

**CORI AGM**

**OMAGH**

**SUNDAY OCTOBER 12, 2014**

**SESSION ONE**

**THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD**

It's a real honour to be invited to share this day with you. I do so with some trepidation, because, while I have been privileged over the years to work with quite a number of religious orders, I am, to state the obvious, not a religious sister – in the strict sense of that word, although I do believe that we are here this afternoon sisters and brothers, united in Christ! So here I am, being welcomed into the intimacy your lives, and daring to address the theme 'Outrageous Hope in Religious Life.' If I happen to say anything that you are not happy with, it is not done out of any lack of sensitivity but out of a 'not knowing' fully what you have been living. So at the outset, I ask for your generous 'understanding' as we seek to explore together something for which we all yearn.

Perhaps the best thing for me to do is not to beat about the bush but to say that I partially know, and the rest is assumption, that the last years have been enormously difficult and painful for you as religious orders – and, not only for you, but for the majority of those called to and seeking to live the religious life in its broader sense. You carry the weight, as do most of your sisters and brothers in the Western world, of declining numbers and few new vocations. All around us in this Ireland that we love and that once was held up as almost the icon of faith in a sceptical world, there appears to be little interest any more in the things of faith. People are leaving our established churches in droves and the average age of those still involved, as evidenced by their presence at worship, is, to use the rather scathing jargon of today, well past its sell by date! That includes you and me, by the way! I

am sure that you do feel, at times, the frailty of old age (let's name it for what it is!) and the frustrations of not being able to do some of the things that you used to do. And yet, if you're like me, you don't feel old inside. My mother died a few years ago at the age of ninety five and a half – the half was very important to her! Even up to a couple of weeks before she died, I would ask, "Well, Mum, what age do you feel today?" She would straighten up in her chair, there would be a fleeting twinkle in her eyes and she would say, very precisely, "Twenty six!" The last few decades have seen a taking over either by the State or by other secular institutions those services that you and other orders regarded as your particular vocations or charisms. This has had the potential to contribute to a crisis of identity. "Who are we, if we are not able, or not permitted any more to do that for which we believed we were called and to which we gave ourselves with such enthusiasm – and such results – in our prime?" And then, casting an interminable shadow over everything, is the elephant in the room – the accusations of recent years which, while having to be faced and named, must not be allowed to ultimately name who you are. I know that whatever pain there is in the wider community is at least equally matched by your own suffering, self-examination and the injustice of not only having to take the blame for the actions of a very small minority but also having to somehow hold your heads up under the weight of false accusation. Seeking to cope with these and many other situations can become a huge weight on the spirit – both of individuals and of communities. If some of the things I have mentioned are too painful, then the temptation can be to suppress them. But they don't go away. They produce a weariness, a sense of false guilt or shame, sometimes anger, and a questioning as to what this life has all been about and so on. When a thing inside us becomes too hard, then one of the unhelpful ways of trying to deal with it is to project one's

confusion and pain out on to someone else, a sort of scapegoating, which, in turn, has a destructive effect on living community. And you know, the only reason I can talk about this is that, in some instances for different reasons, I too have lived these things, the pain of them and experienced the seeming hopelessness of them.

All of these scenarios, along with the anguished state of the world in general, could lead you to despair – perhaps specifically about who you are as religious, about your identity and about your future. What I would like to do for a few minutes is to turn to an incident in John’s Gospel where we find a similar sort of grief, loss and despair that was transformed into an outrageous hope, the sort of hope you and I desperately need for these days. It’s the story of the death of Lazarus.

Jesus had a close relationship with the little family in Bethany – Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Their home was a haven for him in the midst of all that he lived. If you like, in human terms, it was his safe place. It was here that he was able to relax in the intimacy of friendship away from the relentless pressures and demands of his public ministry. Jesus and his disciples were not near Bethany when they received a message that Lazarus was very ill. Before long, he died. It wasn’t until 4 days after his death that Jesus and his friends arrived at Bethany to be met by Martha who said, “If you had been here my brother would not have died.” It’s a bit like an accusation arising from her deep sorrow and confusion. Martha believed but it was as if she couldn’t allow her belief to take wings and soar beyond the present darkness to limitless possibility, light and freedom. And naturally enough; we would have been exactly the same. But then a remarkable thing happens. Jesus challenges her – and she begins to soar. The wings of her faith are caught by the breath of the Spirit who is the resurrection and the life and she sees beyond. “Yes, Lord, I believe.” She then goes to her

sister with this life giving, hope engendering word, “The Master is here and wants to see you.” Mary, also initially seeing and feeling only her deep loss and perhaps even a sense of grievance that Jesus, to whom she was so close, had delayed his coming, reiterates Martha’s accusation. “If only you had been here, Lord, this would not have happened. Why did it take you so long to come?”

Martha and Mary could be said to represent the whole of religious life, that calling to action and contemplation that have been and still seek to be the heartbeat of our vocation and we all have known the struggle of trying to attain some sort of balance between the two. Fr Richard Rohr, when asked which is the more important word, says, “Neither. The most important word is ‘and’” In this way that has chosen you with its intricate weaving of both strands, where you have striven so hard to be faithful, it may seem at the moment that, no matter what you have done, you are either dying or dead. You will have ‘sent messages’, as did Mary and Martha, to Jesus, prayers of entreaty, “Lord, the one you love is sick” but these appear to have been met by silence. You will have wrestled with your constitutions, your mission statements, sought new ways to be witnesses to the Good News that has been distorted into bad news by those who do not have a heart understanding of the gospel – but all to seemingly no avail. Not only within the church of which you are a part, but in this part of Ireland, it seems that in relation to the things of God, in terms of living, vibrant faith, we are either anaesthetised or, at very least, asleep. Surely God who called you into being has not abandoned you? He will come and rescue you and all will be well again. But it hasn’t happened and the relentless seeping away of the life you once knew and loved is almost too painful to bear. Caught in grief, a sense of loss and confusion, you, too, could cry out, “Lord, if you had been here, this wouldn’t be happening. Why didn’t you come before we reached

such a state?” This confusion could be compounded by the unspoken, precious assumption that you had felt that the Order and your communities provided a ‘safe place’ for Jesus to rest, a place of intimate friendship and communication with the Beloved. Was it all your imagination? Have you been deceived? These are very real questions that we probably don’t like to acknowledge, but need to do so as a first step towards our despair and misery being replaced by hope.

The other vital step is to hear the message, “The Master is here and wants to see you.” I wonder can you really hear it? Instead of brushing it aside with the reactive response, “What’s the point? It’s too late now” – could you allow it to sink from your head to your heart? This happened to me actually a few months ago. I was sitting in an ecumenical service and a Lutheran pastor from Finland was reading this gospel. She didn’t highlight these words but they came into my consciousness like a sonic boom and lodged themselves in my heart. “The Master is here and wants to see you, Ruth.” They are awesome words, life giving words, hope creating words – if we dare to really listen. What do they mean – for you, for me? They mean that Jesus is totally present right now. He is here and we are resting in the gaze of love – unconditional, limitless, intimate love. If you can allow yourselves to become aware of this fact, even a little, then you will begin to see how everything changes. I heard Jim Finley, one of the authorities on Thomas Merton, pose the question at a conference last year, “What if infinite love has set its eyes on you for itself alone?” And then he added, “Nothing less than infinite love has the power to name who you are.” How liberating is that?

I am struck by how often in both Testaments the look or the gaze of God is linked to resurrection, new life, freedom, outrageous hope. In Genesis, God looks on all that he has

created and sees that it is very good. Later in the same book, Hagar, the slave girl, fleeing from Sarah, full of despair, comes across a well in the desert and has an encounter with God. She says, "I have seen the living one who sees me." From that point her identity and her future are assured. In Exodus God sees the affliction of his people, and Moses is commissioned to lead them from slavery in Egypt to freedom and new life. The psalmist in a time of reflective insight declares that there is nowhere that he can hide from the gaze of God, that, even in his mother's womb, he was seen and known. In the gospels, it is not condemnation but the gaze of love that lingers on the rich young man who, exercising the freedom of choice, turns away from Jesus – but not, I believe, for ever. In the intense drama of the High Priest's courtyard after the arrest of his Master, it is not destructive remorse that has the last word but the gaze of love directed at Peter that is his eventual redemption.

We can never, ever dismiss ourselves if we have rested under the gaze of love and know that we have been seen. However much we try to, we cannot hide from the living one who sees us. Though others may point the accusing finger, God looks on what he has made – and sees us as good. Shame, guilt, remorse, despair melt in the warmth of his flourishing gaze. Dear Sisters and Brothers, bringing with you all that you have lived of joy and pain, right now the Master is here and wants to see you. And when he looks at you he sees his beloved. That is who you are, the name given to you by an all-seeing, all-loving God. And that word is not just a description, beautiful as that may be. It is also a challenge, a vocation that will endure when every other secondary vocation is cast aside – be loved, be loved. Accepting the fact of our belovedness is the radical core of the gospel, the reason why Jesus came. And only when we truly accept it for ourselves can we begin to pass it on to others as good news.

In reading your web site, I found one little section particularly moving and challenging. It could be addressed to all of us who are seeking to respond to the call and invitation of God to live the religious life. "As religious we ask: How can religious life be truly a witness to our people of the reign of God in our midst? How can our community living point to the possibility of creating a new sense of community belonging where all have a place and where there is room for dissent? This questioning and search is not a cause for dismay but for awareness that we are called to be with others in visioning and living into a new future." Holding these questions in the light of the two little phrases I lifted from the Lazarus story, namely, "Lord, if you had been here, this wouldn't have happened" and "The Master is here and wants to see you" could we briefly look at these again.

You are women and men who have given your lives to sharing your faith story and being a witness to the reign of God in your midst. Sometimes that will have been an easy and joyful thing to do. At other times it will have been painful and difficult. And the story is always evolving. There's always more, no matter what stage of the journey we're on. The real enemies of our Christian faith today are not other denominations or even other religions but rather materialism and secularism and distorted images of what believing is all about. Add to that the degree of mistrust, suspicion and accusations of hypocrisy and irrelevancy that are flung at us, for various reasons so that sometimes we no longer know how to go about sharing this story that has shaped and moulded our lives and become our reason for being. Faced with these and other seemingly insurmountable obstacles I referred to, how do you keep the commitment and find new ways to witness to the reign of God? Like Martha, you do believe, but could it be that because of your present situation you cannot allow your belief to take wings and soar beyond the present darkness to limitless possibility, light and

freedom. Perhaps the challenge of Jesus to you is to accept that the Master is here and wants to see you, really see you. That, I believe, is all that it would take for the wings of your faith to be caught by the breath of the Spirit who is the resurrection and the life and for you to see beyond. “Yes, Lord, I believe.”

We desperately need encouragement – to give courage to one another. It is a rather salutary thing to realise that having given your lives to hearing the cry of the marginalised and to be present to those who are on the edges, in recent years you have found yourselves to be on the margins. You have been hurt, misunderstood, rejected. It can be a very lonely place to be, a place of misunderstanding, a place of injustice – but, on another level, for those with hearts to understand, it can also be the place of community. When it comes down to the nitty gritty of living community together, day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year, it can be hard, very hard. It is so very easy to sum another up, to feel you know them fully and, by default, to allow them no possibility of growth or change. If only ‘they’ had done this or that, this thing would not have happened. To react to another in this way is to dehumanise them. The truth is that every human being is a mystery. There is always more to them than we could ever imagine. There’s even more to me, to you. Perhaps the challenge is to risk letting go of our preconceived notions about the people with whom we share our lives and see them with new eyes. One of the ways we let go is through forgiveness. Jean Vanier has lived community for many years. One of his maxims is that community is founded on forgiveness and builds itself up through love. The Archbishop of Canterbury and Pope Francis were both inaugurated to their office in the same week of 2013, and I remember noting with a sort of outrageous hope that the word both of them were using the most was mercy. They have not disappointed us. For them it



isn't just another word. They have actually sought to live it. And every time I hear the word and see it put into practice, I want to shout Alleluia! It's the quality that is probably most needed in today's world – this willingness to enter the process of forgiveness, this spirit of unconditional love, this compassionate heartbeat. At the heart of mercy lies the challenge to be generous of spirit, to be compassionate, to identify with those who are defenceless, who are victims of their own or others' wrongdoing. It's an attitude that implies decision as well as feeling. It is a call to passionately care – even for those who have wronged us or those whom we don't naturally like. It is also a challenge to be merciful towards ourselves. Often we reserve the harshest judgement for our own confused and troubled beings.

Precisely because of what you have been living in recent times, the possibilities of creating a new sense of community belonging where all have a place are legion. It is one of the paradoxes of the Gospel that Jesus is most surely present when we bring our brokenness, our vulnerabilities and our seeming failures together – rather than our strengths. That's a hugely courageous place to choose to be. But as we faithfully seek to live it, the very breaking or marginalisation can become our way to discovering again who we really are. When we feel vulnerable the instinct is to self-protect. The way we do that is to seek to control situations and even people. There's something quite frightening about simply being open and transparent, which is not to be confused with naivety or having no boundaries. It's something to do with knowing oneself and knowing oneself in God, so that we are not primarily swayed by what other people think of us, or about being taken over if we show a side that others might interpret as weakness. It is, I suppose, a sign of spiritual and emotional maturity, a state that probably takes each of us a lifetime or more to reach, if we ever do. Christian leadership is modelled for us by Jesus, the Servant King who willingly

becomes lower than everyone else in order that he might raise them up into a knowledge of who we really are, beloved daughters of God.

To be open to being with others in visioning and living into a new future sounds great, but it can be hard sometimes, can't it? It's easier when WE are doing the visioning! We can be much happier when we're giving than when we're receiving. In fact, most givers find it very difficult to receive. When we're giving we can usually remain in control of the situation. We don't have to be vulnerable or show any sign of weakness, but when we receive we are in essence saying that we haven't got it all together, that we have needs and fragilities, that in ourselves we are not whole and complete and that, yes, there is something within us that actually needs what the other person is offering. Scripture is full of 'one another' texts. For example, bear one another's burdens, love one another, be kind and compassionate to one another, build one another up. It's very easy to fall into the trap of stopping half way, of doing all these things for the other, but not allowing the other to do for us. We put up the barriers for all sorts of reasons, most of them arising from our own life experience. We miss a lot and we also prevent the other from playing their full part in the beloved community. But if we are aware of being nurtured under the gaze of love, then we see one another through those same eyes. We move from dismay to awareness.

Outrageous hope in – and for – religious life? Yes! Yes! Yes! Not so much because of your efforts nor even that you profess, "Yes, Lord, we believe." Rather because the Master is here and wants to see you – and that, even when you cannot do it for yourselves, he, Jesus, Lord, God believes in you! If you take nothing else away from our day together, please take this – God believes in you! God believes in you! Could you dare to reflect on that for a few minutes or so, and see how everything begins to change?

