Columns
Religious Life



"The Marriage Feast At Cana" by Frans Francken the Younger (1581-1642) (Artvee)



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Consecrated life is a call from God. For many individuals, it happens unexpectedly; only in hindsight does one realize that one was chosen. Some experience a personal, profound and unforgettable loving call from Christ and are gripped by God forever! That's exactly what happened to me.

As a teenager, I felt Jesus attracting me from within one day. He lovingly implored me to come and make a gift of myself and promised that I would always be a "virgin consecrated." He also taught me to listen, discern his heartbeat and attune mine with his because, as he added, "We have to walk together!" I wholeheartedly decided to fulfill his desire, totally and forever. However, the horizons of my calling broadened year after year, decade after decade as newer meanings of his words unfolded.

Initially, I thought he wanted me to be mystically united with him, leading a contemplative life in prayer, especially for Africa and women's liberation. Then, to my surprise, one day, I had a dream of emerging out of the cave of my heart, gazing at the sky with birds flying, even as the sun rose and shone brightly. Within me was a kind of élan vital, a longing for transcendence, for infinite Truth, for justice and liberation in all dimensions of life, especially as a woman of color in a church still freeing itself from the aftermath of colonization.

I wanted to freely scream at the top of my voice that I love Jesus and hear it echo forever and ever … from the hearts of sisters and friends who loved him as deeply as I do. I craved communion in some form of community but did not seem to resonate with the structures in various religious institutes and lay associations or movements, which originally emerged in Europe.

I desired a consecrated life emerging from the heart and soul of colorful Asia, with its infinite depth and breath, wherein the seed of the Word had been sown, but could not find it. However, when I read about the order of virgins in Vita Consecrata, I could resonate with it and became a consecrated member in 2002. There were many challenges since it was a little- known and much misunderstood vocation, often viewed through the lenses of other forms of consecrated life, such as solitary hermits or secular institutes. After much research, the only way to give vent to the desire to be listened to from my own perspective was through writing. It certainly made readers think, if not act immediately.

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Recently, I gained deeper insight into the words "virgin consecrated" and "we have to walk together," which Jesus seemed to say when he first called me as an adolescent. It is a call to live my vocation in "synodality!" Hence, today's synod on synodality is a balm to the wounds of my soul's unfulfilled longings for consecrated life as well as the church. The church in the West seems aged and genuinely trying to take "baby steps" to listen to the East. The feminine spirit of the entire church in Asia seems to be setting itself free with its own voice, which is respected. I couldn't thank God enough for this!

Nevertheless, time doesn't pause to wait for women’s dreams to be fulfilled in a patriarchal church. Jesus took my hand and helped me rise above geographical constraints in the quest for communion and service by going virtual as well as global in inter-vocational communitas, which I hope to elaborate in another column in the future. As I reflect on my journey, there were moments I had to slow down or speed up for Jesus, and times when Jesus did the same for me. He was not only patient with my shortcomings but also came to my aid by intervening when the hour had not yet come (John 2:4, 10).

It has been a nonstop journey, adjusting to each other's pace, trying to be one heartbeat. However, I wonder whether this kind of attunement between Jesus and I involves "being one will" or "doing God’s will" (as if it were predetermined and absolute). God wants us to be happy and often reveals divine will through our own deepest desires when we are mystically united.

That’s why during the first phase of synodal consultations in 2022, I reflected with several groups on how synodality implies a journey to realize the Kin-dom of God within us through prayer, as well as an outward journey to serve humanity.

We also asked ourselves several questions: Is the journey linear or circular or spiral? Are we walking or dancing together? Is the experience dull or colorful? Are we exclusive or inclusive? What about binaries causing prejudices, such as:

sacred vs. secular, white vs. Black, church vs. society, male vs. female, clergy vs. laity, leaders vs. followers, rich vs. poor, central vs. peripheral, locals vs. migrants, conservative vs. liberal and many more.

Are we dragging ourselves, walking or dancing with Jesus on our personal spiritual journeys? Are we coming closer to God or moving away? Synodality implies synergy not only between the various forms of consecrated life but also with people in other states of life. The Holy Spirit gives all the baptized the energy, the power to walk and work together, shepherding one another in the distinctive areas that represent God's special gift and calling for each of us.

The deeper our inner journeys as individuals and communities, the further our outward journeys will take us to overcome patriarchy and structural sin, thereby bringing fullness of life for everyone. The depth of mysticism leads one to become a prophet and get involved!

Conversation in the Spirit through listening and dialogue is the mission of the synodal church today as it expands its horizons, respecting the divine in every individual, culture, religion and the entire cosmos. So where are we going? And how?