

Hope Encounters: Consecrated Life for our Times

by Maria Cimperman, RSCJ

There is something we offer in consecrated life for our time, *if we are but willing to receive it*, if we are but willing to be open(ed).

We open our Center for the Study of Consecrated Life here at Catholic Theological Union, during the papacy of a pope from a religious order who, upon listening to requests from many in religious life and from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), proclaimed this to be the Year of Consecrated Life. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis invites all of us, “at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day,” (no. 3) and assures us that “the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus” (no.1). From this comes our theme for this year, Encounter–*Encuentro*.

Pope Francis proclaims this year on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *Lumen Gentium*, *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, and *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life* (October 28, 1965), along with the closing of Vatican Council II and the beginning of the living of its call. Vatican II was also a “Wake Up the World” for the entire church moment and time. We are now at what I call “Vatican II Plus 50, and in this room we have the blessing of both persons who experienced the period of the Council and who have been deeply shaped and formed by the Council and those who have only been born since the Council—and many in between. And the call of our God to encounter continues across generations, and this time in 2015. What a wonder full beginning to our year!

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Pope Francis, in naming the three aims of this Year, identifies looking to the past with gratitude, living the present with passion, and embracing the future with hope. I sense that we easily enough can look to the past with gratitude. I do see so many around me, here and elsewhere, living the present with passion, yet I sense that at times we are a bit reticent to embrace the future with hope.

We see the world the world around us . . . we see religious life . . . we see consecrated life, new or not so new, and its challenges. So here we are, part of a global community asking questions about hope.

We do sense there is going to be some dying and we don't know how we will go through and manage all the shifts that are already upon us. We are just not too sure about it. Such is the nature of hope! (I think this is why I was asked to speak about hope!) The world is looking for hope, trying to find hope, looking for ways to be hope, to also offer hope. We are not alone in this.

How are we to offer hope? I sense hope is linked to the invitation to an encounter, an *encuentro*. We want to, as Saint John Paul II wrote in *Vita Consecrata*, "Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things" (no. 110), yet perhaps we also refrain, "How can this be?" Yet we do desire to live, as Pope Francis says, as "witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world."

That it is actually possible to live differently in this world is a realization ever more people are having. I recently participated in a MOOC (massive open online course) on social transformation, and there were over 22,000 people in it, and all were saying we must find another way to live on this planet together. Economic, political, and education systems are failing, religious traditions are struggling, and the environment as we are living in it is not sustainable. So we are not alone in realizing some things are dying and will have to be let go.

We have something to offer here, if we but dare. This is a time of tremendous possibility and opportunity if we dare surrender to God.

A few years ago I wrote about crossing thresholds and at the time I sensed many of us were just getting to that doorway. I sense we are now at it, on it and perhaps stepping across it; we are in the process of leaving a lot that cannot go through the threshold, and that in fact only inhibits us from the encounters inviting.

When the theme of this year at CTU was to be encounter or *encuentro*, and I was asked to speak about hope, the two words, hope and encounter, began working in me. I am realizing that encounter is a key marker of hope, and the layers of encounter are important. In fact, I sense one layer in particular is calling us in Consecrated Life at this time.

Hope encounters as a call to consecrated life for our times.

I begin with a definition and four marks of hope. I move then to encounter, and four layers of encounter. I follow with some markers of the fourth layer of encounter, and close with two invitations or calls to us in consecrated life.

Hope and Virtue

Hope is a virtue, and as such it fits under the greatest virtue, which is love. A virtue is a disposition and habit, which flows out of who we are and who we want to become, and it offers a vision of how to get there. Virtues are teleological; that is, there is a goal or end toward which they strive. In Christianity, the ultimate end is union with God, and we live out this desire on a daily basis through our love of God, neighbor, and self. Throughout our lives we strive toward this *telos* or end, and as long as we live our task is not complete. Virtues, like our human nature, are also dynamic; therefore, as we continue to learn, grow, and mature, so our level of understanding and depth of living the virtues evolve.

Hope gives us a particular sustained moral and spiritual vision. In addition, it is the transcendent virtue that animates and informs the virtues that follow. Hope not only gives us the vision, it sanctions and sustains the vision. Christian hope tells us what type of vision we have.¹ Hope is also a prime Christian resource of the imagination.

¹ I distinguish Christian hope here from existential or humanistic hope. Some of this early pondering on hope came from my book *When God's People*

Hope offers a horizon for our expectations in both tangible and nontangible ways. Hope allows us to reshape our reality in a particular way. We begin this reshaping grounded in our first marker of hope.

Context of Hope: Grounded in Reality

Even as hope provides a horizon for our expectations, a person of hope is firmly grounded in reality, a reality in which movement forward is not easy to obtain yet within the realm of possible options. The reality toward which hope leans is that of the wounded heart of humanity and the wounded earth. Hope looks at reality through the lens of Gospel faith and points to areas in need.

Describing hope as rooted in reality, not easy to obtain yet possible, within the realm of possible options, flows from a reading of Thomas Aquinas's look at the virtue of hope.² Hope is not pie in the sky, inattentive to the realities present. Catholic social encyclicals begin with a wide-eyed look at reality around us. It is the standard format for bringing our faith to a situation. I cannot hope for peace in the city of Chicago if I do not realize that within a few miles of where I live we have some of the highest rates of gun violence in the country. I need to know why this is so.

We look for hope when what we are looking at seems virtually impossible, impassible. We are in the midst of *La Lucha*, the struggle, and just cannot see our way beyond it. It is in the virtually impossible places that we ask for hope.

At the same time, we hope only for what we think, imagine, long to be possible. If there is no chance at all, we do not hope. A 1 percent chance is hope. We actually only lament because we hope, because we believe the future could be other than what the present is. That is the book of Lamentations. When we have no hope we despair. Nothing says this is going to be easy, or that we will not suffer. It is the long haul often enough, yet there are sparks that indicate something is possible.

These realities invite an encounter, but we need one more piece from us. The third marker is openness. Often we become open because we don't know what else to do and we have to turn to God. Consider the movie *Romero*, a dramatization of life and death of Archbishop Oscar Romero. At one particularly poignant part of the movie he goes to pray and simply says, "I can't. You must." So it is with us. In time and with practice, the spiritual life teaches us openness in all. It is a slow process in many of us.

Hope invites an encounter. Encounter also asks for our openness, an open stance. When we are seeking our way, we pray to be open(ed). We pray for interior freedom, realizing that our ways of seeing are not complete, and that we need help.

In this stance of openness we find our radical dependence on God. We beg God, and at some point we surrender to God, not always realizing that in surrender we are letting go into God. We surrender to love. We surrender to Mystery. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, OP, speaks of such contemplation as ultimately a state of radical self-giving and of receiving.³ In radical dependence on God, we open ourselves further to encounter, not only with God but with one another and all creation. Our contemplative life is what helps us to encounter God's love in the wounds of the world.

Have HIV/AIDS: An Approach to Ethics (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).

2 See Romanus Cessario, "The Theological Virtue of Hope," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 232–43.

3 Gustavo Gutierrez, "Conversion: A Requirement for Solidarity," in *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez*, eds. Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 86.

With this comes a fourth point about hope. Hope is fostered in community. We do not hope alone; we hope together, and as such hope moves our communal discernment.

Now to encounter. First, allow me to define the word a bit. On the one hand, in English, and from its origins, encounter is “an unexpected or casual meeting with someone.” It can also mean to “unexpectedly experience or be faced with (something difficult or hostile).” In its etymology we also see struggle.⁴

The word, however, has grown in meaning and use, particularly in various cultures. Our Pope Francis has helped move encounter further into our lexicon. In December 2013, Vatican analyst and reporter John Allen wrote that:

All popes tend to have a couple of catchphrases they invoke time after time, so after a while they come to sum up a whole chunk of his thought. . . .

It’s becoming steadily clearer that for Francis, perhaps his core signature phrase is the “culture of encounter.”

The pope invoked the term again Friday in a brief year-end audience with Italian diplomatic staff and the Italian embassy to the Holy See.

“Allow me to underline a prospective that I consider very important,” Francis told the diplomats.

“You’re in a position to promote the culture of encounter,” he said. “You’re diplomatic personnel and all of your work is designed to allow representatives of countries, international organizations and institutions to encounter one another in the most effective way.”

“How important is this service!” the pope said. . . .

Like many sound bites, the “culture of encounter” is elastic enough to embrace a wide range of possible meanings, but in general Francis seems to intend the idea of reaching out, fostering dialogue and friendship even outside the usual circles, and making a special point of encountering people who are neglected and ignored by the wider world.

“Encounter” is thus, in some ways, a proxy for “mercy”—placing the emphasis on compassion rather than, in the first instance, judgment.

Francis has used the language of a “culture of encounter” in too many venues to count.” . . .

The “culture of encounter” is such a defining idea for Francis that saying somebody’s part of it is almost the highest praise he can bestow.

In May, for instance, the leaders of the Focolare movement joined Francis for his morning Mass, and afterwards one of them spoke to the pope, telling him that the prayers of all the *focolarini* are with him and that they’re committed to going out and building bridges with others.

“That’s just what we need,” Francis replied, “the culture of encounter!”⁵

4 “encounter—Middle English (in the senses ‘meet as an adversary’ and ‘a meeting of adversaries’; formerly also as *incounter*): from Old French *encontrer* (verb), *encontre* (noun), based on Latin *in-* ‘in’ + *contra* ‘against.” *Oxford Dictionaries*, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american-english/encounter>.

5 John L. Allen, Jr., “Francis and the ‘Culture of Encounter,’” *National Catholic Reporter* online, December 20, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/francis-and-culture-encounter>.

I have been working with encounter or *encuentro* for some time now, and I sense more and more, from working with hope and engaging a variety of literature, that encounters may be the lynchpins of transformation and even hope.

I have identified four layers of encounter.⁶ They do not necessarily happen in this order. However, there are layers in this spiral that move us, move social change as well, and can both move Consecrated Life and give us direction for movement. They are deceptively simple, until we begin to live the encounter.

The first layer of encounter is to see. To stop, pause, long enough to see. See the other (person or earth community). To look the reality in the eye long enough to let some things sink in, perhaps sink in. To see all that we can. This is like the context of hope, rooted in reality, but we stop or at least pause now to see more. It is more than a glance at the headlines, it is beyond the “Hello! How are you?” as we keep walking. It is when we stop and see where we are in ministry, realizing the faces around us, and beginning to see faces perhaps we had not seen. This puts us on margins somewhere. We have heard the reality with facts, data. Now there is a pause. Something makes us stop—and it isn’t necessarily comfortable. Note that we did stop at the Paris attacks—something encountered us. Yet I suggest that many of us did not stop, pause long enough to really see.

Theologian Martha Zechmeister, CJ, teaching at the University of Central America, in writing about “The Authority of Those Who Suffer,”⁷ calls us to such an encounter, even in the title! Liliane Sweko, SNDdeN, from the Congo, also poignantly makes us stop and see what is happening in her country and surrounding areas she engages.⁸ Such an encounter can build possibilities for further common cause, even in unexpected places.

The second layer of encounter is to see the unexpected. The first layer of encounter, as difficult or powerful as it may be, is interrupted by another layer. In this layer you see differently than what you had anticipated; you notice disconnects. We are often upended here—and we find ourselves realizing, and desiring to enter more deeply into God. We don’t understand, but are willing. A powerful example of such encounter many experienced here at CTU in September was with scholar Fr. Emmanuel Katongole. He has been struggling, as one with Rwandan and Ugandan roots, with the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. He writes, among other areas, on Christian social imagination and Africa.⁹ I share here a selection of what he read to us,¹⁰ including from the narrative of Fr. Zacharie Bukuru, who was rector at the time of the 1997 massacre of forty students in the Junior Seminary in Buta, Burundi:

In the context of endless cycles of violence, African Christians keep wondering, Does Christian faith make any difference—what kind of difference?

In this lecture I argue that Christianity does indeed make a difference but that for Christian faith to offer a radical interruption to the endless cycles of violence in Africa, it has to be grounded within an explicit missiological vision of “Ephesian” identities and communities. The story of the forty young students of Buta provides a most illuminating example of Ephesian community. In the early hours of the morning in the Fall of 1997, a militia group, headed by a fierce woman commander, attacked the

6 This is a work in process.

7 This talk was given at the UISG Conference in 2013. Accessed online at: <ftp://ftp.spdom.org/CPC/Resources5AuthorityofThosewhoSuffer.pdf>.

8 “Called to Illuminate with Prophetic Light the World of Darkness” was offered at the UISG Conference in 2010. Accessed online at: http://www.vidimusdominum.org/en/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_details&gid=15&Itemid=33.

9 See, for example, Emmanuel M. Katongole, *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2005).

10 The quotes were taken from the text of Emmanuel Katongole’s presentation “On Learning to Betray One’s People: The Gospel and a Culture of Peace in Africa,” Luzbetak Lecture in Mission and Culture at Catholic Theological Union on September 29, 2014. I am grateful to the author for sharing the text.

Buta, a high school seminary. They roused the students from their sleep and ordered the high school students to separate, Hutu on one side, and Tutsi on the other. Three times the order was given, but the students refused to separate. So, the commander ordered the rebels to open fire. The students fell, and others tried to escape. In all, forty students were killed. One of the students who had been wounded ran to the rector's house, and called for the rector to open the door for him. When the rector opened the door, the boy dashed inside the small house, and gasping for breath told the rector: "Father, we have won. They told us to separate and we refused. We have won." And he collapsed and died!¹¹

His lecture was stunning, and the Burundi narrative is part of his own interruption. Even at dinner that evening, it was clear, in looking at his eyes, that he was struggling with the realities, hoping for Ephesian communities and reckoning with the violence around him and all of us. Yet still . . . the encounter is moving him and us.

While not all so stunning, we all have encounters in which we see what we don't expect and that keeps us wondering. This is where Hope encounters us, if we are but willing, open, if we ask to be opened. Something about these times also open us up—cracking open through the veneer of busyness, superficiality, and as theologians our answers beg silence as well as response.

The third level of encounter is when we can see (the other) with empathy and compassion. It is interesting that this level (compassion) is increasingly named as necessary for leadership in our time. It is mentioned in terms of social change¹² and for reconciliation and peace-building.¹³ To encounter means to be willing to see differently than what you anticipated. To be willing to be encountered also means to be who we are as we are. Perhaps in both we encounter both strength and vulnerabilities we hadn't anticipated.

A number of people are writing on compassion, and often it is connected to mercy. Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his recent book *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, writes that:

Compassion—or as one prefers to say: empathy (the understanding that comes from feeling oneself in another's shoes)—has become a new and important paradigm in modern psychology and psychotherapy, in pedagogy, sociology, and pastoral work. To be able to put oneself into the situation, into the feelings, thoughts and existential situation of another, in order to thereby to understand his or her thinking and acting, is generally regarded today as the presupposition of successful interpersonal relationship and as proof of genuine humanity. To be able to put oneself into the feelings, thoughts and existential situation of another culture and another people is, moreover, the basic presupposition of intercultural encounter, peaceful relations, and cooperation between religions and cultures, just as it is the basic presupposition of politics and diplomacy in the service of peace.¹⁴

We know this is not easy. In June of last year I was in England for a conference on Janet Erskine Stuart, RSCJ, a major superior and educator extraordinaire. It was there that another educator, Phil (Philomena) Tiernen, made an impression on me. From Australia, she was on a minisabbatical in Europe and attended the gatherings. I had my first encounter with her after a talk we heard on religious life. We spoke at various times throughout the gatherings. I was aware of this as an encounter—I would not have said I met Phil. We encountered one another. I returned to the US on July 3 and Phil went to our holy ground in Joigny, France, for a retreat where our foundress, Madeleine

11 Katongole interview with Fr. Zacharie Bukuru, who was rector at Buta Junior Seminary at the time of the attack; August 13, 2009.

12 The work of Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge have impacted my own work and the reflections that led to this paper.

13 John Paul Lederach, for example, is working on compassionate leadership.

14 Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 16.

Sophie Barat was born. Before leaving Europe also she spent time praying with Sophie in the church in Paris where Sophie's body now remains.

On July 17 I had a stunning interruptive encounter. I saw in my email that Phil had been on Malaysian airline flight 17. I remember that following Sunday, needing somehow to write about this, about her, about what she was calling forth in me, in us. I struggled with words, yet I needed to speak of God even as I didn't understand (and don't). I decided to write on Facebook—a surprising move for me, who previous to this had last written eight months earlier during a month in Brazil.

The prayer that welled up in me, and which I posted, included:

I have not posted on Facebook for a very long time. It is time to post again. I want to share a photo of an amazing person I recently met at the Janet Erskine Stuart conferences in England this summer. Her name is Phil Tiernen. She is a Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a member of my community. And over the next days I would like to share a bit of what her life is teaching me. and her death. and to offer some simple reflections on this public, ecclesial and global moment. Sister Phil Tiernen is one of the people killed when the Malaysian Airlines jet was shot down this past week over the Ukraine. The photo with her was the last photo I took on my phone, a selfie for which I am most grateful. Phil's face—says it all. I had an amazing series of conversations with her! It was such [a] gift to have time with her. I loved being around her! We talked about religious life and what we see around us and what is being called for today. She encouraged me to more. Her being exuded encouragement. She wanted to keep in touch and be in conversation about religious life as we seek to follow the lead of the “befriending Spirit.” She was fun. After visiting one of our schools in London, a group of us had lunch together and just laughed and shared over our meal.

I wept when I heard she was on the plane that was shot down. My heart is sad, broken. And now she is teaching me about the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who loved greatly and fully and whose heart is one with the wounded heart of humanity and the wounded Earth. I am heading off to Sunday liturgy shortly, and I keep hearing “this is my body, this is my blood, given for you . . . in love.” And Jesus did and does. And Phil did and does, now over a war torn and bloodied landscape with the blood from the world on it ever more. Phil lived our call and invitation to discover and reveal God's love. She is not done. Phil is inviting us all . . . and so is our God who loves and weeps with us. We are being called. In the following six posts I found myself connected with the people on the plane, the people on the ground in Ukraine and in Russia—the persons who built the missile and those who launched it, and those whose blood is also on the ground there. It was not and is not easy. I found myself praying, on Facebook, from the second post on, to be open(ed), begging to be open(ed).

Even as Phil is calling me, us, to more, compassion, though framing events in a particular way, does not dismiss the call to accountability and justice. In the midst of realities, the companions of compassion and mercy, justice and truth, must have space to also be encountered.¹⁵ We are reminded by Cardinal Kasper that “we must hear in ‘compassion’ the word ‘passion.’ This means discerning the cry for justice as well as making a passionate responses to the appalling unjust relationships existing in our world.”¹⁶

15 See John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014).

16 Kasper, *Mercy*, 17.

There is yet a fourth layer of encounter, which I call *transformative encounter*.¹⁷ This is where God moves in, moves us, creates something new (“See, I am creating something new . . .”). It is this space of encounter that generates the new. This can take time, and it requires listening, prayer, and reflection. It is transformative because it does change us first and foremost. It also changes how we see what is possible and invites action. The more we have such practices in our life, prayer as well as the virtue of hope that opens us to encounter, the more we become radically available (*disponibilidad*) to see and change.

It is in this kind of encounter that we can experience the dialogue that colleagues Steve Bevans, SVD, and Roger Schroeder, SVD, write about in their important book *Prophetic Dialogue*,¹⁸ and that our scripture scholar Laurie Brink, OP, describes as “dialogue that is itself prophetic”¹⁹—revelatory to each participant. While not easy, this encounter calls forth the best in us, and toward new horizons of hope. This requires a contemplative stance open to move, risk, respond, and create, trusting that in the creating we walk and see as we go.

Again, openness is key here. Carmelite scholar Constance FitzGerald, writing “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory,” uses John of the Cross and what he calls “purification of memory” to call us to that space where we hold all else lightly except God.²⁰ God actually holds us here. This is a delinking or holding lightly to all—accolades and honors as well as wounds and humiliations—so God can move us.

If we can open ourselves to such hope, to the best of ourselves and our world

God is creating, hope-ing in us, this transformative encounter creates and imagines.

While we can name this space of encounter we cannot interpret it yet; we can only point. We can see some of what is emerging from this space of encounter. Creativity and imagination flow from this space, as does a continuation of radical dependence on God—openness. I believe this is a gift consecrated life can offer the wider world, if we ourselves pray to be open(ed) here.

We are in many ways already in the midst of transformative encounter, and it is calling us to attentiveness. As we are being transformed we can offer spaces here with others, for while this is also uncomfortable terrain, we know it—we can remember it. We all have a charisma that speaks to our time, and offering it for this time is part of the evolution of charisma. Yet there is more. We are called to offer, to hold the spaces for just such encounters—as we are going through them. We need not be “in charge” in the midst of them. We are called to be present. Remember, moving faster doesn’t move us at the tectonic level we are being encountered at present. It in fact only distracts us from seeing what is here. Here again, we might think of surrendering to Love.

Hope encounters us each day. As we are open(ed) to God, we are ever more expansive and malleable. Through our faith lens we offer this vision of the world God desires to create in and through us. Our contribution is through the spaces we provide in heart and mind—in our whole being. As Paschal men and women we know this can’t be easy; nevertheless, we say yes. This Reign of God is worth our very lives. Today we mark the ten-year anniversary

17 I am working on language for this, but for now I call it transformative encounter.

18 Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

19 Laurie Brink, “In Search of the Biblical Foundations of Prophetic Dialogue: Engaging a Hermeneutics of Otherness,” *Missiology: An International Review* 41, no. 1 (2013): 16.

20 Constance FitzGerald, OCD, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory,” *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009): 21–42. Found online at: <http://www.ctsa-online.org/Convention%202009/0021-0042.pdf>. Significantly, FitzGerald writes, “currently impasse seems centered in great part in memory and imagination, in the conflict between the past and the future” (22).

sary of one martyr, Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, and we continue to keep vigil with alum John Ssenyondo, MCCJ, a martyr particularly close to our CTU community.²¹ There are others, of course. This is worth our very lives; we know this is a Paschal life we live. The light of Christ lights our way. As we ask to witness this by our lives, we surely will be prophetic witnesses, pointing to God's horizon, with joy, creating community and communion, even if in the process we make noise (*ruido*), as Pope Francis says.

We learn about such an encounter and level of encounter from the one who encountered us and brings us to consecrated life, the one we call Jesus. We find all four layers of encounter in scripture, including the fourth layer. A well-known passage and encounter that may be able to illustrate this fourth layer is found in Mark 6:31–44, the feeding of the five thousand. Allow me now to briefly²² wonder if perhaps we could see in this text a transformative encounter with Hope, one full of surprises and unlikely results.²³

We know the setting. Jesus encountered the people. Jesus went with his disciples by boat to “come away to a deserted place and rest awhile” (6:31). When he arrives at this deserted place and disembarks, he sees the people and the sight of them, Marcan scholar Brendan Byrne, writes, “overwhelms him with compassion.” Byrne writes that “the narrative uses the strong Greek expression *splagchnizomai*, “moved to the depths of one’s being”; in Luke’s Gospel the same word expresses the response of the Good Samaritan (10:33) and the father of the Lost (Prodigal) Son (15:20).²⁴ The language shows that the people were in need. Jesus responds to the people and needs he saw. He sees, and he sees other than what he came to see (a deserted place to rest awhile). Even as Mark gives us a geographical sense of the expansiveness of Jesus’s mission, in the text this also seems to be a surprise, a turn of events. And Jesus sees the other with compassion.

What does he do, then? He responds by teaching them, by feeding them. He offers the Good News. At the end of the passages we simply hear that “They all ate and were satisfied, and there was an abundance of food, symbolically twelve wicker baskets full of fragments and what was left of the fish” (6:42–43).

Let’s take now for a moment the perspective of encounter through the people in the crowd. What if they offer us something about transformative encounter and a lived response? What new possibly emerges?

The crowd saw Jesus leaving and came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them. The people came and saw Jesus. They traveled a long way to see him. They too went to a deserted place to be with him. They stayed, even as it was getting late. What would make you stay? What kind of message could they have heard? What kind of love would be taught?

If you have ever heard someone speak or gone to a concert or listened to a piece of music that is absolutely beautiful, you don’t want to leave. You stay at a sunset until it is completely gone. A piece of art you stay with a long time. Haven’t you been with a friend that you just don’t want to leave? You savor each moment.

What impossibility could this message open up? It is interesting that we never hear who fed them. But what if that kind of generosity—even as commentators on Mark speak of the messianic banquet—opened up more generosity?

21 The body of Ugandan Fr. John Ssenyondo, MCCJ (Catholic Theological Union, MA/MDiv 1991), was found in a mass grave in Mexico. He had spoken out against injustices in the region.

22 There is more than can be opened up in this text in this brief address.

23 The miracle teaches a theological point, many biblical scholars remind us; it is unrealistic, but perhaps parabolic here.

24 Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 114–15.

Another way to look at this is to see that people, who came from all the towns, not necessarily knowing one another, now sat down together. What if they brought food or bought some on the way because they had walked this road and knew it was a long way? What if what happened was that people stayed and now created community, sitting together. Why would you not want to stay? After Jesus's prayer of blessing and thanksgiving, imagine the conversations they would have about what they had heard that day! After such an encounter it would be natural to talk about it with one another. And now a community is potentially forming in sharing the encounter with Jesus together over a meal. These could be memories they then share that remind them of this encounter, that remind them of so much possibility.

The fourth layer speaks of transformative encounter, and the feeding of the many is a snapshot of what is possible when one thinks it is impossible.

Then we come to what happens with such an encounter. Imagine what this kind of listening can open up, what transformative hope can imagine. Imagine what could possibly come forth from this as Jesus offers a way to live, a way that resonated. The peoples' nearness to Jesus, their encounter, opened up much. Jesus's message called forth the best in them.

Marks of Transformative Encounter

What emerges in this transformative encounter? I briefly offer some marks of a transformative encounter.

Gratitude and joy. Gustavo Gutierrez, OP, writes that "Gratitude is the space of that radical self-giving and that presence of beauty in our lives without which even the struggle for justice would be crippled."²⁵ Regarding joy, we need simply review Pope Francis's writings on the *Gospel of Joy*.

Unitive vision. In their important work together, both Gustavo Gutierrez and Paul Farmer speak of "one world" rather than first-through-fourth worlds. The pope reminds us of our call to be "experts in communion"; we do long to be women and men who create communion. In these encounters, our best selves are called forth together, and we are ever more truly who we are, accepting even our weakness and vulnerability as places where God longs to work in us. The call is that in the midst of our diversity, "all may be one."

Paschal openness. There is an acknowledgement that in this time there is a dying, a letting go of one way to another, and we are invited to together and personally hold lightly and even let go—always into God. We will be opened ever more here, in this space too, for it is a generative movement.

Imagination and creativity moving into imaginative action. It is actually a lighter space and a more playful space than we may often imagine.²⁶

Invitation

As our call is to offer spaces for such encounters with Jesus, and to open ourselves to such encounters among God's people, I conclude with two key invitations for our time. First, create spaces for encounters—in yourselves, your communities, and well beyond across groups and with the wider humanity and creation. Offer yourselves and your journey. People are desperately seeking this in the world. Invite people. Listen. Dialogue. All will be transformed.

²⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, "Conversion: A Requirement for Solidarity," in *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez*, eds. Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

²⁶ This could be a dimension of what Sandra Schneiders, IHM, speaks of as an alternative reality construction, but it is the construction happening in real time.

Second, open spaces for your charisms to lead us for this time. Just as vows have particular meanings in particular times, with their foundations and core elements intact, so too does the Spirit work through our charisms to offer what is needed in each period of time.

Yes, there is something we offer in consecrated life for our time. Hope in God leads us to embrace encounters and open ourselves to the transformation that is possible, that God longs to incarnate among us so that we too shall embrace the future with hope.