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## Maria Cimpermann, RSCJ: Religious Life for Our World: Creating Communities of Hope

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resolve conflicts, free hostages, and bring about a process of peace and reconciliation. This they continue to do often at the risk of their lives. Cardinal Nzapalainga found himself several times with a weapon aimed at his head. He attributes his many escapes from injury to the force of his words.

The cardinal's courage makes him today one of the most listened to men in Central Africa. Why did he dare to stand up against the warlords? Why are his calls for reconciliation heeded? How do you actually become a peacemaker? Nzapalainga addresses these questions and talks about his career and his experience with Laurence Desjoyaux, journalist at *La Vie* (a weekly French Roman Catholic magazine) who accompanied him on one of his tours in the interior of the country. She witnessed firsthand that his reputation and courage enabled him to bring together opposing militia leaders and make concrete progress for peace.

Desjoyaux is an accomplished reporter with expertise in jihadist movements. She has travelled and reported extensively on Central Africa and the Middle East. She has also collaborated with the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq, Louis Raphael Sako, created cardinal by Pope Francis in 2018. Sako's book, *Nous oubliez pas!* "Do not forget us" (2015) tells the story of the atrocities committed in Iraq against Christians since the establishment of the Islamic State. Desjoyaux accompanied and reported on Pope Francis' historic visit to Iraq in March 2021.

In *Je suis venu vous apporter la Paix* she enables Cardinal Nzapalainga to put the spotlight on the continuing anarchic violence besetting his beloved CAR with its ever deepening divisions and hostilities. A debt of gratitude is owed to journalists such as Desjoyaux for giving global access to the story of such intelligent and brave

Christian advocates for peace and reconciliation.

Like his brother cardinal, Nzapalainga calls for help to put an end to a dramatic situation and for an international mobilization of all peoples and all religions in the cause of peace.

Both church leaders are contemporary Christian witnesses to great strength of soul and courage in the face of adversity that can inspire their contemporaries.

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**MARIA CIMPERMANN, RSCJ**  
***RELIGIOUS LIFE FOR***  
***OUR WORLD: CREATING***  
***COMMUNITIES OF HOPE.***

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Maria Cimperman, RSCJ, is director of the Center for the Study of Consecrated Life at Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago, USA. She writes both as a theologian, and as an experienced religious of over twenty-five years. While recognizing her own particular North American context, Cimperman points out that she "lives in an international community, and is part of an international congregation" (xviii). She acknowledges engagement with religious on four continents, – giving particular mention to Korea, Philippines, and Australia, – that informs her thinking and writing on religious life today. The blurb on the back cover claims that "this book brings together God's call, the world's needs, and charisms in consecrated life in a way that dynamically engages the vows, prayer, community, and ministry for

the particular time and contexts in which we live.” That claim is fulfilled in an engaging, accessible way.

This book follows on from a lecture series offered by Cimperman at CTU in 2017 and is firmly grounded in the experience of individual religious congregations as they strive to remain true to their founding charism “to respond to the calls and cries of God in the world” (3). Cimperman, with many references to Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*, and the 2017 *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II* from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) is clearly in step with the concerns and hopes of Pope Francis for religious life. She is similarly in tune with contemporary theological reflection (note the copious references to authors such as Sandra M. Schneiders, Richard Gula, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna). Concern for the global challenges of our time is evident from many references to *Laudato Si’* and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The ten chapters of this book hold in dynamic and creative tension the two aspects of its title, a *Religious Life* that is *for Our World*. The lexicon is mystical-prophetic and the overriding concern is for a missionary discipleship that lives the Good News by serving God’s mission. The first part of the book has three chapters. Chapter One identifies the challenges in the world: violence, migration, poverty, earth sustainability, hunger for meaning and belonging; and in the Church: the abuse crisis, greater lay leadership and responsibility, listening and participation. These need to be addressed by religious life, which, as part of the Church, “is also being urged to consider its realities interiorly, internally, and externally in order to respond by

creating the communities of hope that are longed for locally and globally” (19). The conditions necessary for such communities are individual religious seeking interior conversion; religious communities questing for communal transformation; and religious congregations committed to the revitalization of their particular charism.

Chapter Two reflects on the nature of call and charism. There is the personal story of God’s call connecting with the deep narrative of a congregation’s particular charism that gives shape to a collective story of gospel living in service to the needs of the world. Chapter Three, entitled “Friendship with God,” develops five signs highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the mystical and prophetic in the religious vocation. These are to know God, cultivate interior freedom, read the signs of the times, live in closeness to and in solidarity with the powerless and marginalized, and invite all to participate in the vision of the Reign of God. “A mystical-prophetic life leads us and our congregations to the depth and breadth of our life in God and God’s creation” (52).

The material for the second part of the book is organized in seven chapters, with chapters four to eight providing a contemporary catechesis on the vows beginning with a general introduction in Chapter Four and subsequent chapters attending to consecrated celibacy, poverty, and obedience. Significantly, Cimperman interjects a chapter entitled “Living Community: Doors and Destinations” (Chapter Six) in this catechesis on the vows right between celibacy and poverty. Healthy community living is a prerequisite for consecrated life well lived. She adds, “Building community is part of our participation in the mission of God” (91). It is the fulcrum on which the vows well lived revolve and generate communities of hope, so much

needed in the world today. Intentional intercultural living is key to building up and sustaining life-giving communities in international congregations. She quotes Spiritan, Tony Gittins, “Theologically speaking, intercultural communities consist of members drawn from diverse cultural backgrounds but sharing a single charism and an intentional commitment to fellowship, motivated not simply by pragmatic considerations but by a shared religious conviction and commitment to a common mission” (98).

Finally, in Chapters Nine and Ten, Cimperman connects the call of consecrated life with the cries of the peoples of the world and of the earth by returning to the world’s challenges listed earlier and developing these with examples of creative congregational responses resulting from “a communal discernment in action within a charism” (177). One such example is that of the Medical Mission Sisters founded in 1925 with the charism to live as a healing presence in the world by trying to live as Jesus lived, with care and compassion for all. Their General Chapter of 1997 discerned that healing the earth had to be part of their healing ministry. One of the outcomes from that discernment came some nine years later with the establishment of an ecological education project connecting centers all over the world through the congregation’s network entitled “Haven for Ecological and Alternative Living” (HEAL).

Exciting and innovative life-giving initiatives such as this one alert us to the power of charism that “like yeast in bread making, it is not large numbers of people but rather a small critical mass that is essential” (191). As it was with the founders of congregations, so it continues with those who, as Chapter Ten puts it, engage in “widening Charisms for the Sake of the

Church and World.” In this chapter Cimperman challenges all to recognize, fifty years after Vatican II, that religious life is a partnership in mission and so “to look more intentionally at charism and calls with a vision of being in mission with others” (196). Here, this book has brought us to its summit: “Much is possible when we invite the family to the shared table of imagining responses to current calls” (200). She briefly documents the collaboration coordinated by the Union of Superiors General of both women and men congregations to address particular needs at particular times. As in other parts of the book, Cimperman illustrates her point with examples such as the Solidarity with South Sudan project established in 2008 with which Spiritans are familiar.

This book is in the vanguard of Pope Francis’ call for religious life to “wake up the world” as announced in 2015, the “Year of Consecrated Life.” He called on religious to “be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth” (xv). But first, religious have to wake themselves up to become the mystic-prophets they are called to be through individual conversion, communities transformed in hope, and congregational revitalization.

Cimperman presents this book as being “about living our sacred Paschal time – the living, dying, and rising, wounds and all, with the Risen Christ” (25). At a time when religious life knows both decay and new life, “Consecrated life is being asked to look at its structures in order to see what is still helpful and what needs to change for the sake of mission” (xvi). This is a familiar challenge for religious, one first presented in this epoch by Vatican II’s call to *ag-*

*giornamento*. The challenge is ever old, and ever new. Cimperman brings the reader to a mountaintop of insight and refreshment. She whispers a message of hope into the listening ear. The task is to come down from the mountain and practice what we have learned. This book is clearly the publication of material presented, shared, and digested by religious in discussion with the author. It can be characterized perhaps as a workbook with lists such as “Keys for Seeing the Vows” (68-70), an outline of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (163-5), bullet points summarizing ideas from *New Wine in New Wineskins* (166-7). All chapters provide questions for reflection and discussion at their end, and some suggest an assignment before you begin reading, such as the

chapter on Consecrated Celibacy which asks the reader to “read the section on celibacy in your congregation’s Constitutions” (71).

As with any workbook providing follow up materials from a shared experience, the reader receives the meaning, but without the experience, may find it difficult to enact what the text expects. The remedy for this is to do as the book proposes: use it as a resource for a reading/study group, and, prompted by its rich material, its many insights and examples, generate a discussion formative of a community of hope.

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