

Janet K. Ruffing, RSM

From Transfiguration to Transformation

"Begin with Lord, Make Me an Instrument"

As I awaken, the living Christ in me...
as I give love, love I receive...

IN THIS STUNNING LITTLE CHANT, we can discover the entire movement of our progress through Lent. As you all know, every Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and then proceeds through the Sundays of Lent to the Triduum—Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. We always begin in the desert, progress to the Mount of Transfiguration, and then we have some variety depending on the year, and we turn to the solemn celebration of the Passion of Jesus and his Resurrection.

The Scripture stories and liturgical rituals move us from place to place geographically and symbolically. Lent is often characterized as a "journey" from the Desert to the Cross and Resurrection. I would like to consider these mysteries of the life of Jesus as our own mysteries. I would like to consider them through the lens of transformation. We might think of this as something of an inner transformation, exploring and discovering our Christic identities.

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"Born of Fire"

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday with a voluntary embrace of our human condition. We sign one another with ashes. Some of you are old enough to remember that the words once were "Remember you are dust and unto dust you will return." And later an alternative, "Repent, and believe the Good news." Both are profoundly true in deep and abiding ways. We humans are truly earthlings. Our physical selves literally are made from "stardust"—in the new cosmology our planet earth evolved out of a dying star. As a poet friend in my community once wrote to me, "You, too, are also born of the fire."

The entire poem might serve us well as we consider the journey from transfiguration to transformation.

The Flower—also born of the fire

The grandparents of each flower
soil water air

Yet every bloom
finds its roots in fire

The crimson petals of a rose
its delicate softness
have endured the furnace

Each emerging daffodil
is another sunrise

Near Anacortes, Washington
fields of tulips are burning

Fire awakened first
called to fill the emptiness
with a unifying

YES¹

From the hand of creator God, fire awakened first and became the beginning of this amazing creation of which our original stardust became us. Throughout our many Lents and Easters, we are invited ever more deeply into a spiritual transformation that leads us to participate ever more intimately and ever more deeply in the very life of God's own self. We sing Kurt Van Sickle's deeply moving chant, "Make me an instrument, Lord, of your peace...as I awaken the living Christ in Me." This awakening of the living Christ in me

is one way of describing just how it is we participate in God's life. We continue to be changed—transformed, metamorphasized—from merely, yet astonishingly, stardust, dust, earth to becoming fully incarnated spiritual beings. And it is Jesus who shows us the way to this transformation in his life, death, and resurrection. The pattern of our lives is the same as his, and I want to talk about how that takes place in consciousness supported by Lenten practice.

What Does Jesus Communicate

What is it Jesus—this man of Spirit and a wisdom teacher—tries to communicate to us in words and symbols, healings, and meals, even as the Creator God had been communicating this same invitation prior to Jesus? Over and over again, Jesus points us to communion, union, a full sharing in God's own life:

I have come that you may have life and have it to the full. Do you understand what I have done for you? So you are to serve one another.... Live in my love.... As I have loved you, so you are to love one another.... The kingdom of God is in your midst.

We have a Jesus who shows us the way. We have a Jesus who lived everything he taught. These are all themes of the mysterious transformation God works in each of us throughout our lifetimes, as well as in the community of believers. Over and over again, we discover deeper and more pervasive ways of entering into this mystery of becoming Christ, of becoming divinized so that we might fully share God's Trinitarian life. Love burns, love transforms, love turns stardust into us—living beings who are so filled with the God life that we can reciprocate this very love from a place of transformed freedom. We who are born of the fire, born of stardust, learn over the course of our lives how much God loves us, and we learn how to receive and respond to that love. We become lovers of God by allowing God to transform us, so that God can truly awaken the living Christ in us.

On Sunday We Heard Mark's Version of the Transfiguration (Mk 9:2-9)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he

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was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my beloved, listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

Scripture scholars are still quite unclear about this particular story. Some believe it is a post-resurrection creation that clearly anticipates Jesus' resurrection in the light of persecution. But since all Christians knew the ending of the story before the Gospels were written, we who read this story now and hear it proclaimed as part of the Lenten season understand it as being deeply meaningful to us right now as well as to whatever way we identify with the disciples who experienced this vision of the Transfigured Christ. The story itself is infused with deeply symbolic meaning as well as with a profoundly theological and even mystical meaning.

Meditating on the Transfiguration

They Synodal document on vowed religious life, *Vita Consecrata*, opened with a meditation on the Transfiguration of Jesus as a decisive moment in his ministry (VC # 15)² and used it as the basis for describing vowed religious life as originating in discipleship of Jesus that involves a special relationship with Jesus but also encompasses a fully Trinitarian sensibility. The disciples in this story enjoyed a profound moment of contemplative awareness. The disciples who are present are given a vision of Jesus rapt in contemplative communion with Abba God. In this communion with God, the Old Testament prophets, Moses and Elijah, join him on the Mount of Transfiguration.

These figures, as the synoptic Gospels work it out, fully confirm Jesus as a son of God and a prophet in the lineage of those to whom God granted such theophanies and through which God conferred a mission on them or confirmed a mission already given. In this story, God is consoling and strengthening Jesus for his mission and his

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passion, which he knows lies ahead of him. Two other men of God who spoke to God “face to face”—Moses on Mount Sinai and Elijah who disappeared in a fiery chariot and was expected to return again—became a symbol of mysticism within Judaism. These are Jewish leaders to whom Jesus was compared by Gospel writers and whose appearance confirms Jesus in his mission.

Jesus—the evangelist knows, as does Jesus himself—is heading to Jerusalem, to the cross and to the potential reversal of his mission as he understood it. Did he get it right? Was he wrong? What do his

Even Jesus needs strength and confirmation in his call

disciples need? Jesus, this man led by the Spirit, often withdrew to commune with God and share God’s company. Jesus seeks and needs this intimacy with God that confirms he is still God’s beloved. Even Jesus needs strength and confirmation in his call. Peter, James, and John accompany him. They, too,

become absorbed in this mystery of Jesus’ stunning intimacy with God and the prophets who have gone before him.

They see, in two accounts, his face and clothing shining, transfigured, dazzling. The man they know and desperately love has become a burning bush. He takes his place literally in the light of those who have gone before him, and his radiance indicates he already fully is son of God in God’s eyes. Even though the cross lies ahead, he already lives in intimate communion with God.

Peter, impetuous as always, wants to organize something, to do something, and offers to make three booths for Jesus and his heavenly visitors. They receive instruction, a prophetic word, a word of revelation from a heavenly voice. In this theophany, once again as at the Baptism, they hear, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” Variants add, “with whom I am well pleased” or “my chosen” in place of “beloved.”

In this scene of the Transfiguration, this is God’s confirmation, not only for Jesus sake but also for Peter’s, James’s, and John’s. They receive instruction no matter what happens: “This is my beloved. Pay attention, listen. Believe.” They are afraid, awestruck until the vision fades and they see only Jesus. Jesus is strengthening

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and preparing them for what still lay ahead. They may sense the impending danger, the extent of which they dare not imagine. They need this vision, this experience on the holy mountain that will become for them symbolically a new Sinai (where God spoke to Moses) or Horeb (where Elijah experienced God in a gentle breeze) to sustain them in their future leadership of the community, just as Moses, Elijah, and Jesus needed it.

A Symbol

I have long been captivated by this scene, this icon of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, a symbol for the contemplative life that Elijah also symbolizes—he who in a time of despair discovers God in the gentle breeze. Moses, with whom God spoke face to face, had to veil his face when he came back down the mountain to continue his journey through the desert. But throughout the Exodus, God guided the people by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When the people settled and David built the temple, God filled the Holy of Holies with luminosity.

How might we contemplate this scene for ourselves? How might we enter into it as a symbol of our ongoing transformation into a Christic self that God continues to effect in us?

I was introduced to Fra Angelico’s painting in Cell 6 of the San Marco Monastery of the Dominicans in Florence—*The Transfiguration*—on a visit to Florence in 1993. There is something about this scene that sticks in my imagination and in my heart. Although this fresco is not exactly an icon in the style of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it is nevertheless deeply symbolic. It is painted in a style called European Gothic, and it is more symbolic than realistic. It is a representation of a profound mystery, with such subtle details that one could never tire of looking at it. Fra Angelico designed it as an aid to contemplation.

He painted these scenes of the life of Christ, from the Annunciation (placed at the entrance to the dormitory area) to the Resurrection (in the cells of the friars). The painting in each cell became the friar’s pictorial prayer book, coaching them about how to appropriate

mystically each of these key moments in the life of Jesus. They are a primer in prayer for people who were highly visual in their religious culture and experience. They understood all the symbols, and periodically they changed rooms, living night and day with another painting of a mystery.

In *The Transfiguration*, Christ stands on a rock, the solid foundation on which he will build his Church. He is transfigured, a hint of resurrection in the pre-Easter Jesus. His arms are outstretched as on the cross, but he is not suffering. Moses and Elijah are shown as heads, beneath the arms of Christ. We are reminded of the Old and New Covenants and how the New Covenant supersedes the Old. We are also reminded of other mountains—Sinai and Horeb.

John, the beloved disciple, and Mary, his mother, are present as at the foot of the cross. Both John and Mary are able to take in Jesus' transformed presence, because they are both turned toward the luminous transfigured Jesus. There is more. Saint Dominic has been added to the scene along with Mary. Saint Dominic and Mary were not present for this Gospel event, we know. So why are they here?

Fra Angelico was not aiming at historical accuracy when he illustrated Holy Scripture. He painted images with a threshold for visible recognition but also wanted to use it to indicate a number of meanings contained in a passage of Scripture. He was illustrating doctrine, prophecy, and an image for contemplation.

Mary Magdalene and Dominic are both entering the scene by praying, standing on either side, contemplating the Gospel scene and inviting the viewer, us, to join them—to step into the scene ourselves. Unlike James and Peter, who turn away or protect themselves from the luminosity, John leans in and adores. There is room for many reactions and ways of entering the scene.

We know the rest of the story. The disciples still need reassurance, but Mary and Dominic anticipate Jesus's reassurance: "Stand up. Do not be afraid." They serenely stand like Jesus does and contemplate the scene. They somehow have already assimilated this mystery. They want to join Christ in it. They invite the movement from fear

to contemplation, to moving toward the outstretched arms of Christ and an eventual embrace. They already possess the transformed consciousness portrayed in the scene in which they stand. They absorb the whole mystery. They fully recognize that Jesus will have to suffer.

In another cell of the monastery, we will find Mary and Dominic contemplating the crucifixion just as serenely as they contemplate the transfiguration. The point is who God reveals Jesus to be on our behalf, and the very real spiritual level of reality that we, through grace, participate today in this same mystery. We too contemplate and are transformed by that contemplation.

How do we hear those words, "Stand up. Do not be afraid"? What does it mean for us to "stand up"? It can be the courage of our convictions. We believe, we stand for something. When Jesus cures, he often said, "stand-up" or "rise" or "get up." Resurrection faith is implied here. Jesus will rise again.

Transfigured Life

Vita Consecrata, the Roman syndodal document, uses this scene as the primary symbol for the way religious life

is to make visible the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called. They bear witness to these marvels not so much in words as by the eloquent language of a transfigured life, capable of amazing the world. To people's astonishment, they respond by proclaiming the wonders of grace accomplished by the Lord in those whom he loves. (VC # 20)

This document suggests that religious, through their life of prayer and their assimilation of the luminous mystery of the Transfiguration, draw others to this same experience. Religious are merely icons, like this painting, of a deeper mystery of Christian life to which we are all called. We are all called to participate in this transformed life in Christ. This transfigured life is the result of having been made an instrument of God's peace—letting go, releasing others in forgiveness, loving.

All of these virtues are evidence of the living Christ in each of us. It is a result of integrity of life, lived in the familiar and loving presence

of the Holy One. Mountaintop experiences root us in the holy mystery, sensitize us to God and God's ways, and strengthen us for our mission in the world, in our families, communities, and workplaces. Those of us who let ourselves be guided by the Spirit can say with Simeon the New Theologian,

I see the beauty of your grace, I contemplate its radiance, I reflect its light; I am caught up in its ineffable splendor, I am taken outside myself as I think of myself; I see how I was and what I have become. ...I do not know where to sit, where to go, where to put these members which are yours; in what deeds, in what works shall I use them, these amazing divine marvels.³ (VC # 20)

This transformation described by Simeon offers a glimpse of what it might be like to be caught up into a mystical consciousness in which our inner self enters into the fullness of its identity. It is so focused on Jesus, so taken outside ourselves, that we are dispossessed of our everyday ego consciousness, which is solely concerned with me, myself, and I. From this new place of immersion in the Christ mystery, Simeon says he is taken outside of himself—ecstasy is the word we use for this. We are made for such ecstasy, self-forgetfulness, and self-transcendence. His response, much like John's in Fra Angelico's painting, is deep reverence. He is drawn further into the mystery of who Jesus is, almost mesmerized by it.

Transformation

This is, I believe, the transformation that God accomplishes through our fidelity to contemplative prayer and through which God gradually changes us. I believe God works this transformation in us through our lives of service as well. I think, however, we often only become gradually conscious of it and catch glimpses of this process when we enter into silent and deep prayer.

Too often our Lenten practice is focused on external choices and actions. What did I decide to give up? I may spend far too much time focused on me and what I am going to do or not do for Lent. We might do better if we focus more on how I am getting in the way of the transformation Jesus is trying to bring about in me.

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Since Vatican II, Lenten practice has focused on growth in Christian life, practices that encourage us to contemplate the mysteries of this life given us in such abundance in Jesus and to live from this transformed awareness as we move out into the world. Lent is about the renewal and deepening of this life that is already ours—given us even as we were born of the fire and symbolically again in Baptism, when we were plunged into the baptismal waters, emerging as new creations.

Gregory of Nazianzen describes in a sermon God's desire and delight to transform us:

Nothing gives such pleasure to God as the conversion and salvation of men [and women] for whom God's every word and every revelation exist. God wants you to become a living force for all humanity, lights shining in the world. You are to be radiant lights as you stand beside Christ, the great light, bathed in the glory of him who is the light of heaven. You are to enjoy more and more the pure and dazzling light of the Trinity, as now you have received—though not in its fullness—a ray of its splendor proceeding from the one God, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and power for ever. Amen.³

Paul's robust Christic mysticism plays off this transformative theme of God's work in us through the symbols associated with Moses speaking to God face to face, which Jesus does to an even greater degree:

All of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 4:18). If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new (2 Cor 3:18, 5:17).

Moses spoke with God face to face, but God's reflected glory shining on his face was so intense that Moses had to place a veil over his face. Paul uses the mirror as the image through which the disciple looks. When we look into the mirror, we see not ourselves but we see our Christic reality, the becoming of our Christ nature. The glory we glimpse in the mirror of Christ, whose image we are becoming, reveals this transformed Christic identity. We are being transformed into this reflected image of Christ, from one degree of glory to the next.

For Paul, *in Christo* (in Christ) is another expression of this inner Christic identity that we experience in contemplative prayer, but which we also discover in ministry—preaching, teaching, evangelizing, healing, consoling, etc. Here and elsewhere, Paul is grasping for images to show this deep oneness with Christ. He describes us as a new creation, clearly the work of the Spirit, everything becoming new in this Christic identity.

Prophetic Task

Vita Consecrata fully expresses the unity between action and contemplation and between contemplation and prophecy in “Chapter 2, The Manifestation of God’s love in the World.” This final section of the document best describes apostolic or ministerial religious life. It is the first instance in an official Church document where prophecy and religious life are explicitly linked:

The consecrated life has the prophetic task of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity as it is announced in Scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God’s providential action in history. This is the plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity (cf Col 2:20–22). To carry out this service appropriately, consecrated persons must have a profound experience of God and be aware of the challenges of their time and understand the profound theological meaning of these challenges through a discernment made with the help of the Spirit. In fact, it is often through historical events that we discern God’s hidden call to work according to God’s plan by active and effective involvement in the events of our time.

Discerning the signs of the times, as the Council affirms, must be done in the light of the Gospel, so as to “respond to the perennial questions which people ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4). It is necessary, therefore, to be open to the interior promptings of the Holy Spirit, who invites us to understand in depth the designs of Providence.

[The Spirit] calls consecrated men and women to present new answers to new problems of today’s world. These are divine pleas which only those accustomed to following God’s will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation. (VC # 73)

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Within the mystery of the Transfiguration, just as at Jesus’ baptism, Jesus and the disciples hear, “This is my beloved. Pay attention, listen. Believe.”⁴ What if we continued through this Lent, this period of springtime renewal, really listening to what Jesus has to say to us especially through the Sunday Gospel readings and the transformative baptismal symbols of the RCIA, celebrated in many parishes.

This is the Good News of the liberation of the oppressed. This is the Good News of our Christic identity. This is the Good News that God brings life out of death. This is the Good News that we can join in intimate communion with the very life of Christ, hidden in God. Can we commit ourselves to live and act in accordance with the beatitudes, becoming instruments of God’s peace, love, forgiveness, release? Can we dare to enter the fullness of being the sons and daughters of God—God’s Beloveds?

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NOTES

1. Patricia Ryan, RSM, *Also Born of the Fire: A Book of Poetry* (Denver: Outskirts Press, 2008), p. 19.
2. *Vita Consecrata, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father, John Paul II* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1996).
3. Gregory Nazianzen, “The Baptism of the Lord,” *Christian Prayer: the Liturgy of the Hours* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1976) p. 1967.
4. *This disclosure of the hidden dignity of the man Jesus dramatically demonstrates to us that there is nothing essentially incompatible between humanity and divinity. Although he was truly one of us, Jesus lived wholly in God. This paradox raises the question of our own latent potential. If it is true that “of his fullness we have all received” (Jn 1:16), then we too are*

*destined to become not only bearers of divinity, but sharers in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Only sin and time impede our divinization. For most of us, the leaching out of sin, such as no fuller’s alkali could accomplish, is spread over a lifetime, “seventy years or eighty for the vigorous” (Ps 90:10). Slowly we are transformed; eventually we will become radiant. “My friends, we are God’s children now. It is not yet apparent what we shall be [in the future]. We know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). This is the goal of our existence. It is toward this that our journey leads. (Michael Casey, *Fully Human, Fully Divine: An Interactive Christology* [Liguori, MO: Triumph, 2004]).*