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What if?



*A profound spiritual,
communal passageway!*

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“Behold, a sacred voice is calling you. All over the sky a sacred voice is calling.” Black Elk

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision” Archbishop Oscar Romero.

The exploration of ‘What If’ is a profound spiritual path. This fundamental question motivates pioneers and entrepreneurial dreamers to explore seemingly unsolvable issues. It is these explorations that have led to significant innovation. Early members of religious congregations who arrived in America from Europe similarly addressed their times by exploring ‘the what if’ question. Pioneering members, often with few resources, planted the seedlings that became modern-day hospitals, universities and social service agencies. These passionate visionary pioneers with energetic fervor developed unforeseen solutions to address the needs of their times. Today, it seems that God is asking us to address the ‘what if’ from our own unique historical perspective.

Today we are faced with four intersecting, powerful global issues (immigration, environment, technology and globalization). These realities are impacting and reshaping individuals, communities and systems. Rather than understand these issues as merely separate entities, we need to realize their interactive nature that creates both new opportunity and consequences for our lives. For example, the sustained droughts in Africa which have led to mass migration from rural farms to cities subsequently increasing population density and placing stress on the labor market. At the same time, we have become aware that each technological advancement, such as robots, driverless cars and artificial intelligence, yields both new opportunities and painful realities such as elimination of jobs in certain sectors. As depicted in the graphic there is an energetic intersection of these four powerful global issues.



It is a fallacy to believe these four factors will stabilize within a few decades. These seismic changes have only begun to impel us to explore the ‘what if’ questions. Klaus Schwab in his book *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* elaborates on this, he states:

“Three reasons, however, underpin my conviction that a fourth and distinct revolution is under way.

Velocity: *Contrary to the previous industrial revolution, this one is evolving at an exponential rather than linear pace.*

Breadth and Depth: *It builds on the digital revolution and combines multiple technologies that are leading to unprecedented paradigm shifts in the economy, business, society and individually.*

Systems Impact: *It involves the transformation of entire systems across (and within) countries, companies, industries, and society as a whole.”¹*

Schwab’s insights raise the question of how these societal changes impact religious life as it progresses towards becoming a smaller, pioneer entity. The world has become more diverse and globally connected with increased social and economic interdependence. Thus, it becomes imperative that congregations breathe life into the ‘what if’ journey through their assemblies, chapters and other gatherings. The possibilities and potential of the ‘what if’ need to be at the forefront of the congregation’s dialogue if it hopes to be of influence these times.

As Marc R. Benioff states in the foreword to the book *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*:

“We live in exciting times of fundamental technological change. The pace and scope of groundbreaking scientific and technological advances coming from research facilities, start-ups and large organizations never cease to amaze me. The “science fiction” of yesterday is today becoming a reality in new products and services that we won’t imagine living without.”²

In addition, one could say the “science fiction” of today is a vision of tomorrow. These global technological breakthroughs are grounded in the question “what if”.

The movie “Hidden Figures” illustrates Benioff’s observation. It focuses on three African-American women and their contributions to history. These passionate pioneering women were important contributors to sending the first person, an American astronaut, into orbit around the earth. The movie portrays well the prejudice these African-American women faced in being recognized for their intellectual capabilities. As the plot unfolds, the movie demonstrates that real and lasting change happens simultaneously on multiple fronts.

The paradigm shifts included:

- Developing the math, science and technology to achieve what seemed impossible—placing a person in orbit around the earth.
- Believing and experiencing women as having the intellectual capacity to be engineers in a male-only profession.
- Accepting blacks as equals in an all-white world.

These three paradigmatic shifts were predicated on the willingness to ask ‘what if’. This prompted these scientists to probe habitual patterns of existing assumptions, mental models and technological frameworks. Without entering into this depth of personal and collective reflection, exploring the wonders of outer space would have remained merely a dream. Just as these groundbreaking women, had to question their existing paradigms, this epoch moment calls the

¹Klaus Schwab, *Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Crown Group, 2017), 3.

²Schwab, *Fourth Industrial Revolution* (2017), foreword.

emerging smaller, pioneer congregation to envision a future by reflecting on what aspects of their mental model, assumptions and frameworks need to shift in order to influence today's world.

As a group asks the creative question 'what if', it catapults members collectively into the heart space. They enter into a three-dimensional discernment process that weaves together the past, present and future by gleaning wisdom from the past while embracing the moment, and thereby risking new possibilities.

Engaging in the 'what if' exploration taps into the spiritual call to grow in holiness. The collective is being asked to pursue wisdom opening their soul to receive God's grace. This receptivity allows members to see their future as interconnected with the past, present and future. The creation of a common vision demands both personal and collective surrender. This often means letting go of one's own personal vision and opting for a larger communal transformative path. For an emerging smaller, action-oriented pioneer community, this receptivity is imperative.

The consequence of exploring 'what if' is that it unwraps two profound characteristics of the spiritual pilgrimage, *wisdom* and *call*.

Scripture speaks eloquently about the fruits of wisdom. James states: "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits." (3:17) In many ways, to be a smaller dynamic pioneer congregation is a walk similar to that of the great mystics seeking knowledge from a deep contemplative reflection on the spiritual invitation from God.

The second aspect of the 'what if' question is renewing the vocational *call*. As the collective members enter into this journey it opens the congregation's heart and soul to transformation. As scripture states in Isaiah 6:8, "Then I heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? Here I am, I said; send me." As the congregation's ancestors responded 'send me', each generation is beseeched to reply similarly based on their own historical context.



³Saint Mary's Hospital, Rochester, MN, USA. Digital image. Wikimedia Commons. http://wellcomeimages.org/indexplus/obf_images/4e/5a/2feb8e6763391a040fda1be83eac.jpg, 8 Nov. 2014. Web. 10 Feb. 2017.

⁴Do Something: A History of Fundraising, Ground Breaking and the People Who Built Ursuline College." VOICES. Ursuline College, 12 Aug. 2014. Web. 10 Feb. 2017.

In order to truly embrace the exploration of the 'what if', a congregation needs to develop two interconnected capacities. There needs to be a commitment to establishing a trustworthy breathing space and a courageous, visionary discernment process. The creation of a breathing space is essential to create the necessary safety to participate freely in discernment. For this reason, both trustworthy breathing space and courageous and visionary discernment are inseparable capacities.



In exploring the 'what if' perspective, this environment of trust is vital to open and honest dialogue which allows the group to explore, question, and probe existing assumptions and to reimagine the current framework, and congregational constructs.

The container of trust is not easy to foster. Often healing and letting go of preconceived definitions, anger and resentment over past hurts are significant to the communal relationship-building and envisioning process. The environment will need to be safe in order that healing and reconciliation become significant parts of the envisioning process. In the book, *An Other Kingdom*, the authors state, "trust is the glue of a communal narrative. It is a given, the absolute

without which all the rest doesn't work."⁵ Pre-existing mental models that were successful in one epoch often becoming stumbling blocks in another era. The tendency to minimize issues, negatively critique societal changes, or seek simplistic solutions hinders the members entering the transformative process. In order to envision the religious congregation's 'what if' scenario, it requires entering into contemplative stillness. This silence unleashes the collective centering and discipline needed for doing the interior soul work.

Each time the congregation enters the discernment process, there is a need to create a trusting space that permits the members to embrace both the wounds of the past and celebrate its success. Thus, focusing on the ability to reconcile, celebrate and let go in order to address the 'what if' of our charism is a critical human capacity for this age. As a part of creating trust, members need to cultivate a deep and penetrating belief in the 'what if' process. This is fundamental in order to embrace both moments of breakthrough and periods of ambiguity and wondering where we are going. These are normal aspects in a transformational process. The willingness to break-open the 'what if' questions can create tension, conflict and often times heated disagreements. Thus, it calls us to collectively move into and through the tension even though it may be scary and can trigger defensive behaviors. This communal pilgrimage calls for contemplative presence, fostering a non-judgmental attitude and transformation of the heart. When the group commits to remaining in their heart center, it allows the friction to slowly meld and move them into a shared and

⁵Peter Block, *An Other kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), 15.

passionate future. In the book, *Our Pristine Mind*, the author speaks about having a good heart:

*May all beings have happiness
and the causes of happiness.
May all things be free from suffering
and the causes of suffering.
May all beings never be separate
from unconditional happiness,
where there is no suffering
May all beings live in great impartiality,
free from attachments and aversion.*

This is not the happiness of having everything I want! It is rather the sense of contentment and contemplative peace that comes with accepting, even with wavering faith, however the Spirit guides the congregation into a resurrected future.

The development of a trusting environment also demands an unfailing faith in the goodness of each other. The exploration of 'what if' is an epoch journey. This path is similar to the Old Testament Israelites in the desert, having only enough manna for the day and realizing everyone may not see the promise land. Yet, each person is instrumental in creating the seedling that, as it blossoms, future generations will take it for granted.

As Archbishop Oscar Romero stated "we may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builders and the worker. We are workers not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own." The willingness to enter this level of communal trust, discernment and decision-making becomes a prophetic witness to others that differences can be celebrated, tension has merit. Truly resurrection unfolds from a deep sense of

belief in the goodness of each other.

Courageous and visionary discernment is the willingness to communally participate in the mystery of the Spirit's call. "Community is people wrapped in mystery. Community understands their story, which give shape and meaning to the mystery. Story honors our common experience."⁷

When we live in a time of such paradigmatic shift, discernment calls us to focus on 'what if'. Congregation's are being invited to ask how their charism's fits into each of these four global realities: environment, globalization, immigration and technology. These issues are reshaping our worldview by disrupting existing mental models, patterns of behavior and societal relationships. In creating a courageous vision, the collective call is to reimagine why we exist, while affirming the past and yet like a flower in spring opening to an unfolding future.

In Eric Kaufmann's book, *The Four Virtues of a Leader*, he explores four traditional aspects of the sacred path of leadership. He states the four virtues needed to have a shared direction as:

- **Focus** set direction and clarity of the journey – What am I/we creating?
- **Courage** enables full engagement that is otherwise blocked by anxiety and fear. What am I/we avoiding?
- **Grit** drives action forward in the face of fatigue and disheartenment. What am I/we sustaining?
- **Faith** ensures agility and responsiveness in the place of rigidity and entrapment. What am I/we yielding?⁸

⁶Orgyen Chowang, *Our Pristine Mind: A Practical Guide to Unconditional Happiness* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016), 127.

⁷Peter Block, *An Other kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), 15.

⁸Eric Kaufmann, *The Four Virtues of a Leader: Navigating the Hero's Journey through risk to results* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2016), 4.

These four virtues paint a picture of what is involved in creating a courageous vision and the internal fortitude to persevere in the odyssey. They integrate the critical elements of answering the 'what if' by recognizing both the desired state and the emotional resilience needed to persevere for such an aspirational vision.

There can be a tendency to become caught up in the fervor of the vision and societal impact. It is imperative to recognize the internal emotional will needed to see the plan to completion through times of insecurity, push back and missteps. The core of any direction is rooted in members being inspired and emotionally grounded for both the short and long term. These fundamentals are not separate experiences rather they are intertwined characteristics that establish the foundation for creating the 'what if'.

The opening quotes from this article from Black Elk and Archbishop Oscar Romero are relevant for walking the 'what if' path. These quotes speak to the sacredness of the call and the transcendent reality of the process. Their message invites the collective to enter into the visionary path of awestruck mystery that all of the great religious congregations have embarked upon. The final fruits of this spiritual excursion will be seen over time rather than in an profound invitation before this generation of religious is to embrace with passion the courageous summons to risk in faith as they address their 'what if' for these times. It is a journey to witness the gospel as channels of hope, love and justice for the world.

⁸Eric Kaufmann, *The Four Virtues of a Leader: Navigating the Hero's Journey through risk to results* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2016), 4.

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Sharing your “What if” Reflection:

*“A Leadership Journey isn’t a guided tour of a well-mapped destination,
but a departure from the known and familiar toward new horizons of achievement.”*

Eric Kaufmann *The Four Virtues of a Leader*



CommunityWorks, Inc. would like to hear your “What if” as you explore the future of religious life.

As we have listened, through our consultation, we continue to hear embers of what if visions, and hopes for the future.

We invite you to share these musing with each other on our [website](#) or on our [Facebook](#) page as we catch the dreams that have the potential to shape the future!

Focus Question:

What is your passionate “what if” that gives you hope and commitment as the future of religious life unfolds?