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Religious Life



Benedictine Sister Jennifer Mechtild Horner, prioress of the Sisters of St. Benedict of Beech Grove, Indiana, holds a candle intended to symbolize the light of Christ as the sisters begin their first prayer service of Advent Dec. 1, 2018, at the Our Lady of Grace Monastery. (CNS/Katie Rutter)

by The Life Panelists

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Retreat direction. Political activism. Teaching. Catechesis. Public speaking. Eco-spirituality. This month, panelists reflected in a personal way about their prayer life and its effect on the rest of their lives, especially their ministries, as they responded to this question:

How are your ministry experiences and your prayer life linked? How does one impact the other?



Mary John Mananzan is a Missionary Benedictine sister from the Philippines. A noted theologian and author, she has served as president of St. Scholastica's College, as prioress of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Manila Priory, and as national chairperson of the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines. She is a political and feminist activist who helped develop an Asian feminist theology of liberation and works with a number of organizations that deal with gender issues and women's concerns. Currently, she ministers as superior of the Manila community and as a member of the Priory Council.

I have tried from the beginning of my religious life to live our Benedictine motto: Ora et labora ["pray and work"]. Sometimes we pit prayer and work against each other, as if one cancels the other. But in my life as a religious, I have come to realize that these two aspects of religious life are intertwined, and we have to live them in a creative tension in everyday life.

My particular congregation, the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing, specifically affirms that we are monastic but at the same time missionary. So our daily horarium includes lauds, holy Mass, midday prayer, vespers, one-hour *lectio*, and compline. And in between, we do our assigned tasks.

For me, "*labora*" goes beyond my institutional assignment in school. It includes involvement in the burning issues of Philippine society — as a political, feminist activist.

My involvement started with a "baptism of fire" in a workers' strike during the period of martial law, when strikes were prohibited, where I personally experienced police brutality when they beat up the workers with whom we sisters linked arms.

That began what is known in the Philippines as "Parliament of the Streets," where we declared our solidarity with the oppressed masses: factory workers, urban poor, tenants and farmers. We joined rallies, picket lines and fact-finding missions, and gave structural analysis seminars. Realizing that a comprehensive transformation of society is not possible without gender equality, we initiated a women's movement for the defense of women's rights and empowerment.

We reason that Christ had a special option for the poor. We are followers of Christ and therefore should also have an option for the poor. And when the poor are oppressed, we have to be in solidarity with them.

Our activism is definitely rooted in contemplation. I agree with Thomas Merton, who said religious, celibate solitude has as its primary purpose the fostering of contemplation. And in this, we participate in the divine perspective from which prophecy arises.

I have also experienced spiritual awakening in political events. I understood the widow's mite when striking factory workers gave contributions of small coins to buy supper for the sisters who stayed overnight preparing for a 4 a.m. picket line. I gained insight into the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes when we fed 500 workers gathered in a forum, surrounded by the military.

Considering William Hocking's idea of a prophet as a "mystic in action," I want to add that a mystic is a prophet in contemplation.



Lucy Bethel is a member of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul. An eighth-generation Bahamian, she held various positions in banking in the Bahamas before entering religious life. Later, she served as director of a center providing full-time care for mentally challenged adult women. Currently, as director of Providence Spirituality Centre, she is a full-time spiritual/retreat director in Kingston, Ontario.

The segment on prayer in the constitutions of my congregation reads: "Our prayer life is a listening and a response in faith to the loving invitation of God, who is continually drawing us to himself."

I view my ministry as a spiritual director as a call to practice this reality, not just for myself but for all those people our God of providence places on my journey. While my primary ministry on behalf of my congregation is presently that of director of our retreat center, Providence Spirituality Centre, the ministry that feeds my heart and soul is my ministry as a spiritual director.

I feel affirmed each time one of the people I accompany speaks of "God's presence with us." Why? Well, without being aware of it, this person has affirmed what for me is a personal core value, that is, that my ministry is blessed when built on a foundation of prayer through which I am invited to listen well and be attentive to all the "nudges" of God.

Richard Rohr names this reality well in *What the Mystics Know: Seven Pathways to Your Deeper Self*: "We cannot attain the presence of God because we're already totally in the presence of God. … What's absent is awareness." In the moment when I feel affirmed, I am able to gift the other by affirming her for being attentive to God's presence in her life, the "Presence" in which we are already immersed.



Sr. Lucy Bethel (Provided photo)

I am reminded through these encounters that my ministry is a "ministry of presence," a living, dynamic reality, not task-oriented, nothing to accomplish or achieve, filled with experiences to be lived fully. It is a "presence" nurtured through faithfulness to personal prayer and shared as gift to the other in and through my ministry. Is this not what John 10:10 is all about? "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly."

Over the years, it has become clear to me that I am only able to give to others out of the abundance God gives to me. I am called and invited by a loving God into personal prayer, where I am nurtured and blessed with all I need to be a listening, supportive and nurturing presence for the other.

Thus, it is in and through faithfulness to my personal prayer life that I grow in my effectiveness as a spiritual director and companion to others on their spiritual journeys.

Bennesar **Maria Magdalena Bennásar (Magda) of the Sisters for Christian Community is from Spain. Studies in theology gave her a foundation for the charism of prayer and ministry of the word with an emphasis on spirituality and Scripture: teaching, conducting retreats and workshops, creating community and training lay leaders in Australia, the U.S. and Spain. Currently, she is working on eco-spirituality and searching for a space to create a center or collaborate with others.**

Prayer is like water. Will that affirmation make anyone raise an eyebrow?

To say that prayer is "as intimate as breathing" invites us to think about our own breathing: our own connection with it, a source of our existence (without which we can´t survive, not even a few minutes).

Is there something, someone, more intimate than our breathing? Here is our challenge: think, feel, breathe in and breathe out, relax, enjoy. Again!

Breathing permeates my whole being. It becomes part of me; still, I have to invite the air to come in, and if I don't, it doesn't come, even though I am surrounded by it.

So yes, there is something more intimate than air: water. Water is me. Depending on my age, I am 50% to 70% water. Scientists tell us that about 70% of the surface of our blue planet is water.



(Unsplash/Matt Hardy)

I don't have to call water to come into me, to be part of me. I don't have to call God to come, to be with me. God is me, is part of me, of you, and of the planet. We are one.

Prayer is simply and profoundly becoming aware of the awesome creatures we are. We are permeated with God, part of God. As Paul says, we are immersed in God (Acts 17, 28).

Becoming aware of that is to be part of a process of transformation. It is somehow to channel our love, which, like an inner watershed, channels all my "waters," all those and all which I love, into the big river of life.

As religious, we know intimately that prayer is the source of our love, of our life. If we explore how intimate that love is, how much a part of our being it is, we find that we are identified by prayer. Like the water in us, like the water in the planet, we are one with all.

How does prayer make an impact on my ministry?

People aware of being one with the One exude a certain light, a certain brightness. Is that ministry?

When gazing at the blue planet, I get transported to a better place within myself, a place of beauty and possibility, a place of love and water and life for all. I guess, I hope, people see that in us or through us.

Sister, you are "blue." Isn't that ministry? You're a beautiful watershed!

Advertisement

Kenyonga **Grace Mary Kenyonga, from Uganda, is a member of the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, the region of South Africa. In South Africa, she first ministered to adults and children with HIV/AIDS and taught high school religious education and catechism. For two and a half years, she served in a predominantly Muslim area in Senegal, where she worked in the community's clinic for the most marginalized and vulnerable in society. She has recently been missioned back to South Africa.**

My first lesson in an eighth-grade religious education class was on prayer. I asked the students what prayer meant to them.

The answers included the following: talking to God; "wireless communication" used to talk to God; talking to your best friend (because your best friend is on your side, whether you are wrong or not).

Prayer aligns our desires with what God wills for us. We always have wishes, goals and intentions, which cannot be accomplished if what we desire is not the will of God. As Jesus did, we pray to let the will of God be done and not our own will.

Prayer and ministry are inseparable; success in ministry is an outcome of prayer. In my ministry of teaching, catechesis, home visits or health care, I am the face of God, carrying out his work.

I acknowledge that God gave me this work or ministry and ask God in prayer to guide me and grant success in what he has given me to do. Praying for my ministry,

I put my trust in the one who owns the work and am confident it will succeed. I also encourage the people for whom I minister to pray.

In Senegal, West Africa, one elderly lady came to morning Mass daily. I told her: "What you are doing is good. Keep it up."

She replied that since she got married, she had not missed morning Mass unless she was sick. Taught in her catechism classes to always pray before undertaking any work, she said, "God did not give me an office job, but I am married. My job is looking after my husband and children. Every morning, I come and tell God to bless this job that he gave me. God always answers my prayer. I am able to feed my family, and I have never had a fight with my husband. All this is because I offer my work to God in prayer."

God creates and sustains all things, including me and my ministry. I need to pray before undertaking my ministry so God may allow his presence to be felt through me. I can only offer the service that my physical and mental capacity allow. We live in a materialistic world, full of human abuse, and sometimes, we fight spiritual wars in our ministries. All that is beyond our means we offer to God in prayer, for nothing is impossible to him.



Sr. Teresa Joseph leads a concluding prayer at the first International Buddhist-Christian Dialogue for Nuns event, which was held Oct. 14-18, 2018, at Fo Guang Shan, Kaohsiung, Taiwan. (Provided photo)



Teresa Joseph is a Salesian Sister in Mumbai, India. With extensive academic work from universities in Rome, she has taught university courses, held diocesan and congregational offices, revised catechetical texts, and launched many creative programs for teachers, parents and students. Currently, she is animator of the community at Auxilium Convent, Lonavala. She takes every opportunity to work with children who live in the streets.

As a young novice, I knew that whatever grace I prayed for through the intercession of St. John Bosco, the Lord would grant. Over the years, I developed a culture of prayer prompted by a deep longing for the Lord and learned to entrust my ministry to God.

I saw prayer, accompaniment and empowerment help Sharon, the most timid girl in class, to become a promising head girl in school and the best graduating student of the year.

Prayer and the ministry of presence with a loving heart helped Dora, a young teenager from Rome who could not complete her licentiate thesis. We attended daily Eucharist together. I encouraged her, and she not only succeeded in that, but earned specialization in two other fields. She is now a happy and contented tourist guide at the Vatican Museum. Her mom embraced me with tears in her eyes, saying, "If my Dora is what she is today, it is all because of your prayers and guidance."

I have experienced the power of prayer moving my audience, creating positive vibes. Asked in 2017 to offer a reflection on the letter of Don Bosco from Rome in May 1884 at a Salesian Seminar for Missionary Animation and Formation in Thailand, I felt genuinely unworthy. But I surrendered to the Lord, spent more than three months in prayer and reflection, and saw my reflections welcomed joyfully and gratefully.

The next year, when I offered a retreat in Cambodia, I was sustained by the prayers of Sr. Caroline Menezes and the sisters of my community of the Mazzarello Youth Centre, Wadala.

My way of prayer is total surrender to the Lord, letting him have his way. Spontaneous prayer with and for others is very easy for me. The latest miracle I have seen with my own eyes was the joy on the faces of four women telling me how their husbands had given up alcohol after I asked the children and the mothers to pray with me to the Lord.

So my prayer life has much to do with my ministry, and it affects "the other" significantly, in transformation of life and relationships! Yes, the Lord has done it. To him be all glory and praise.

Henri J.M. Nouwen said eloquently: "Christian life is not a life divided between times for action and times for contemplation. No. Real social action is a way of contemplation, and real contemplation is the core of social action."

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