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Personal Conviction

Recently, I was at the National Executive meeting of the Conference of Religious India (CRI) in New Delhi. It was an intense three days of reflection, listening, and the way forward for Religious men and women in India.

There was a whole range of themes as part of the agenda, and one of them was the socio-political issues gripping us in India and the world. One other topic that hit the core of our beings was when I raised the issue of why so many religious nuns are leaving the Congregations today. This was a hot button topic, and every member present was fully and actively involved as each one present there, including the men, shared that they too were facing the same in their respective congregations. It was interesting to listen to each one, but one point that stood out and articulated was the 'LACK OF PERSONAL CONVICTION OF OUR BEING CALLED BY GOD'.

As I carried home with me the thoughts of that day, and as I was continuing my reflection, I felt I should ask myself if it would help us to look at the personal conviction of two great Saints, Therese of Child Jesus and Teresa of Avila, the two great Carmelite female saints, whose feast we will celebrate soon. And would it not be in sync with this sacred time in our Congregation, and to try and align it with our Chapter theme, 'Rekindling Our Sacred Belonging'.

Both St. Therese and Teresa of Avila experienced profound moments of uncertainty, illness, spiritual darkness, and doubt. And yet their personal convictions of God's presence and His love, expressed through their unwavering trust, even when their feelings did not match their beliefs, can show us a path to follow.

St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus felt an early and strong call to religious life and after overcoming obstacles, entered the cloistered Carmelite convent at the age of 15, joining two of her older sisters. She developed her "little way," a spirituality emphasizing childlike trust and love of God. Through her life and spirituality, she continues to inspire millions worldwide. Her littleness is basically an attitude of

humility and trust. The author of the book “Everything is Grace”, Schmidt, Joseph



F, writing about the ‘Little Flower’, speaks of “Being reconciled to our weakness, and if we accept ourselves as we are, we also accept God’s love for us. But if we reject ourselves, if we despise ourselves, we shut ourselves from the love God has for us, we deny that love.”

Then we have St. Teresa. Her life is a story of profound encounters with God, of visions, and conversations with angels. Her book, ‘Interior Castle’, revolutionized the way we think about prayer and the ability to converse with God, with humility and self-knowledge, to attain a greater understanding of his great love for us.

But how can St. Teresa speak to our lives in this vocation? At the core of all of her writings, St. Teresa calls us to love. I know we often feel there is no time for prayer. We are busy bodies and stuck only with activities. And yet St. Teresa describes mental prayer as an intimate sharing between friends... the important thing is not to think much, but to love much and so do that which stirs you to love. Love is not great delight, but a desire to please God in everything. So, you see, our lives are an outpouring of love, and therefore our lives are a prayer. St. Teresa also reminds us that we are Christ’s hands and feet to the world, and most especially to our children. She says:



Christ has no body but mine. He prays in me, works in me, looks through my eyes, speaks through my words, works through my hands, walks with my feet, and loves with my heart. If we can embrace this truth, and remember that we are truly being Christ to our children, drawing them with love to the Saviour of the world, and allowing that transformative love to permeate all of our work, we will not only build the Kingdom of Heaven, but we will also find eternal rest and peace for ourselves. (St Teresa of Avila: Do That Which Stirs You to Love-Annie Muller)

As we look at these two great Women who were, on the one hand, absolutely human but on the other hand, were driven by a deep desire to love God ever more. Let us now shift the focus a little bit to our lives as we delve deeper into them. For instance, what do we do when we face struggles, boredom, unhappiness, challenges of balancing between an alluring world of today vis-à-vis our Call, challenges within communities, questions regarding the meaning of religious life, etc? Where do we go or who do we turn to?

Here, I would like to make what might appear to be a bit of diversion, from the lives of two women saints of yesteryears to two other present-day women, and the not-yet-declared saints (tongue in cheek). Maybe you have already guessed that I am referring to the webinar we had on 10th September, where Ms. Shruthi and Ms. Nancy addressed the whole congregation. I had a purpose in organizing it for the whole Congregation. Of course, I can't put here in the circular all that they said. You heard them yourself.

It was, however, amazing for me, especially if we go back to where I began this circular – 'LACK OF PERSONAL CONVICTION OF OUR BEING CALLED BY GOD'. Though both spoke on different themes, the common thing among both, despite being lay women, was the conviction and the commitment to what they were doing. They were both deeply involved in what appeared clearly to be their mission. One could easily detect and feel the fire in their belly – the one towards her mission to be a teacher, and the other in her mission of intercessory prayer and spiritual counselling, as well as discerning the working of the Spirit. It was not just a well-prepared presentation of their work, but they shared from their deep experience with solid and relevant examples and a clarity of mind. No one could say that they lacked personal conviction. Ms. Nancy even spoke about how our personal conflicts in communities spill out in public, not only affecting our work but also leaving a negative impression and witness on our staff and co-workers.

The purpose of bringing the examples of the two lay women of deep conviction is to show that it is not just two Carmelite canonized women saints who show us the way but even in our modern times, nay, the women next door, can inspire us to 'rekindle' in us what may be lying dormant. Thus, the examples of the four women mentioned in this circular, a set of new questions can arise for each one of us.

One could, for instance, ask oneself if I am endlessly looking, searching, and seeking? And what am I seeking and for what? Or am I living an indifferent life, following the daily routine, almost like a robot? What aspect of my religious life do I need to 'rekindle'? Do I even have a desire to 'recommit' and 'rekindle' something in me or am I just satisfied with the way life is going? Or even the question raised by Ms. Shruthi, "Is being good, good enough"?

Sometimes our young people talk of happiness or being happy in life, and they feel they can find it somewhere outside of themselves. What we really need to look at is the purpose of our life that we have chosen. It is this purpose we need to be faithful and committed to.

My invitation is that we remain with these questions and discover where I am today. What aspect of the call have I not yet woken up to? Will going back down memory lane when we felt our first call, help? Do we remember the blessings accompanying that call? Did it also bring to our mind the challenges we would be facing as religious in the future? Was there a question then in our mind about a perpetual commitment to this call? Both St Therese and St Teresa kept their gaze on the Lord and they had their own frailties simply because they were now convinced that God had called them and that God had a purpose for each one of them.

As I conclude I do so with a prayer, may St Therese and St Teresa of Avila pray for the grace that we may be totally convinced of our being called by the Lord to live this mystery of His unconditional love for us.

The sisters of my team and I wish you a very Happy Feast!

m. nirmalini

Superior General