2. MOVEMENTS OF GRACE: RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE EVOLUTION OF
CHRIST CONSCIOUSNESS

We will reflect on the movement of Grace, which is the movement of God’s love in the
tradition of Religious Life.

In his book “The Future of Man” Teilhard de Chardin\(^1\), scientist, explains the evolutionary
movement of our time. He suggests that “the movement dates from when one man perceived
that the forces of nature were not static, but they are moving.” It is a dramatic thing for
humanity to awaken to evolution. There are some people who say, “Yes we are moving” and
others say “we are not moving”. This is a slow awakening in our consciousness. It affects
not only how we understand ourselves but also how we understand religious life in the 21\(^{st}\)
century.

Thomas Berry showed that not only are we moving, but where we are moving towards. He
said we are moving towards greater wholeness, greater relationality. This is an important
concept: that evolution is an inner as well as an outer event. The deep interior of the cosmos
is also moving.

We must take account of how the interior life is evolving. But the inside is moving towards
complexity, greater love and greater interconnectivity, because from the beginning the
universe connects. From the Big Bang, you have hydrogen and helium in connection. The
universe is moving towards deeper love and greater interconnectivity and the end will be a
consummation in love.

If this is the case our world could look very different. This gives us hope that the evolutionary
process, in which we are the agents in our lifetime, can contribute to bringing the world
forward in love.

The process of evolution is not just out there, but is in us when we feel the impulse to be
“more”; not just as a single person, but together to bring it forward in love. The word some
scientists use to describe the process of the inner and outer evolution of the universe is “deep
time”. As it evolves, there is greater communion among us and with God.

Religious Life is nesting within this evolution.
Think of Religious Life as evolution. It is a tradition on the move. In theory it is easy to say
we are moving. But often we prefer to stay static rather than to move.

We can identify certain Moments of Grace – a one-time event when something new is born
into existence. Religious life has passed through many moments of grace from which Sr.
Gail Worcelo selects six.

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Religious Life: A Tradition on the Move - Within and Without

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These movements represent radical Moments of Grace. In a moment of grace something has to be sacrificed. Often founders had to sacrifice: we remember the sacrifice St. Mary Euphrasia made in leaving Tours to come to Angers. (E.g. Pope Benedict in making his decision to resign for the sake of the Church.) Each of us has radical moments that set the rest of our lives in motion.

There are also cosmological moments of grace. They are moments that give rise to what follows. There is a sense that we are in a sacrificial universe. When we open our hearts to this reality, we realize that we are in a kind of life where everything keeps giving. For example, the beauty of the flowers, or photosynthesis… when the first cells captured the sun, we can have food because of this process.

Think about the moment of grace that started the Christian tradition: the Christ event that initiates the whole unfolding of the tradition. But this tradition does not stay static because the heart of Christ is evolutionary. It keeps calling us into deeper authenticity, a deeper transparency and increasing depth.

The coming forth of new expressions in the tradition of religious life has an external form, but an interior evolution as well. These moments of grace arose often in response to social, political, economic and planetary needs.
What need did St Mary Euphrasia see in the world of her time? She wanted to extend the Congregation and its structures to be able to adapt to the changes of her time and to the social needs of women. Often moments of grace emerge because of a need. But they emerged also because of an interior pull coming from the Holy Spirit to become “more”.

Theologian Karl Rahner calls this inner pull to become “more”, “active self-transcendence.” Saying this in ordinary language, we feel it in ourselves that Christ is continually calling us and the whole tradition into a deeper dimension of the Christ. Already in the pattern of the tradition (Christ is our big bang) with self-giving love as the basis (kenosis) we find a deepening of kenosis, a deepening of justice, mercy, wisdom and truth.

Each tradition INCLUDES something from the previous one and TRANSCENDS it as it advances towards new levels of complexity and depth. The Cosmological goes beyond all previous moments of grace (mendicant, intellectual …). All of the moments get put into the new one and the tradition advances by one more. This is important. Our religious life has always been evolving and we are privileged to be at this new moment; all is included, but the whole thing goes forward in a new way.

Ten years ago at the Parliament of the world’s religions nobody understood about us moving into the cosmological level. Two years ago, the entire theme was hearing each other talking about healing the earth. The traditions are waking up to this moment and the beauty of the sharing is that we realize that we are in a universe where everything is different, because the earth keeps differentiating.

So we can celebrate the differences. When we come together in the various traditions we celebrate the differences in how we celebrate God. All traditions are to be shared. The theologian Raymond Panikar working on interreligious dialogue used the concept of a complicated homeomorphic equivalent, which means all the traditions are equivalent to Christ. He says we must go deeply into our own traditions to be able to understand and to contribute to dialogue.

Another concept is that of emergence in the universe and the tradition. Emergence is a power of the universe… we move from desert to community. We are helping the tradition to move into the new phase of cosmology. Christ is calling us to do the work of the Church and for the Church.

A good image of emergence is watching a caterpillar moving into a cocoon. We watch in silence as the whole body of the caterpillar transforms into liquid. We can be hard. However, God’s work in us as we change into this new phase will change us into liquid and we may not recognize ourselves. Maybe we, religious life, and the Church will look different; we have to let go of control and let God work and we do not know what the outcome will be. But because we know the universe, and that things move into the “more” beautiful, we can hope the same for us.

The power of emergence brings us into greater possibility. Imagine yourself as a caterpillar and suddenly you can fly. This is what God wants from us.

Gail Worcelo elaborates on the different “Moments of Grace” in the following manner.
First moment of grace. The external form was the Desert. But there is an interior gift: Transformation in Christ through the SOLO QUEST. It was a singular journey. Even today for us to be whole in Christ we must attend to this dimension. To be whole, we need to spend time alone and grapple with Christ interiorly by ourselves.

Desert mothers and fathers flourished in Syria in the 3rd-5th centuries. They believed we could encounter Jesus by opening our hearts. They rejected the idea of knowing by the intellect. They felt that we just need to open the heart. They believed we could find our true self in Christ. Many people came to them and they would ask for a word to transform them into Christ. Early on, they gave us the sense that it is possible to become transformed into Christ.

A brief story on Abba Lot and Abba Joseph is helpful. Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph because Joseph was very holy. Lot said: “I keep all the rules in community what else should I do?” Joseph replied: “why not be totally transformed into fire, transformed into Christ”.

Second moment of grace. The external form is community. This is a new emergence. St. Benedict and St. Scholastica took the wisdom of the desert and said community life is the way to transformation in Christ. Prayer, work, chanting, Lectio Divina and community life emerged as a new way of being. St. Benedict developed a rule for community life.

Christ is manifested in the whole and each one is reflecting Christ to the other. And the way we grow in this new phase is in the collective: a higher “we”. We start to grow together and together we are drawing each other forward. It is a relationship that goes beyond the ego and any selfish sense of isolation. It is a different form of relationship.

Third moment of grace. 13th century. The external form of religious life is the Mendicant. The inner form is kenosis. St. Francis of Assisi encourages the interior desire to empty ourselves for Christ.

St. Dominic and St. Catherine encourage us to develop the interior desire to search for truth and kenosis.

Fourth moment of Grace
St. Ignatius of Loyola externally offers us a model of discernment in the Exercises. His gift to the tradition was to bring the head and the heart together to discern the will of God. He saw transformation in Christ through discernment.

Fifth moment of Grace. The external form is the Activist: e.g. Mary Ward and St. Angela Merici. The inner dynamism is transformation in Christ through service to the world.

An edict for Sisters concerning enclosure was developed in 1258 by Pope Boniface 8th and affirmed in 1563 by the Council of Trent. We know from history that while contemplative enclosure still pertains, other models beyond monastic life have evolved.

St. Vincent de Paul, St. Louise de Marillac, St. John Eudes and St. Mary Euphrasia emerged in their time saying something has to change. They felt that some other response was required to meet the needs of the world.
St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise decided to form women and call them “sisters” and not “nuns”. For a convent, they would have the houses of the sick. For a chapel, it would be the streets of the city. This started to change things. The new sisters were outside of canon law so they did not have to abide by the rules of the nuns and they were known as “extra canonical”. During this time, there was a lot of exploration. By the time of Pope Leo, Sisters are recognized and they become a new invention in history. And we know that the work of Sisters has transformed the life of millions.

**Sixth moment of Grace.**
In our lives we need the Desert. But there is an interior gift: Transformation in Christ through the SOLO QUEST.
We also need to live in community and do what that implies: Lectio Divina, pray together, work, play.
We need the Mendicant, we need to go out, and experience the self-emptying.
We need the intellectual to stimulate the mind.
We need the ACTION in the world. In this phase we become transformed in Christ through service.

The 6th movement of Grace was introduced by Teilhard de Chardin (in 1940) and later by Thomas Berry.

This movement is called the cosmological phase and it is more complex. It is the phase of communion consciousness: a consciousness of interconnection and Christ incarnate in the whole. It is hard to express, because we are on the edge of this new emergence.

The universe moves into a greater complexity. Christ begins to incarnate in a more complex way in the interrelationships and the connections.