

# CREATING A FUTURE TOGETHER: HOW WILL WE BE PROPHETIC?

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### Part 1

I want to thank the CRA for the privilege of being with you these days, sharing some of my simple, experience-based reflections on Religious Life today. I am among you as one of your Asian Sisters, as a voice from the peripheries. During our time together, I hope to learn from you about the emerging identity of Religious Life in Australia. I speak from my many years of lived experiences, especially among those on the extreme margins of society. I speak from my deep conviction that the real prophetic challenge for Religious everywhere in our world today, is to live and bear witness to the radical freedom, radical love, and radical simplicity of Jesus in tangible ways so that our world cannot but be touched and transformed by our presence and action. Let us hope that our conversations here will generate more hope, more desire, more possibilities to be of one heart, one soul, one mind, as we search together for new ways of encountering the Word and engaging the world with prophetic audacity and faith.

The Bible gives us a wonderful picture of the manner of God's meeting with human beings and inviting them to pause and to think about a renewed way of life, and greater belongingness and responsible partnership in God's project. God comes to us gently, caringly, asking some fundamental questions to turn us around; to Adam, God asked, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9); to Cain, God asked: "Where is your brother?"; to Hagar, God asked: "Hagar, Maid of Sarai, where are you coming from and where are you going?" (Gen16, 8); to Elijah: "Why are you here?" (1 Kings 19:10). Jesus of Nazareth asked Andrew and John: "What do you seek?" (John 1:38). We could well imagine God asking these very same questions to the CRA today. Answering these questions could open new doors to CRA's journey into the future. Yes, this gathering is a graced time to come home to your call again, both individually and as CRA, to discern where you are at this time, where God wants you to go, and how best you can move forward together as one body in the mission of God as it unfolds before you at this time.

Today we have gathered here as men and women who are passionate about Jesus and are committed to the prophetic mission of Jesus. We have gathered here because we are disturbed and deeply concerned about our world, "groaning in travail" (Rom 8:22), as it is being increasingly wounded by unimaginable violence and destruction of people and our Planet Earth, ideological conflicts and insane expressions of nationalism, inter-cultural and inter-religious tensions and conflicts, driving millions to flee their own homes and become refugees and asylum-seekers. Who, if not us, will bear the message of reconciliation, healing and hope to our world that all can live harmoniously together, that all may have life to the full? (Jn.10:10) What we need are not more keynote speeches or theological rhetoric but rather, audacious faith to confront ourselves and to open ourselves to an on-going conversion, so that our hearts and our lives can embrace the peripheralized and the most vulnerable of our time. Active compassion is prophetic action. Pope Francis continues to challenge all Religious to make radical prophecy as our way of life. He says, "Go to the peripheries! "Wake up the world!"

Even as we begin our reflections today, we want to gratefully remember all those Religious here in Australia who have gone before us, as well as those who are among us today, whose lives challenge us to live the Good News in a radical way. While going through your CRA Newsletters, I was very impressed to see the many expressions of your prophetic involvements in responding to the urgencies of today. Another source of strength and

inspiration for Religious here and everywhere we find in Australia's first canonized saint, St. Mary MacKillop, and her prophetic involvement in the peripheries of her time. She who was familiar with poverty in her own life and impassioned by Christ, became the sacrament of God's compassion and justice in her total commitment to the most needy of her time. Neither her poor health nor opposition from Church authorities and others could stop her from hearing her call to serve the homeless, the migrant, the lonely and the unwanted; to advocate for systemic change, to stand up and speak the truth with the boldness of a prophet. She never compromised her efforts to promote human dignity and to change unjust structures and systems. She said, "Never see a need without doing something about it." We also want to celebrate so many of her sisters and other Religious in Australia ministering in remote settlements, unnamed and unsung, with no supporting finances and even in anti-Catholic environments, living a genuine religious life on the margins. And so it is with a sense of deep appreciation and at the same time as a lark of our shared desire to search for the MORE and the new of our response that we enter into the theme of our Conference. Of course, the glue that holds all our actions and reflections together is Jesus, the Son of God of the peripheries, his spirituality and his way of life and mission.

**Buzz session: As we begin our reflections on our forward journey as CRA, what is your greatest Hope? What is your greatest concern or fear?**

### **The Spirituality of Jesus**

Albert Nolan, in his book, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, speaks eloquently of the spirituality of Jesus which was foundational to his style of leadership and mission. He says, "If we find it difficult to take Jesus seriously and to live as he lived, then it is because we have not yet experienced God as our Abba. The experience of God as his Abba was the source of Jesus' wisdom, his clarity, his confidence, and his radical freedom. Without this it is impossible to understand why and how he did the things he did" (pg.71). To be prophetic disciples of Jesus, we need to live as he did; we need a spirituality that is dynamic and apostolic, mystical and prophetic; we need hearts on fire for Jesus and his mission.

Throughout his ministry, he consciously nurtured a deep, sustained, contemplative union with his Abba. We do not need complicated theological discourses to understand the radical freedom, radical love and radical simplicity of Jesus that is at the heart of the Gospel! In the life of Jesus, we see a healthy rhythm of contemplation and action. Prophecy and mysticism are integral to the spirituality of Jesus. We can be sure that his life is a journey of deep prayer and contemplative intimacy with his Abba, fortified with constant discernment. Reading the signs of the times and responding is part of his spirituality.

The fruit of his intimate relationship was made visible in his compassion, freedom, and boundless courage to risk for the sake of his mission. He called forth new life and new beginnings by his very presence, and through his relationships. By his presence and action, Jesus led others into their own encounter with God, and gradually they were enabled to discover their own purpose and identity. (e.g. Samaritan woman, Zaccheus...) The credibility of his authority came from his witness of life. His unparalleled authenticity, and his spirit of inner freedom, gave him the power to become God's presence among his people. Jesus' lifestyle and mission were prophetic and counter-cultural in every way. He helped others to see old things in new ways. The mission of Jesus was to reconcile and to heal, to bring hope, to comfort the afflicted and to discomfort the overly comfortable; to turn things upside down and inside out, and to help all God's people rediscover their true identity so that all may have life in abundance.

Centred in his Abba and nourished through his times of prayer, solitude, and table fellowship with friends, Jesus maintained his ability to confront crises, to look reality in the face and communicate hope to his followers. He, likewise, used his power and influence to empower those willing to make God's dream of the Kingdom come true. Jesus did not start a religion,

but a “movement” that was both prophetic and counter-cultural and, therefore, revolutionary from the beginning. We cannot practice the spirituality of Jesus without being part of this Jesus movement and facing the consequences like he did.

### **Jesus’ Profound Relationship with his Abba Guided his Prophetic Choices**

A close look at the Baptism of Jesus and his temptations will help us to see the options Jesus had before him, and why he chose what he chose. This is very important because Religious Life today is at the crossroads and Jesus shows us the way forward. Jesus was not presented with a blueprint for his mission when the Spirit descended on him at his baptism. Jesus had to read the signs of the times and trust in his Abba to discover the “how” of his mission, and make clear choices as he stood at the crossroads of his ministry and mission. In his redemptive work, he had to choose one of the two possible ways. Both were good; the choice of evil for him was not an option. One option was to take the role of a triumphal Messiah, the type of person the Jews awaited. This messianic figure would come in power and glory, and subjugate the enemies of his people.

The other choice was that of the Suffering Servant, the one who embraced our human brokenness and pain in order to be one with the human race at its lowest level. This choice was chosen purely out of love for those who suffer, those on the religious, social and economic peripheries. He would enter into their life, take it, hold it, and transform it. In choosing this way, he was going against the grain of every human heart. We see his poverty in his choice of his own lifestyle, in his bypassing legitimate human power, prestige, and possessions as the means of his mission, in order to embrace us in our deepest weakness, “even death on the cross”.

“Power, possessions and prestige” are words that we can use to describe certain strengths we as human beings claim for ourselves. These words cover the political, economic and social aspects of our lives: decision-making power, material security, and social status. Each in itself is valid: having the ability to make choices about one’s own life, having economic sufficiency, and receiving respect are all good and necessary. Each also has its extremes however; the will to have power over, the craving to accumulate, the pride of prestige. It is not that Jesus merely avoided these extremes. He went further. Rather than choosing these instruments to effectively establish his proclaimed Reign of God, he chose to bypass these legitimate strengths. His choice in bypassing them was simply to be with those who do not have them, to complete his incarnational embrace. At the time of Jesus, there were too many on the margins, too many deprived and disposed, both ‘the poor’ and the ‘outcast’. These were the locus of Jesus’ mission. For the Church and for us, the choices are the same. (Cf. Herbert, Tony SJ, “Disturbing the Dust”, forthcoming publication.)

The gospels tell us there were three temptations (Matt 4:1-11), but behind these was one temptation: “If you are the Son of God,” why take to yourself our human weakness and suffering? Accept and use legitimate social status, political power, and economic security; these will surely be more effective and persuasive. These were real temptations for Jesus. Looking at the experience of Religious life today, do we not see that we, too, face these same temptations? We continue to invest so much energy and resources to hold on to our securities and maintain our well-established institutions, ministries, lifestyles, power and influence, convincing ourselves that these have worked well so far and will continue to do so! We refuse to read the signs of the times! Although we speak much about a prophetic Religious Life, many of us still hold on to what gives us success, comfort and security.

The birth and early life of Jesus are connected with Bethlehem and Nazareth, the geographical periphery. It was very much within the socio-economic, political and religious realities of his time that Jesus announced his plan for the establishment of the Reign of God. In the Palestine of his time, Jesus confronted very similar situations with similar dilemmas like we experience, although not on the same global scale. From his mission statement, as

expressed in Lk 4:18-19, it is very clear that he wanted all forms of oppression, domination, and marginalization to be abolished, all prisoners to be freed. The new society of his dreams, God's Kingdom, was to be marked by a set of interpersonal relationships where God would be the Abba of all (Mt 23:8-12); where everyone would live in freedom from fear, worry, anxiety and all forms of oppression (Mk 2:1-12, 7:1-15; where freedom would be used for true service of others; where we would freely become "foot-washers like Jesus" (Gal 5:1, 13); where service would be directed to justice for all so that all could live in harmony as children of God (Mt 25:31-46).

Jesus wanted all, the poor, the outcasts, the outsiders, the women and children, to have dignity, freedom and fullness of life. Every sphere of life: political, economic, social and religious, was radically questioned by him. If we are serious about discipleship, then we need to take into account the distinct concern Jesus showed for the downtrodden, for women, for non-Israelites; the summons he issued to the rich to divest themselves of surplus wealth; his criticism of those in power; his denouncement of hypocritical religious leaders; his prophetic gesture of table fellowship with the sinner and the outcasts; his way of challenging all to forgive and to love as God does and, thus, be free; his way of countering domination with humble service and love. He was the new foot-washer leader! His whole mission was a struggle for a different and a new social order, which he called the Reign of God--the Kingdom of God.

A prophetic Religious Life will always be counter-cultural and this is what Jesus has shown us. In the Gospels, we see a clear pattern of Jesus and his followers following a counter-cultural way of life: discarding old ways of life; building new inclusive relationships and new ways of understanding God's perspective and plan for all. For Jesus, each person is a valid center of freedom, love and creativity, but a center open to other centers organized into a fellowship of equals around the supper table, in the presence of our God (Cf. Samuel Rayan, SJ: Jesus Today, An AICUF Publication)L

**BUZZ session: What is the meaning of counter-culture for you? Is Religious Life, as you live it, counter-cultural?**

### **Some of the Insights Gained from Sharing my Life with the Marginalized**

I was born and brought up in Kerala in the South India, and I joined the Sisters of Notre Dame as a missionary in Bihar, North India. As a young Sister, I had the experience of sharing my life for many years with some of the most marginalized people in Bihar, India. I remember the first day of my visit to Sikandarpur village in Bihar, one of the poorest places I had ever been to, or even read about. It was a little village of the ex-Untouchables, the Musahars, who are the lowest in the caste category. They were far-removed from all developments, even the very basic necessities of life. They were landless, asset-less, illiterate, unemployed and struggling for survival. My first reaction to the stark poverty, unhygienic surroundings, misery, illiteracy, malnutrition and total marginalization of these people was one of repugnance and helplessness. A barrage of questions arose in my mind: Why are they like this? Who are these people? Will they ever choose to live like this? Why did I come to this miserable place? If this is part of my religious call then what is the meaning of Religious Life? Will my vows, my prayer life, my formation, my religious commitment make any difference in the lives of these people? Why am I afraid to get involved in their struggles for dignity and life? Do I know and love the real Jesus of the Gospel? What is the faith response God expects of me in this situation? I had more questions than answers!

As I stood there, outside a Musahar hut, lost in my thoughts, a woman's warm hand held me and invited me to sit down on a piece of wood. She brought a bowl of water, and as is the custom, started to wash my feet. Yes, she who knew nothing about Jesus was doing that great "Jesus-act" of foot washing as a sign of welcome! She washed my feet with affection and reverence and made me feel at home immediately. The poor who have nothing will

always find something to share! That act of foot washing was my first experience of pitching my tent on the peripheries for several years to come.

During the first phase of our life with the poor, we spent our days moving from house to house, visiting the people, listening to their stories, their hopes and fear, their desires and needs, their joys and agonies, and thus establishing a bond of friendship especially with the children and the women. We often accompanied the women to work in the fields of the landlords, and had a real experience of the life of poor village women. For several months, we ate what they provided and when they could provide it. Sharing their food was a much-appreciated sign of mutual acceptance. We washed our clothes with the women at the village well; we slept in their huts or in the open, always cared for by the women of the village. Though they never had enough for themselves, they always found a way of sharing with us. For protection and for food, we depended on them. Our belongings consisted of only the absolute necessities and there was nothing to hide from our people. Our growing at-home-ness with our people helped us to feel a sense of belongingness to the village community. However, coming from a comfortable middle class background, we faced some big challenges in adjusting to the lifestyle of the poor.

While among them, we realized that even what we, the privileged of society call necessities of life: clean drinking water, some nutritious food, toilets, electricity, a room or space for ourselves, clothing and medical care, education and information, all are luxuries that millions of our people around the world do not have! Those on the margins live in the “survival mode” all the time: Aaj keliye kamana khana, “to earn and eat for the day,” was the motto of the villagers. This is the terrible reality of millions of refugees, asylum-seekers and the poor around the world. Their world is far removed from ours where we enjoy middle class or even upper middle class securities and comforts and take them all for granted!

From reading and praying the Gospels, I was very aware of the fact that Jesus and his friends had experimented with a new lifestyle: refusing to be over-anxious about food and clothes, not caring to insure a place to sleep; starting on a journey with little or no provision, trusting in God, trusting in friends, trusting in the goodness of human hearts, giving to everyone who asked, and pooling their resources together and sharing life in joy (My 6:24-34; 10:8-10; 5:42; 8:18-20). But now, I was facing the realities of poverty and powerlessness and being challenged to be converted to a new way of living and to put my faith into action. That was not easy! Most of our people see religious as socially and economically privileged men and women who seem to belong to another “planet!”

**Buzz session: What is the perceived identity of men and women Religious in our larger society today? Are we seen as who we profess to be?**

The days we spent just being with the poor became a transforming God-experience for me and for my companions. Before we realized it, we were thinking differently, acting differently, feeling differently. Some things that earlier I considered my needs, now looked redundant. Another big shift began to take place in my way of praying and reading the Gospels. The needs of our villagers became very present in my prayers. As I remained with the people in their struggles and agonies, I was beginning to recognize the passion of Jesus. All that I had been associating with Jesus was taking on a new meaning. Yes, the poor will always have a great role in leading us to our own much-needed conversion. They are, indeed, truly the *beatitude people* because it is they who are the poor, the outcasts and the sinners who have a preference in the Reign of God. The poor know their need for God and for others. They know how to receive and how to share. They know how to keep hope alive amidst hopelessness. Living among them, we were gradually becoming a community together. Our physical presence and involvement among the poor is an unambiguous declaration of who we are, and on whose side we are.

While being among the poor, I found myself becoming much more aware of God's all-pervading presence, but I did yearn for some quiet moments for prayer. We used to get up around 3:30 AM to take care of ourselves and by around 4:00 AM, we would sit in our little hut in meditation for about an hour. As people woke up, they would come to our hut and stand around wondering what we were doing. One day I got up from my prayer and told them that we were speaking with our God, and God was speaking with us. The poor understand that. Our Asian people expect religious persons (Sanyasi) to be God-realized persons. Gradually, it became a practice for many, especially women, to come to us during our meditation and ask us quietly to tell our God about their special needs like safe delivery, healing of their children, etc. Besides praying for them, we tried to educate and empower them to care for themselves. Every evening, before we slept, my companions and I sat around our little kerosene lamp, reflecting on our God experiences of the day, especially recalling those moments when we recognized God's presence in our people and how we had lived the Gospel that day. This practice of reflective living has had a lasting impact on my life.

I can remember innumerable experiences when the poor became God's providence for us. Two of us shared half of a small mud hut with an elderly poor woman whom we affectionately called Maiya (mother). Her love and concern for us was outstanding. During our stay there, we were instrumental in helping the elderly of the village to get their old age pension from the government. Although it was a paltry sum of Rs.100 (less than \$2) per month, they could now purchase some rice and lentils with it. Like several others, our Maiya was delighted to get that money. That week we had to be away from the village for some work. Meanwhile, Maiya and a few of our other village friends decided to sacrifice their long awaited pension money to build a small hut for us. These are people who do not even have the security of a daily meal. Maiya bought some bamboos for the hut while others prepared the mud and straw for the walls. In a few days, they managed to put up the little hut for us, 5'x8'. When we returned to the village, the whole village was in a celebrating mood for they had made a house for their sisters! We could not control our tears of joy when we realized what had happened. I called that house, where we were privileged to live, God's tabernacle! This experience of being owned by the poor had a very energizing and motivating impact on us. No wonder Jesus praised the poor widow who gave all that she had (Lk 21:1-4)! The generosity and hospitality of the poor always amazed us and challenged our lifestyle as Religious. I must confess that what strengthened me in my ministry as the Congregational leader was not only my passion for Jesus, but my heart-experience of the marvellous ways the poor shared their life, love and hope with me, and the joy and meaning I found in sharing my life with them for many years.

The longer we lived with the poor the more we knew that we were being evangelized by them in way that we had never imagined. I realized that evangelization is a mutually transforming process because I have much to receive from the poor. Slowly I was learning to see the world from their perspective, and that helped me to re-read the Gospel from their perspective. I realized my need to go beyond saying that something was unjust. If I was to take my call seriously, I needed the daring spirit to be grounded in the reality of the marginalized. I learned that for me as a Religious, moving to the peripheries would have to be an intentional and unequivocally faith-based venture. I became aware of my need for dying to my intellectual and spiritual arrogance, my own certainties, and rising to a new way being human, a new way of being a Christian, a new way of being a Religious.

As we grew in our relationship with the people, our ministry among them became more and more collaborative. At the beginning, we thought we had the answers to what people needed; while being with them, it was evident that our people knew what they needed. There were abundant opportunities to ask them, listen to their hearts' yearnings, and help them to organize themselves and struggle together to claim their rights. Jesus could have told Bartimeus (Mk 10:51) what he wanted to do for him. However, recognizing his human

dignity to know and to ask for what he needed, Jesus asked him, "What do you want"? This is very applicable to us, too, who minister among the marginalized. Only together with the marginalized in life-giving relationships can we move to a future that is marked by justice, dignity and harmony.

Despite all I have shared, there were many moments when we wanted to give up. It was a huge challenge for us to adjust ourselves to the unhygienic surroundings. We missed being more connected with the world of information and daily news. There were many physical discomforts as we had no regular meals, no bed, no toilet, no furniture, no TV and all that we had taken for granted. There was no achievement to claim at the end of the day! There were times when we faced much opposition and threats from those who had power, money and influence. They did not approve of our being on the side of the poor, educating and empowering them. Our work among the poor went against the vested interests of those who had kept the poor on the peripheries for generations. During those days, living with the poor without regular "community life" and daily Holy Mass was not common among Religious. Our way of praying, living community, and defining our ministry as just being with the poor gave rise to much criticism and misunderstandings from all concerned. There were times we were tempted to leave and go back to our convent. Yes, unlike the poor, we always have the option before us to stay and struggle along with the poor or to go back to our security. But, like Jeremiah, we had to admit, You have seduced me Lord, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me: you were the stronger..." (Jer 20:7) and Jeremiah returned to the ground of his faith and continued his prophetic mission. Immersed in the pains and struggles of the poor, I was beginning to taste of the cost of discipleship. I felt exposed and vulnerable. From my experience with the poor, I am convinced that for us as Religious, becoming one with the people on the peripheries is a prophetic expression of our passion for Jesus and his mission and a formative experience for all our ministries.

In fact, for me, all those years when I lived among the poorest of the poor were the most significant years in my life as an apostolic woman Religious. Yes, my life experiences with them did change my own understanding of my call to Religious Life, community and mission. I experienced the transforming power of living communion and community with the poor. Sustained theological reflection and sharing the meaning of living a prophetic Religious Life in our present context, and Social Analysis helped us to ask the hard questions; in the Gospels we always found the answer. The spirit of renunciation, simplicity and dependence on the people and on Divine Providence are part of our solidarity with the marginalized.

Wherever we are in the world, most of us Religious have taken it for granted that having middle class (or even higher still!) comforts and conveniences is our right, part of our promised hundredfold, because we have left everything for the sake of Jesus, the poor man of Galilee who had nowhere to lay his head! As religious, we can live a good life, insulated from the reality of poverty and marginalization, and still do a lot of good work. However, we will never be able to hear the "cry of the poor" unless we have risked being with the poor in their struggles and pains. If "Yaweh is always on the side of the oppressed" (Ps 103:6), then where should the Church be? Where should we Religious be? To be on the side of the marginalized means to get out of our comfort and securities and experience the lot of the poor in our lives with them. We cannot communicate God's love to a people whose lives we have not touched with our lives, people we really do not know as our brothers and sisters, as our friends. Pope Francis said that the shepherd should "smell like the sheep." Spending time out there with poor and suffering persons, experiencing the smell, the touch and feel of real poverty and the struggle for justice and life is very redemptive! When the poor have become our friends, when their concerns become our concerns, there will be an urge within us to return to them and find meaning in our lives. I believe that for all of us as Religious, especially those called to leadership, even a periodic baptism of immersion in the life of the marginalized is the way to keep alive the prophetic fire of our discipleship. Dear friends, we need to go "outside the front gate", to somehow immerse ourselves in the lives of the

marginalized people and stand among them to listen to the Spirit's gentle voice giving new directions to our lives. I am sure if CRA could periodically organize these immersion experiences for Religious, students and collaborators and accompany them with the necessary theological reflections and social analysis, it may open the door to a renewed commitment to prophetic involvement on the peripheries. The need of the hour is to risk going out into the world of the other, and making a clear choice to do so because this is the prophetic identity and mission of a Religious today!

**Buzz session: What do I do as a regular practice to keep in touch with those on the margins wherever I minister? How are they part of my life and life's choices?**

For Jesus, the margins were the center of his mission. Yes, we belong at the edges, on the peripheries! That is where our discipleship is to be lived out. It is inevitable that such a calling will create unwelcome tensions in our lives. No amount of theologizing, discussions, meetings and conferences can substitute for the real need for all of us to move out and go to the different peripheries of our post-modern world that need our presence today. This is what incarnation is all about. Some members of the CRA are doing commendable work on the margins. But it is good to see where most of us are located as individuals, communities and institutions. Where is the Spirit leading us to relocate ourselves as prophets of God's Reign? Regardless of our age and numerical strength, we will continue to hear the call to be stripped of our desire for comforts and be used for the sake of life in abundance for those on the margins. I do not believe that diminishment and aging can ever put out the inner flame, the vitality and apostolic zeal in our hearts, because the Spirit of the Lord is upon us today and every day! Given your age and experience, wisdom and expertise in reading the signs of the times, you live in a privileged moment of giving birth to a new way of being Religious today. What if we really believed that the creative Spirit of the Lord is upon us here and now?

Let me conclude this part of my talk with the powerful words that Pope Francis spoke to the General Congregation of the Jesuits in Rome in October last year: "Only when people experience first-hand God's healing mercy on their own wounds "will we lose the fear of allowing ourselves be moved by the immense suffering of our brothers and sisters, and will we hasten to walk patiently with our people, learning from them the best way of helping and serving them...We don't walk alone or comfortably, but we walk with 'a heart that does not rest, that does not close in on itself but beats to the rhythm of a journey undertaken together with all the people faithful to God."

May Mary of the Magnificat help us to recognize the presence of the transforming Spirit within us and around us, a Spirit that uproots and plants, demolishes and builds up, turns our comfortable old life upside down and inside out, as She midwives us in our new birth into a New Humanity where She makes all things new.

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