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Three Journeys to the Mystery
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Good morning sisters,

This morning, I want to start by playing the song *The Rose*, because this song tells the story of an encounter with the divine mystery. (The Rose the song) 3 min.

We are all on a journey within the divine mystery. I love it because every journey is an adventure in which we change and expand our narrow and skewed vision a little bit more every day. As we travel, and because we travel, we come face-to-face with the divine mystery through our own journey. Some are external, concrete and exterior, involving movement through life across landscapes and through space– and other journeys we take are interior, as we move across internal, or spiritual, landscapes, along which we experience engagements with the soul.

We use the term mystery often, and so it is important to ask, what does mystery mean? The fascinating term ‘mystery’ carries countless different meanings for different people, but at its core, the term mystery connotes something that is hidden, an incomprehensible truth that is at its essence, beyond human understanding.

More specifically to us, Mystery in the Christian context is used as an adjective to describe a condition or disposition of God. We can trace the modern use of the word Mystery to the Greek word, *mysterion*, which is used 27 times in the New Testament, and emphasizes the disposition of divine Truth that is available only through revelation. The divine revelation operates all around us, and is inherent in Nature, in our history, and in Jesus Christ. Our journeys are propelled by these engagements with the divine mystery, where we are always living in engagement with a part of the Truth, and yet it is big, the mystery is the entire journey itself that must be lived moment to moment in ourselves.

The divine mystery can be experienced in the dialectical tension between revealing and hidden. As journeywomen in search of Truth, we puzzle and continue on, fueled at times by a deep sense of curiosity, confusion, sometimes mistrust, and even failure. In these times, we might take heart to know it is here that we are most engaged with the divine mystery; a mystery that is always moving and eternally present.

As we are drawn along our journeys by the Sacred Mystery, we need to examine what it means. First, we are invited by the redemptive history which, as the phrase suggests, is unfolding and expanding every moment. Actually, this enterprise is unending, so there is no luxury to cling to the past glories. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he is not the same man.” We live in an eternal present. We continually need to be equipped to sense and read the signs of the time, and be open to the new meanings this will bring.

I offer that there are three different types, yet interlaced journeys, we take with the Sacred Mystery: the Contemplative Journey, the Alterity Journey, and the Border-Crossing Journey.

Contemplative Journey

The draw of the Sacred Mystery invites us to be contemplative, and to enter a mode that is beautifully described by Sr. Barbara as a form of study, as well as an essential component of Dominican spirituality. The Chinese character *kwan sang* stands for contemplation, and offers a similar insight into the consciousness of contemplation; it literally means, 'to be still and watch how a sprout buds'. There is consensus, then, that contemplation requires us to pay attention to both the internal and the external, or the interior and exterior world— and to simultaneously examine what is going on inside of our hearts and outside around us. We watch and study, as we move through time along our paths, and yet not every journey is the same.

One of the most beautiful definitions of contemplation, in my perspective, is to describe it as follows: a long loving gaze at the real by Walter Burghardt.¹

First, let's think about the long gaze. It is really challenging for those of us who live in the quick paced, short attention spanned, digital world, where one's attention and focus shift, on average, every twenty seconds. We also live in a capitalist society, which forces us to be ever effective and always productive. The long gaze can lead us to meaningfully connect with others, and to increase our integrity and offer the world true gifts for the sign of the times. It then can be a prophetic action which stands against productivity and effectiveness, and for affection and relationality. Thus, the long gaze is naturally connected to a loving gaze.

What, then, is a loving gaze? A loving gaze channels the divine; and is most like the gaze we receive from God. As Sr Rebecca Ann Gemma stated, hope is a lens by which we see the world; it is a natural and a theological virtue. In this view we find that God's gaze favors the poor and the invisible, and this specifically stands out as a foundation for the kingdom of heaven. Like the leavening of bread, a loving gaze nurtures and feeds the world. It allows it to grow and expand without any noise and within a deep and beautiful silence.

Dr. Brian Swimme explained that the created universe expands and is deeply interconnected. I agree with him on this most important point, because the universe is created, sustained, and expanded by the enormous energy of Love. When we meet the gaze of God, which is love itself, we can only expect hope for new life and new humanity.

Next, we need to pay attention to and explore the word gaze. Is it just looking and observing something? And if not, what else does gaze imply? What are we women religious seeing today?

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan lends a hand to understand what gaze might mean. He contends that we not so much seeing, as we are seen by the Other, with a capital O.² In this definition, the Other means all those aspects of the environment, particularly the language that describes us, are used to operate, control, and at times, manipulate people's minds. I personally understand the Other now as involving the environment of capitalistic enterprise and the glowing screens of high technology. So, while we see, we are actually caught in the frame or structure given by the Other. For example, in this high tech society, the poor and the less productive and effective often are overlooked, and become invisible. They easily fall

¹ See Walter Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," *Church* (Winter, 1989).

² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book X: Anxiety*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Polity Press: Malden, MA, 2014), 152.

into isolation and the abyss of alienation. The gaze that involves capitalism and technological media bears the imprint of those who create and control it, and as such, is skewed by a Western, white consciousness that bears the dynamics of racism, sexism, and marginalization.

Now I'd like for us to contemplate together, what do we do in God's gaze as women in religious life? In this reflection, I will begin by emphasizing the importance of bearing witness to death in this journey drawn to the divine mystery.

Just a few months ago in May, the university where I taught, Holy Names University, closed. It was such a painful process. There was sadness, disappointment, and mistrust in me and others. The dying process in Western culture is not embraced; it is stale, uncreative, and filled with uneasy vacancies. In a similar way, the narrative of the current dominant culture negates weakness, aging, and death. Rather than turn toward these normal parts of life, like aging, people keep them secret and deny or hide them through make up, plastic surgery, and shame. Weakness is denied and fear of it transforms individuals on a quest to be posthuman; people dream of living forever.

In this environment, to be a willing witness to death can be a prophetic action against the dominant culture. Then, how can we as women religious witness the declining numbers in many of the U.S. religious communities, and fully participate in their transitions as we engage with aging and dying members, and the difficult processes of closing missions? It is possible that we may add strength to our process if we can learn to contemplate these endings through a long, loving gaze.

If we look at the reality of 21st century religious life, the dispersion and the decline in numbers, what would it look like? Michael Foucault said, "no discourse, no reality." If we do not articulate the process of dying honestly and explain what it involves in a contemplative way, we cannot bear witness to the resurrection because that it would not exist.

Today there is no doubt we are experiencing a massive shift in religious life; we also must realize that we are possibly witnessing to death of religious life as we know it. Perhaps, early Christian communities, too, needed to talk more about the passion narrative, as we need to talk about our own realities. For our communities to dream to live in the land of resurrection, we, too, need to openly develop a more creative and sincere passion narrative.

When we take stock of our current situation, we are encouraged to engage in the act of contemplating it to find out, Where I am standing now? And then, am I or the community standing in a place with the freedom to continue the journey toward the Mystery?

The Real is the whole entity of a person or an institute, including the imaginary and the symbolic realm. The imaginary involves the realm of dream and fantasy. When we dream, we gain the ability to sustain the sometimes harsh realities of life itself in the midst of moments of being lost. When we come to a certain stage in religious life, we cannot grasp only the imaginary realm, such as the idea that our institution will stand firm forever. This can also be a difficult moment, as when we lose the belief in the permanence of our domain, we may feel the ground breaking underneath our feet. Nevertheless, if a religious community stands too much in the imaginary domain, for example, the community will be very fragile.

The second domain of a person or an institution is the symbolic, which emphasizes the Logos. The Constitution, canon law, and any minute orders of housekeeping, including *faire de menages*, are all examples. This domain gives people a sense of security. But, if this domain supersedes other domains, the one could be overly legalistic, judgmental, and perhaps oppressive towards its members and organizations.

However, the symbolic is also limited: God is more than what we can speak; this is a way in which the mystery overlaps with the concept of the Real. As we contemplate the empty tomb, or the hole, we enter the domain of the Real. Here we meet the unknown God, and the world itself.

I offered a course of women and mysticism at the Holy Names University. In the class, I always asked students to make their own definition of mysticism. Every hands-on answer would be welcomed in this class, but they could copy others. One student offered a fascinating definition; it held that mysticism is a way of seeing myself and the world beyond my own frame, which is the perspective of God. I now like to use her definition of mysticism. The Real is the space where mysticism begins.

This leads us to the question: what is the essence of religious life?

We can remove elements and ask the question again, and see what remains. If there are no more new members, and no more property or institutions, rules, and laws, then what is religious life? If we have completed all of our current missions, then what remains of religious life? In this harsh question, we face the Real, and in contemplating the answers, we find the core value of religious life. A disciple met Jesus in Galilee and in front of the empty tomb, in the midst of the lack and the horror, in the middle of the Real. It is here that God says, "Return to Galilee." Today, in our contemplative journey as women religious, we can ask ourselves, "Where is the Galilee to which we must return as a part of our journey? Where can we face the Real, and experience the mystery of God in the midst of the dialectic brought about by His absence and presence?"

Alterity Journeys

The second journey stands on the alterity, or a third way, in which we bear fruits in betweenness. This nature of alterity is expressed very well in one of my favorite stories, Alice's Adventure in the Wonderland. I would like to use this story as a metaphor for my journey. (Alice the clip for 3 min).

Interestingly, Alice's journey begins with her observation or discovery that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it. The narrator says "*There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it is so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself.*" Alice felt curious when she saw the rabbit pop down a rabbit-hole, and so she followed it deeper and deeper, in pursuit of a glimpse and understanding. Her journey took her on an amazing, and unforeseeable journey.

Picture Alice, standing in front of the rabbit hole, through which lay an unknown mystery and an unknown future. Alice's curiosity draws her into the mysterious hole, and pulls her through it and onto a great journey. Like Alice, we religious are also invited on an adventure in this new world. For this we need holy curiosity. Of course, curiosity killed the cat!

Nevertheless, we need holy curiosity to look into the Real, embracing hope. And as the narrator of Alice in Wonderland says, "*in another moment, down went Alice after it, never considering how she would get out again.*" I believe this phrase symbolizes the beauty of apocalyptic hope, and how we might experience our own travels.

The world where Alice journeys is a place where she has the freedom to transform greatly, and in ways previously not possible. For example, in this new world she can be both big and small. I love this part of the story, and that the new world is so flexible and accommodating and full of possibilities. She is changeable in size!

On our own paths, we, too, might feel the need to take on different forms. At times we may feel very small, or quiet, and unassuming, while at other times we might feel big and powerful. Either way, we can open more doors through this flexibility.

Sometimes we are too tall to understand the cry of the poor; yet other times we are too small to understand the evolving Mystery. When Alice was a child, she cried and she experienced a transformation that led her on a great journey. We may need to cry to experience more of life, lest we become stuck in closed spaces, or mindsets. When we are more open and flexible, like Alice— we can engage with many different others, and situations once beyond our scope of understanding. Let us imagine what kinds of adventures are awaiting us!

The adventure of this expanding cosmos lies in the fact that there is neither a center nor a periphery. The truth of this reality is that it never stops evolving, revolving, moving and changing; nothing in our world is ever static. Therefore, it is an illusion that there is the center! We are all connected, and perceive this world from our own perspectives, but these are by nature skewed and fragmented, just a tiny angle and perspective on a vast entity. We should not be discouraged that our perceptions are limited by our perspectives. But we should be graceful about this so we can be truly free. A decentered world has no ability to control. We are invited and given the freedom to walk into a new territory of love and friendship.

We need to collaborate in this new space we are in, in this shared journey we are on, to create a whole. We need to learn about one another so that we may extend our previously limited understanding to include this new moment. We must listen and befriend, embrace the new, see the many new but previously hidden forms of similarity and difference, and know that we are all one when together.

A good metaphor for understanding this new way of operating religious communities might be to envision a web. In the community, the way to communicate is often a very unilateral and hierarchical model. If we imagine the religious institute as a circle or web, the way to communicate would be quite different. Many voices and perspectives can be taken into account. Many forms of communication, and the voices both small and large can be heard.

Imagine how religious life was in the beginning. It was in the desert, and the people were often destitute with an extreme lack of resources. Yet, in these apparent states of lack, it was a space of hospitality. Women and men labored there in silence and welcomed peasants who suffered from high taxes of the Roman empire. There was an alterity based on subversive power. In the desert, those touched by death, poverty, and lack of resources, were considered honorable guests.

Where is the desert in this global world? If we return to Galilee, do we need to be little or big? Alice's journey began with puzzlement that led her to travel down the hole, beyond

any place she had known, far beyond where she could see or even understand, in search of answers. This bears striking similarities to religious life. With curiosity, we run into the rabbit hole without worrying about backtracking as a way to get out of. Instead, we know we can only go forward on our journey, never back. We move confidently forward, into the darkness and we must find the bravery to face many questions: what is religious life today? What would alternative ways of living on this journey look like? Are we still committed to run into the hole, in pursuit of engaging the real?

We must also ask, do we have the freedom to quit the journey, if we so choose? Do we have the fortitude or voice to even ask this question? It would depend on the disposition of each community, and the ability to exist in a space in which all answers can temporarily be considered as possible. We must continually renew our resolve for the journey, our commitment to mission, our relationship to the real. Black holes, voids, possible transformations that become forbidden, these are the sign of a delimited journey, of stifled stagnation. God calls us to the desert in the spirit of freedom and into the spirit of freedom we travel, together and individually— one way and head first, like Alice. Her groundedness and curiosity, and ability to embrace new world and keep moving forward, can be an example, however playful, for how we might navigate and conceptualize this journey.

Border-Crossing Journey

The border crossing journey has dual qualifications: it is both physical and spiritual. There are many borders to cross when entering a new land, and these involve risks yet the crossing always brings with it the power of transformation. In this journey, it is essential to meet the other, the stranger. Receiving and greeting this stranger is often a source of anxiety and discomfort. This person could be an exile, an undocumented immigrant, a new community member with a thick accents. No matter how much you feel uncomfortable, it is a necessary process to cross over or transcend your own frame or perspective. In dancing with the stranger, we are given great gifts. We can engage with our hidden self and experience expansion of our view. We greet the stranger in ourselves as well.

The space of border crossing is called a borderland where all foreign elements clash and out of the conflicts and tension, new life emerges. In conversing with others, we need to train our ears carefully. Before asking others to tame their tongues for my ears, I should ask myself to tame our ears. Confucius suggests a virtue of sixty years old as having tamed ears. Having tamed ears indicates you have an open and generous heart so that any word, speech do not bother you because you already learned to listen to others' hearts.

For the person or the community that inhabits a borderland, a new life emerges. The loving dynamic which embraces cultures, offers an open way to be together, and to experience life in this new moment, together, while fully learning from one another. Then, in this journey, they can find a companion to go through. In this companionship, we find ubuntu spirit.

Ubuntu spirit

Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu term meaning "humanity". It is sometimes translated as "I am because we are" (also "I am because you are"), or "humanity towards others." Ubuntu has its roots in humanist African philosophy, where the idea of community is one of the building blocks of society. Ubuntu is that nebulous concept of common humanity, oneness: humanity, you and me both.

Ubuntu is an old philosophy and way of life that has for many centuries sustained the African communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, and in Africa as a whole. The concept of Ubuntu is found in diverse forms in many societies throughout Africa. More specifically, in the Bantu languages of East, Central and Southern Africa, Ubuntu is a cultural world view that tries to capture the essence of what it means to be human.

Today, the spirituality of Ubuntu has been adapted in education, philosophy, business management, and it has more common elements: inter alia: the human experience of treating people with respect; humanness, which means that being human comprises values such as universal brotherhood and sharing, and treating and respecting others as human beings; a way of life contributing positively to sustaining the wellbeing of people, the community or society; and a non-racial philosophy applicable to all people as human beings.³ In the shared humanity, one group or one person does not have to take all responsibility and the other group of person does not have to rely on other's decision making.

I learned this spirituality when I had a conversation with a young Congolese theologian when I visited Congo in March. The theologian emphasizes this spirituality as a new way of humanity, expunges the deep wounds of western exploitive colonization, which easily creates a deep sense of inferiority or frustrations, and recovers the interior heart.

This is a way to move forward to the new future, and can bring many new possibilities of collaboration and new sisterhood projects. Now thankfully, thanks to the development of technology and globalization, we feel more directly connected and we can realize that we can influence one another and collaborate in ways we have yet to imagine. Of course, we need to develop further infrastructure which connects more people around the globe.

Companions/Guides

Finally I would like to reflect on a kind of leadership in this journey to cross the cultural boundary and create a Ubutu space. Almost every ancient religion imagined a journey from this world to the other world. The journey is tumultuous so that the soul needs guides.

In Korean folklore, there are four companions who guide the soul into the other world. They are called Kkok tu (꺾뚝), which means the frontier or the beginning. We find them in the ancient tomb, where they painted these figures around coffins. The first kkoktu is a navigator who is a path finder. Through the journey into the unknown, the kkoktu is to find a new route to go through. The second companion who accompanies the soul is the kkotu protector. The protector fights against the enemy or violent spirit which might hurt the soul. The second kkok tu is a warrior to defeat any danger and possible harm. The third kkok tu is a caregiver who takes care of the soul in terms of physical and mental health. When a soul experiences enormous anxiety or fear from uncertainty, the kkok tu consoles the soul and gives necessary care. Then the last, but not the least kkot tu is an entertainer. During the journey to the unknown, perhaps, one of the most important components is a sense of humor, which gives us a sense of fun and joy. We tend to be eager to find a companion who is serious, smart, wise, and brave. However, it is important not to forget a companion who can bring humor and laughter which helps us to feel light in this heavy duty journey.

³ T.I. Nzimawe, "Practising Ubuntu and Leadership for Good Governance: The South African and Continual Dialogue," **African Journal of Public Affairs** (2014: 30-41).

Final remarks

We as women religious have been on the journey to deepen our understanding of the great mystery and to further expand our existence in the unfolding universe. We deal with being puzzled in this new landscape. We naturally are touched by the fear of the unknown and the anxiety of the uncontrollable, yet we can remain steadfast holding one another, and tending the Mystery with hope.

Our journey begins as we encounter the real, the hole, the empty tomb, and it creates the dialectic that draws us forward, reminding us of the changeable and exciting nature of our path. No one reaches a final destination. We do not travel backwards. The essential nature of our path, like Alice, involves not seeing the end, and the intentional embracing of new worlds, new friends, and new ways of being. We have discussed the many interior and exterior journeys that characterize our lives. The final destination is itself unknown, and yet our journey never ceases to expand, challenge, and engage us. It is why we are so fully alive; we live by crossing borders, embracing mystery, and creating community. This is how we survive.

The late Chicana feminist thinker Gloria Anzaldua emphasized the importance of being in the borderland. It implies two sacred spaces. First, our origin place, where we first departed on our journey, or the spot Alice first encountered a rabbit hole, or the moment a disciple discovered an empty tomb. And then it anchors us where we are now, somewhere on a path, walking along with a mission, in search of a destination where we find comfort and happiness. There, here in the borderland, is the space where we can most enjoy the journey of religious life itself. We can experience our path, our communities, and fellow travelers, without worrying about the final destination, and like Alice in Wonderland, who never worries about the way to get out of it. We can make the most of the journey and encounter the Mystery that unites us.