondage' and in ignorance.
- ☐ Many of our members are finding self-surrender a task too difficult to accomplish. We are afraid of giving ourselves totally to God and letting God into our lives because we think our freedom would come to an end.
- ☐ We experience community life where personal ambition, material gain, desire for privileges and other human goals become objects of devotion; they draw us away from obedience and from the community, and they so much become our focus of interest



to the detriment of that primary aim of every religious, that is, 'to know nothing... except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:2).

- ☐ Some of our religious communities and some of our members lack peace of mind, neither able to give nor to receive it; yet Jesus left peace as a legacy for all those who follow him: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you" (John 14:27). We worry about everything: our future, our health, our family, in the bid to create security and well-being for ourselves.
- ☐ Above all, we are afraid and suspicious of anybody with strange behaviour. We are gradually becoming demon conscious and we think our sisters with difficult characters are either possessed or are witches. Yet, every day at the Eucharistic celebration, we confess God's sole Lordship over our lives, recite his glorious acts, thank him for his ongoing struggle against evil on our behalf, believe in his mercy for all and in our being definitively redeemed and set free through the death and resurrection of his only begotten Son; we bond with him through holy communion, and believe that we are a holy possession of this God who loves and cares for us. In spite of all these, we are afraid that somebody close by would harm





or bewitch us.

Faced with these frightening experiences, we do not wonder any longer why our communities lack the peace, the harmony, fraternity and the hallowed atmosphere that should characterize them. As soon as we lack knowledge of who we are before God and in the Church, when we cannot surrender ourselves and our future over to God, trust God completely especially when faced with suffering, love and obey him with all our heart and soul; when God is no longer the only object of our devotion and the sole Lord of our lives, myriad idols enter our lives, claim our devotion and this implies the destruction of the only foundation for genuine community. During our reflections in the retreats, we discovered that these are problems whose solutions would come only if we begin to grow in faith.

This year, we had ten retreat sessions, and this was in order to offer all the Daughters ample opportunity to participate more fully and at their leisure. All these retreat sessions were conducted in the light of this general theme of faith. We thank all the moderators of our retreats who helped us to think over these faith issues in our lives as individuals and as community. The retreat notes of a few of them are published in this booklet.

We have decided to publish these reflections because they are global problems. The concerns and the issues raised here are the concerns of all religious men and women all over the world and the concern of every Christian.

Though it defines our relationship with God, faith is an



experience that is difficult to come by. The Bible defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). This definition helps us to understand the difficult and complex nature of experiences which faith defines. A teaching, an event or an experience that needs further explanation and assurance is one that is not reasonable, obvious or one whose solution is not within human reach. When something is obvious, it does not require further explanation.

Faith is a word for interpersonal relationship in the journey of life. In this journey of life, the meaning of faith is determined by two factors. Firstly, it is determined by what God has revealed about himself. Since God is God and not a human being, what he reveals about himself is not immediately comprehensible to the human mind. Human reason needs to be aided by the light of God's truth to understand what God has revealed and is revealing in human history, and in the history of our individual lives. Secondly, the meaning of faith is determined by how God would want human beings to respond to what he has revealed about himself. These two factors imply that faith invites us to live a life determined and defined by the life of God. They invite us to respond to historical experiences in ways that accord with this divine revelation.

Both the Jewish and Christian religions are fruits of this divine revelation. Both the Old and New Testament are presented to the reader as the story of what God has revealed about himself and how Israel understood that



revelation and made it a way of life. Therefore, what we read in the Bible is not a body of teachings; they are not lecture notes, which the adherent should study and understand. In his book *Never Alone* (New York: Image Books, 1994), J.F. Girzone says that "If Christianity is merely a theological system, it will at most produce a highly educated elite devoid of anything resembling the living Christ in their personal lives" (pp7-8). Rather, the Jewish and Christian religions present a way of life, a pattern of life defined as a "walk with God". When God called Abraham, he told him "I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). Similarly, the Psalmist prays, "Lord let me know your way; Lord, teach me your paths" (Ps 25:4).

Among ancient peoples, the gods that people worshipped determined their way of life and their relationship with other peoples. Israel believed that pagan nations engage in filthy practices because they do not worship the God of Israel, who revealed himself as the Holy One and who leads his believers to fullness of life and happiness. Therefore, Israel often distinguished between the way of the Lord, the way of life of other nations, and the way of human beings. It also distinguishes between the intentions of God and the dictates of the human heart. Since Israel considered the gods of the nations as made by human hands, they regarded the way of life of pagans as the way of the world or as life according to the dictates of human heart. God commanded Israel through Jeremiah, "obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you" (Jer 7:24). By giving his

people knowledge of himself, God teaches them a way of life that is described as 'the way of the Lord'. This corresponds to the saying that 'the right knowledge of God leads to the right attitudes to life'. This way of life with God is what the Bible describes as faith. It comes from knowledge of who God is. In order to be a person of faith, knowledge of God is of primary importance. Lack of faith comes from ignorance of God. This implies that each member of the community has to be taught what this way of life is and how to make this journey towards God.

We consider that the best way to learn about God is to come to God himself, to listen to him and to be taught by him. Our retreats provided opportunities for this school of divine knowledge. God is the one who teaches his people a way of life that corresponds to the dictates of the heart of God. Divine revelation consists of everything God has revealed which give knowledge of who God is in relation to the world and who human beings are in relation to God and the world. In several ways, God taught Israel that he is a Father, whose way of life is the way of steadfast love, justice and righteousness (Jer 9:24), and who patiently leads his children to follow that way as they toddle through the thorny path of life. The ultimate aim of the divine teaching is so that we might love him with all our heart and without wavering in trust. Often, some experiences of life demand of us that we abandon the lessons of life we have received from God and to follow other ways, which seem to offer better alternatives. The person of faith, the believer in God, is the one who loves God above all things, and who remains steadfast in God even when life's circumstances demand that we abandon God for other alternatives.





Our retreats also provided opportunities for personal encounter, which is another source for acquiring the knowledge of God. The biblical stories show how personal encounter with God transformed the lives of some individuals. Personal encounter with God is the essence of Christian spirituality. It ensures not just the knowledge but also the living presence of God in our lives as an active partner, guiding and leading us in the journey of life. The transformation that one experiences through this encounter does not happen overnight, but progressively as the one grows to become more and more like God. In the entire history of Israel, some individuals have been singled out as those who experienced a personal encounter with God and who learnt to undertake this journey of faith with God. The Old Testament presents them to the reader as models of faith. Of them, the book of Sirach (chapters 44-50) says that they are 'ancestors who were honoured in their generations, and were the pride of their times' (Sir 44:7). It tells us of the lives of such men as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Aaron, Phinehas, Joshua and Caleb, the Judges, Nathan, David, Solomon and the Prophets. These people remained steadfast in God even in the face of many trials.

In the New Testament, faith acquires a new orientation because what it means is determined by what God has revealed in Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, to be a believer is to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus says of himself "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Therefore, other models of faith are presented to the reader as those who lived the life of Christ or who followed in his footsteps. Names like Mary, the twelve Apostles, Paul and the saints feature very



prominently in this regard.

Knowledge of God and of his ways led to the creation of faith communities. Teaching about God and of his ways is an important aspect of the Jewish and Christian religions. It is the duty of the community of faith to teach and communicate to her adherents and new converts this way of life. This is why St Paul says that faith comes from teaching. He tells the believers in Rome, "How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? So faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:14-17).

In the following pages, excerpts from the retreat notes of some of our retreat moderators are presented according to their different themes. Apart from the homily of Most Rev Anthony Adaji in Chapter Two, whose permission we have to publish it in this volume, all the other chapters enclose edited excerpts from the retreat notes of some of our retreat moderators. Each chapter begins with an introduction of the author and a short summary of the author's reflection. We are highly indebted to them all, and especially those whose retreat notes are not represented here, for making themselves available to the Holy Spirit for the work of leading God's children towards growth in the knowledge of God and faith in Christ.

May the fruits of these retreat lead us to grow in faith, Amen!