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## **Introduction**

Dear friends in Christ,

I hope I may call you like this today. We are gathered here to reflect on religious life in our complex and interesting time. Complex and interesting.

Two years ago, we started with a project, titled: Monastic Pastoral Care. The idea for this project was to find out if and how religious communities have to take over some pastoral care of the traditional parishes, where many people didn't find any more an answer to their spiritual and pastoral needs. In times where the number of priests, pastoral workers and participants is decreasing, we notice an increase of visitors in abbeys and monasteries. People searching for something they lost, and maybe they couldn't tell anymore what they are searching for. During the first year many communities have been visited, some of them are century-old traditions, others are new movements, often inspired by an old tradition or by an old building. We found that it is not easy for communities to define themselves. Some of them have been trying to end their religious community-life for several decades, to see now, that their work doesn't come to an end. It can be very frustrating, because consecrated life now is totally different then let's say forty or fifty years ago. Religious life is also searching for a (new) meaning in very different forms. That makes our time very interesting.

But our time is also very complex. We are living now in post-secular times, in an urbanized society. In times where paradigms are changing. Times where earlier obviousnesses are questioned. Our time questions for example patriarchy, control, absolute rationality, anthropocentrism. Our time is searching for new ways of connectedness with ourselves, our neighbors, people all over the world, with God or transcendence, with all other creatures, with the whole creation. All these developments change also the spiritual and pastoral needs of contemporary people. Postsecularity means that we are confronted with the limits of absolute secularity and that religion is again visible and playing her role in the public sphere, after it was banned to the private sphere. But we can't move back to a kind of pre-modern religion. We have to respect the achievements of the modernity or Enlightenment, as there are human rights and human dignity, emancipation of women and workers, ecological awareness, etc. So religion, also Christianity, has to redefine itself. We don't live in a mono-

Christian society anymore, but in a diversity, with most of the people in urban contexts, very close to each other. All this has its impact on the 'why' and the 'how' of religious life, of the life of every believer.

The second half of the twentieth century, after the second World War, we waked up in a new world. Vatican II, 20 years later, understood it correctly. This council asked us, Christians, and Religious, to make a turn to the world and to connect ourselves with "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, [because] these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

The impact of this sign of the council was enormous in religious communities, especially in female religious communities. They had to make a turn in thirty years (wrote Sandra Schneider at the end of the nineties) which the world had been doing for four hundred years. The core of their lifes remains the same, namely the *imitatio Christi*. But the reflection on their relation with the world, their mission, their being a community, and on some external signs, has also an impact on the understanding of the *imitatio Christi* and their self-understanding as religious. And this process hasn't stopped until now. Leaving historical forms behind is not self-evident, and the consequences go beyond what was thought. Religious life can not be controlled as it was the case in the past centuries. Many communities searched and search for answers to the changed spirit of times and mentality of their members.

In 2014, fifty years after *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Vatican II document on religious life, pope Francis wrote an apostolic letter to the Religious in which he asked them to wake up the world. In this complex and interesting time it is not so evident as it seems. Many communities has increased or became very vulnerable. How can we wake up the world in this situation?

That's why we changed the title of this original project Monastic Pastoral Care, in Being Prophetic in secular times, a new call?! (with a question remark and an exclamation mark) and we decided to organize a refelction day. Because when we want to renew or rethink RL, we have to understand our times, we have to search for God, living in his city between people. When we want to respond to the call of pope Francis to awake the world, we have to know what it means, and what our presence in the world can be. In our program we included both the question of our time and the challenges for religious life today.

## **Agenda of the day**

It is with great joy that I can announce you the lectures and the speakers of this day. We started this morning with two lectures. Sister Nicole Grochowina will lead us in our reflection on pastoral and spiritual needs in our time. Sister Catherine Droste will give her reflection on what it means to be prophetic in our times.

In the afternoon, we will start with a more visual contribution of Tom Callebaut, architect and specialized in sacred places. Everywhere in Flanders where we want to rethink and rebuild holy places, you hear the name of Tom Callebaut.

Further, two themes which I found many times in literature about the future of RL; First we have to think on community. It is seen as an evidence in RL and in Church, but it don't seem clear at all. A last theme is the ecological theme. An ecological movement is developing both in society and in the Church.

To our great regret the topic of communication is dropped from the agenda. We are aware of the importance of this item, but Anna Neumaier couldn't be here anymore, and it was too late to find someone else. Maybe we can integrate it in the debate at the end of the afternoon.

So, before starting this reflection, let's take a moment to focus ourselves on the Holy Spirit, given to us by Jesus Christ.

Holy Spirit of Christ,

Be with us here,

Be our breath and

Clear our mind, our ears, ours eyes

Let us speak words of wisdom and love

Let us meet each other in sensibility

And lead us through this life

in joy and hope

Amen.