

CRC Mission

The Canadian Religious Conference (CRC) is both a voice for and a service to leaders of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life. The mission of the CRC is to encourage its members to live fully their vocation in following Christ. The CRC supports its members in their prophetic witness to justice and peace within society and the Church. The CRC looks for audacious ways of interpreting faith and life so as to embrace the new vision of the universe.

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News Briefs

CRC Theological Commission

The CRC Theological Commission is made up of women and men religious from different parts of Canada. The Commission's mission is twofold: To deepen the meaning of consecrated life from a theological perspective that integrates both human and social sciences; to propose future venues that will actualise religious life in a creative and prophetic way. It is within the framework of this mission that, once a year, the Theological Commission publishes an issue of the *CRC Bulletin*.

The members of the Commission wish to **enter into dialogue with you**, readers of the *CRC Bulletin*. Please feel free to e-mail them your comments, reflections or questions after reading their texts.

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CRC Publications

On the CRC website at www.crc-canada.org, under the Publications tab, you can access issues of the *CRC Bulletin*, including those published by the Theological Commission. Placing these publications online in PDF format enables you to download them.

You will also find, in the same section of the site, *Le Lien CRC Link*, our monthly newsletter.

Introduction

Lorraine d'Entremont, sc

The articles in this issue of the *CRC Bulletin* flow from what Theological Commission members heard as concerns of participants in the May 2016 CRC General Assembly: *Discerning Hope Amid the Challenges*. Two prominent themes engaged at the Assembly were the concept of world view, and its implications for all our relationships. These articles explore the notion of world view, and offer theological and psychological perspectives on the relationship of women and men.

In the first article, Lorraine d'Entremont, sc, explores the meaning of world view and its implications for personal and spiritual transformation in consecrated life today.

Patricia Brady, OSB, in "Relationships of Men and Women: Differentiation and Diversity," touches on what is different and what is common in the gender experience of God and spiritual maturation, and on the potential of both of women and men to witness communally to the in-breaking of the reign of God.

Gill Goulding, CJ, in "Transcending Polarizations," offers the 'presupposition' of Saint Ignatius of Loyola as an approach to 'the other' that can be fruitful for mission.

In "Reaching the Whole Through the Other," Louis Riverin draws from art and literature to highlight envy and denial as human responses to gender difference, concluding that it is relationship, and not difference, that is primary.

Martha and Mary in Luke 19:38-42 get a 'make-over' in Michel Proulx's, O.PRAEM, interpretation which demonstrates that this story opens new possibilities for women and relationships between men and women.

Br. Antoine-Emmanuel, FMJ, speaks of the gift of reciprocity between Jesus and several women in the Gospel in his article "From Domination to Reciprocity," and shows how the reign of God, fruit of Jesus' Paschal Mystery, makes it possible for us to experience genuinely new reciprocity.

In the last article, Solène Garneau, FMJ, and Louis Riverin, FMJ, collaborate in a reflection on the gifts and challenges of consecrated life in a mixed community of women and men.

We hope the various 'lights' we have shared may illumine some new horizons for you. ■

“....Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your Mind....”

Lorraine d'Entremont, sc

At the May 2016 General Assembly, CRC members engaged in conversations about 'world view'. The highest priority arising from the Assembly for implementation by the Administrative Council was: "Help us move toward a new world view, from a pyramid (colonizer) mindset to a circular model: male-female relationships, relationship to the earth, First Nations....."

What Is a World View and Why a New One?

Kathleen Dean Moore describes world view as follows: "A culture's actions, our sense of what is usual and proper, is shaped by a world view. Some people call it a *cosmology*.....It's an ethos, a set of guiding beliefs, that people swim in, often no more aware of them than a fish is aware of water."¹

A key word here is 'aware'. When we become aware that the world view out of which we live results in faulty, reckless or violent relationships with persons and all of creation, or in systemic inequalities or injustices, we sense an urgency to change it.

While growth toward more harmonious relationships is a good and sincere motive for altering one's world view, for persons in consecrated life, and indeed for committed Christians, it is not the whole story.

Changing one's world view becomes part of the ongoing transformation to which we are called, the invitation to "....be transformed by the renewing

of your mind...." issued by Paul in Romans 12:2. There are other similar invitations in the scriptures, a notable one being the Beatitudes, which challenge us to see the world in a different light, to alter our world view and transform our ways of thinking.

A World of Changing World Views

It is now almost cliché to say we are living in a time of great change on our planet and in our societal structures and institutions. Many voices, including Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*, are urging us to 'renew our minds' about our relationship to the Earth and all of creation, and to change our practices to avert ecological disaster and foster equal and respectful access to the beauty and bounty of the Earth.

Throughout the world, there is growing awareness of the disharmony in relationships between women and men, with efforts being made to alter the attitudes and structures contributing to this. These are but a few of the societal signs that call us to change individually and collectively.

Simultaneously, we are aware that many of our congregations are in a phase of diminishment in their life cycle, and are seeking ways or models to name this experience. The former congregational world views no longer fit the present situation. Some identify this as a time of transformation for religious institutes.

¹ Kathleen Dean Moore, *Great Tide Rising*, p. 93.

The Experience of Transformation

While we usually desire the outcome of transformation, such as the butterfly that emerges from the caterpillar, we will generally experience resistance to the process. And with reason, for it is not an easy one to navigate personally or communally. Uncertainty characterizes this time that some have named as ‘middle space’² in our congregational experience. It is that place of knowing we need to move from where and how we have been, but being unsure of where to go, let alone knowing if we are ‘there yet’. Other sectors in our society also have a similar experience.

Lynn Levo, csj, in her article in *LCWR Occasional Papers, Summer 2016*, says that transformation, in an institutional context, differs from change, which usually means improving on past practices, in that transformation is about acting now to create a future tomorrow. It is not just about looking different, but about being different. Feeling and intuition are important ways of knowing in this process, in addition to the education, skills and expertise on which we customarily rely.

She explains that particular feelings accompany the personal and communal wrestling that is part of transformation. Fear is common, and needs to be faced and expressed communally. Feelings of powerlessness and helplessness are also common, as well as irritability and aggression. Grieving past or anticipated losses is ongoing, as well as a sense of meaninglessness, isolation and aloneness. All of these require healthy expression and outlets, and call us to trust in God more deeply. “This is a critical time for being present, for listening deeply, especially to our emotional self, and for radical reliance on God.” (Lynn Levo)

Backpack for a Transformation Journey

Backpacks make us think about what is essential or important to bring. Here are some ‘travel essentials’, not the ones popular advertising would promote. Bring the treasures of our rich tradition of scripture, charism and spirituality. Reflect on the transformation stories told in the bible. Probe the transformation stories of your founders and congregational history. Draw from the wisdom of our rich spiritual tradition and its teachings on dark night and discernment.

Listen to what others outside the circle of religious life are saying about the world and about us. ‘The stranger has eyes we do not have’ says an Ivorian proverb. He or she can tell us things about us that we ourselves do not see.

Bring your full self and a journal or crayons or whatever helps you tell your story to yourself and companion travellers. Pack a cushion for long rest and contemplation breaks, to sift and sort the twists and turns of the journey. Self-care and contemplation are not negotiable!

And as you ponder your experience, ask yourself these questions:

- What story is this telling me about my future and our future?
- What can/must I/we do for this future to take root? ■

² Term used by Nancy Schreck, osf at LCWR 2014 Assembly.

Sources

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Relationships of Men and Women: *DIFFERENTIATION and DIVERSITY*



Margaret Patricia Brady, OSB

Christian spirituality is the human response of both men and women to the mystery of the death-resurrection of Jesus the Christ and the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit and its gifts through all time. It is a journey of growth as Christians become more and more Christ like.

Human response to this mystery is conditioned as well as structured by both the individual's historical situation and their sexuality. Both masculine and feminine experience of God is distinct but not separate from one another. They are complementary initiated by the individual's gender experience.

Resisting the urge to identify either specific gender attitudes whether feminine or masculine and their subsequent responses to biology allows us to see the transcendent dimension over the material. From here we move into the qualities that may be symbolically understood as either masculine or feminine but described as trans-temporal in which all may participate.

It is impossible to give more than a brief overview of the gifts of both genders. Culturally men are generally seen as having leadership abilities and are protective and supportive of life. On the other hand, women are seen as altero-centric and intuitive

with a caring, protective sense for life both physical and spiritual. Their spiritual qualities of compassion and refinement complement men's more assertive qualities by moderating and enhancing them.



Stained glass window depicting Pentecost, Slupsk, Pologne – Photo: Piosi (Shutterstock)



Three Stages of Religious Growth

When we look at the differentiation and diversity of gifts and see them as building up what is lacking in the body of Christ, the Church (Col. 1:24), we may view men and women in religious communities as “living laboratories of the kingdom of God.” (Simon-Pierre Arnold, OSB, Guest Speaker at the 2016 General Assembly of CRC)

Both communities would work towards building up the *koinonia*, ultimately in oneness, unity and communion. Since communities are made up of individuals, we must also take into account three stages of religious growth through which members will hopefully pass. They are:

1. Systemic control—keep the rule or the law and it will keep you.

2. Idealization is the stage in which one can identify and experience the ideal—God is love and Jesus is the perfect embodiment of love toward God and the human person. This is a highly emotional experiential stage where the ideal has not yet become a permanent inner reality. This interiorization leads to the next stage.

3. Personal process. Here one begins to understand on an experiential level that life comes out of death and the paschal mystery is a lived reality. Is not this what religious communities are challenged to live so as to open themselves to the kingdom of God? From here we move to communal dimensions of growth.

Ecclesial Mysticism

As members of communities collectively open themselves to experientially live communally in the mystery of the divine indwelling through prayer and contemplation of the Scriptures and celebrate together this mystery’s permanent actuality in the liturgy; they have returned to ecclesial mysticism. This leads to radical involvement in the mission of the Church, to the transformation of society.

In this prophetic dimension of ecclesial mysticism communities begin to challenge oppressive societal structures giving themselves selflessly to love and care for the poor and marginalized. All of this is done in community and such a community is a sign of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. We live in the already and the not yet. It anticipates the goal of all Christian communities—communion with the Triune God and with one another in faith, hope and love.

Discussion Questions

- From your own life experience can you give some concrete examples of the three stages of religious growth?
- Do you see your community moving into ecclesial mysticism? Are there some things that may facilitate its growth? ■

TRANSCENDING POLARIZATIONS



Gill Goulding, CJ

The Jubilee Year of Mercy could not have come at a more felicitous time to directly address a key issue raised by the Canadian Religious Conference in their Plenary Assembly 2016, namely, the issue of right relationships. At the heart of Pope Francis' challenge to the Church during this jubilee year was a call to rethink the way in which we relate to God, to one another and to the whole of creation.

In this consideration the Holy Father asked us to move beyond images of dominance and to transcend polarities in order that there might be true fruitfulness in the mission of the Church. The mercy of God is revealed in right relationships and these in turn engender fecundity in mission. These are vital truths for apostolic religious to reclaim.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, there is the injunction to realise that "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.... There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28) This is a particular challenge to religious not to debate about egalitarian 'rights', or gender ideology but rather to celebrate our oneness in Christ.

How can we best enter into such a celebration? Perhaps one way is to take as 'our way of proceeding' the presupposition of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola.¹

The Presupposition

Ignatius identifies a certain disposition we should have in regard to entering into an encounter or dialogue with another. Roughly paraphrased this disposition is as follows: the 'other' to whom I am speaking desires to say something that is good, so my responsibility is to be open to the good the other is trying to say. Such a disposition is clearly a very positive one. It means I come to any dialogue with an openness and an eagerness to listen closely and attentively to perceive the good the other is trying to say.

It is entirely different from the attitude of a person who comes to a relationship or an encounter or a dialogue with the presupposition "I know what Sister. X will say, because she always says the same thing, I know where she is coming from." Or "Father Y and Brother Z, I have known them for years they will never be interested in anything new." This attitude severely limits any real exchange for it sets limits to 'X,Y and Z' and does not ascribe to them the ordinary human reality, namely, of a person who, by the grace of God, grows, dialogues, changes, develops, matures, rather it conceives of a static identity.

How often have we done the same with community members, colleagues, acquaintances and even friends?

¹ To assure better cooperation between the one who is giving the Exercises and the exercitant, and more beneficial results for both, it is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false.

By contrast the Lord calls us to a disposition of openness that we might be surprised by those we encounter; that we might be amazed at the way God works in individual lives; that we might be ever open to engage in dialogue with all whom the Lord causes to journey with us on the path of life.

Can we be really disposed in this way? What would this mean in practice?

Well, it may include an engagement with community meetings in a way that sees them as a source of potential new engagement and learning. Such a disposition may lead to the possibility of our visioning processes becoming more enlivened, as, rather than focusing upon our problems and frailties, we consider the opportunities that may be opening up for us with smaller numbers and an increasing age profile. How do we harness the wisdom of our elderly members?

Certainly Pope Francis was concerned to engage the wisdom of age with the energy of youth, such an engagement may be across religious congregations or involving those outside religious life. A disposition focused in this way may stimulate possibilities beyond our current imagining.

Relationship with Creation

How does such a presupposition then affect our relationship with creation? If we are all one in Christ, then, as Hans Urs von Balthasar states, Christ “is the unchangeably valid blueprint in every situation in the world and in history.”² Such an assertion does not deny the reality of human freedom, but recalls us to our interconnectedness in Christ.

The prologue to the Fourth Gospel makes a similar assertion, in Christ all things were created and in him there is a recapitulation of all things. This connection moves beyond human relations and focuses also our relations with the whole of creation. It underlines that there is a fundamental intelligibility to the universe and an essential connectedness of all creation.

Pope Francis has insisted in *Laudato Si'* that “everything is interconnected, interrelated”³ and he also calls insistently for “a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.”⁴

The presupposition of the *Spiritual Exercises*, our relationships with one another and our interconnectedness with the whole of creation are grounded ultimately in the reality of the Trinity where we glimpse both a mystery and an intelligibility that transcends all polarization. ■

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, II*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 277.

³ Pope Francis *Laudato Si'* (138).

⁴ *Ibid* (240).

Reaching the *WHOLE* Through the *OTHER*

Louis Riverin, FMJ

At the National Roman Museum, we can admire the singular sculpture of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, which has the features of both sexes: ambivalent curves, a woman's breast and a man's sex. This ancient work is inspired by a myth according to which the nymph Salmacis, enamoured of the handsome Hermaphroditus but rejected by him, would have liked that their two bodies to be merged into one... and her desire was granted.

Why?

The tortured aestheticism of this sculpture thus expresses a heart-rending cry: why this insufficiency, this incompleteness, this never-quenched thirst? Why should I be eternally poor of what the other alone possesses? What might we have done to the gods to deserve this misfortune?

This curse can only come from some great fault as in the myth told in Plato's *Symposium* (189d-192e). In this myth, humanity was originally androgynous and would—because of its pride—receive the divine punishment of being separated into two sexes. Henceforth it would experience an inextinguishable thirst for the missing part or the “difference” of the other, which humanity then attempted to grasp by fusion. Fusion, according to the myth, is a way of having the other without the other, that is, dispensing with or the avoidance of entering into a relationship with him or her.

Another way of “dispensing with” or relieving the thirst for the other is to deny that the other has something that I do not have. That is true for sexual difference and it is also true for my condition of being created. Nietzsche bears witness to this with his implacable and caustic logic in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “But that I may reveal my heart entirely unto you, my friends: if there were Gods, how could I endure it to be no God! Therefore there are no Gods.” If I can't have it, then it doesn't exist!

Not Being Everything, a Blessing

After considering those perspectives, how amazing it is to re-read the Bible and to see sexual difference presented as a blessing: “God created the human being in his image, . . . male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:27) And this is not only good, but “very good.” (v. 31) Not being everything is unbearable; but the means that God has given us to reach this totality is the relationship, it is love, where the other remains other by engaging in its difference, as it happens in the Trinity.

The Father is eternally different from the Son, and reciprocally this holds true. However they mutually surrender themselves to one another through the Holy Spirit. It follows that the Divine Persons of the Godhead are not “all”, yet in another sense they attain this “all” by their communion of love. This is why the saints are not delivered from the desire to be “all”, rather they live this desire according to the love of God that flows freely within them.



The story of the young Vietnamese Redemptorist Marcel Van (1928–1959)¹ shows that while certain women would have preferred to be men; men can also deeply aspire to feminine qualities! Van asked Jesus: “Little Jesus, is it true that women saints love you with a more ardent love than men saints?” His dismay at the idea of not being able to become a Carmelite like his big spiritual sister Saint Thérèse of Lisieux likely resulting in a smile

¹ His beatification process is underway; he had the grace of several *Conversations* with Thérèse of Lisieux, the Virgin Mary and Jesus (published by Saint-Paul/Les amis de Van, 2001).

from the Saint, especially when he prayed to be changed into a girl! Of course, she was to explain to him in prayer, “God could do that, yet God does not choose to do so,” for ‘being infinitely wise,’ God was calling to him through his masculinity. Today, many people rejoice that Van gave a masculine face to the *Little Way* of Thérèse.

By accepting his incarnation, he follows in the path of his big sister Thérèse. For, although she was already a Carmelite, she simultaneously felt within her “the vocation of warrior, of priest, of apostle, of doctor, of martyr.” She finds the key to her vocation in love, which is the heart of the Church’s body. “So I shall be everything,” she exclaims in ecstasy. Materially, she is neither warrior, nor priest, nor martyr yet it is in love or in the communion with those who actually are [those things], that she can truly say that she is everything; by a singular renunciation of everything.

She thus echoes the Master of Carmel, John of the Cross, in *Ascent of Mount Carmel*: “To come by the ‘what you are not’, you must go by a ‘way you are not’.” Assuming what she is not—and never will be—mysteriously becomes the key to accessing it.

Marguerite Bourgeoys and the Complementarity Between Men and Women

This also applies to the relationship between the sexes. What beauty there is when we manage to combine our respective wealth! Marguerite Bourgeoys’ autobiography, *Les Écrits autographes*, gives a beautiful manifestation of the complementarity between men and women. In that work, one discovers that the person who would become the *Mother of the Colony* knew full well what it was to be around only men.

Travelling across France before embarking for Canada, she passed a night in an inn where there were men who “said several regrettable words” to her, so that she had to stay by the side of the coachman! When she got to her room, she barricaded the door with everything she could find and even had to discourage one man who wanted to come in...

During the ocean crossing, she once again finds herself with almost all men. One can see a sign of her discreet effect in their transformation in the fact that, by the time they got to Quebec City, she said that by then they were as “gentle as true religious,



Arrival of Marguerite Bourgeoys in Ville-Marie, (Montreal), New France (Quebec), 1653 - Illustration: Francis Back - Photo: Bernard Dubois
© Musée Marguerite-Bourgeoys

which gave me much joy to go on with them to Ville-Marie” [now Montreal]. And shortly afterwards, she adds that “these hundred men were changed like linen that has been put through the laundry.” One can guess at the kindness of Marguerite’s heart behind this change, taking care of each one.

Even if she became acquainted with some of the less pleasant aspects of men, Marguerite also received a great deal from her male colleagues, particularly as a result of the incredible historical adventure of Ville-Marie. The audacity, tenacity and kindness of Monsieur de Maisonneuve as well as all the men who surrounded him was the catalyst that drove St. Marguerite’s long vocational search to finally reach its goal. It also enabled her vocational identity to unfold in the manner that it did.

It is in communion that we receive what we are not, and will never be. Renouncing to have the other without the other, we accept to enter into relationship with him or her, in order not to have only his/her difference, but the relationship with him or her!

Questions for Reflection:

- What riches have I discovered in me thanks to my brothers and sisters?
- Which riches are those that I myself do not possess, but of which I can say that they are mine because of my brothers and sisters? ■



Toward a New Relationship Between Men and Women

Re-interpreting the Account of Martha and Mary, Lk 10:38-42

Michel Proulx, O.PRAEM

We know quite well the account of the Gospel of Luke where Jesus is received by two sisters, Martha and Mary (10:38-42). For centuries, these women have been regarded as illustrating two major types of religious life. Martha, in her eagerness to serve, represented the apostolic life while Mary, seated at the feet of Jesus, illustrated the contemplative religious life.

It is quite obvious that was not what the text evoked in the first century, since at the time of its writing, these forms of consecrated life did not yet exist. However, in a re-reading for today, could we not see in it the evocation of new possibilities that Jesus offers to women, as well as the illustration of a new type of relationship between men and women in the Church?

New Positioning for Women

Martha, bustling about cooking and preparing the table, symbolizes the traditional role of women in a patriarchal context. Women are truly at the service of men's well-being. Martha is moving about in every direction so that her male guest lacks nothing, which was usually what women in the first century were doing in their house.

But with the character of Mary, Luke shows that Jesus opened up new possibilities for women. In a prophetic way, within a patriarchal society, Jesus imagined and experimented with another way of living the status of women. That is what Mary's character is illustrating.

Christ in the House of Mary and Martha, main altar in the church of Saint Matthew in Stitar, Croatia - Photo: Zvonimir Athletic (Shutterstock)

One notes that she is seated at the feet of Jesus. In Judaism, that is the position in which the Holy Scriptures were studied under the guidance of a master. It is the position of someone who becomes a disciple and dedicates himself to the study of the Word. That was reserved for men. It was unthinkable that women study the Law. So, Jesus is not only open to that, but he even says it is the best choice that a woman can make. In fact, he says to Martha, who was complaining about her sister's attitude: "It is Mary who has chosen the better part, and it is not to be taken from her." (10:42)

Resistance

We notice that the novelty of what Jesus is doing arouses resistance: "Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me." (v. 40) This protest probably reflects the criticism that women in the first century received who availed themselves of this new idea.

But is it not surprising that this criticism comes specifically from a female character? Don't we have here an example of what Simon-Pierre Arnold, *osb*, said at the last CRC General Assembly? He said that, very often, colonized people have a "colonized spirit," that is to say, that their representation of themselves has suffered the effects of colonization. They have integrated this vision of themselves, this positioning of dominated people. Martha defends, in a way, the status quo of the model she knows, of the model that has been instilled in her since childhood.

Transformation of the Male-Female Relationship

This narrative from Luke not only opens up new possibilities for women, but it also illustrates another type of male-female relationship. In the patriarchal model, women are at the service of men. Our text shows that, in an astonishing way, Jesus does not enter into this relational framework. While Martha suggests to him that two women be at his service, Jesus refuses this type of relationship.

If we examine the relational dynamics between Jesus and Mary, we see that this woman is not at the service of Jesus. It is instead Jesus who is at the service of Mary. Jesus is indeed a master, but a master who positions himself as a servant. He serves Mary by making her hear the Word. Doesn't Jesus say: "Yet here am I among you as one who

serves!"? (Luke 22:27) And that is how Jesus also places himself in his relationship with women. In Lk 10, we are witnessing an inversion of the situation. Jesus does not expect Mary to prepare a meal for him, but he himself offers her a meal, a meal of the Word. We are a long way from the patriarchal model.

Shared Listening of the Word

But can we not take another step? A step that authorizes an interpretation of this pericope in light of the whole of the Gospel of Luke. Could we not understand that Jesus is placing himself, with Mary, in a position where they listen together to a Word at which they are both filled with wonder?

At the beginning of Jesus's ministry, there is an experience of hearing the Word. Having been baptized, "And a voice came down from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'." (Lk 3:22) In the narrative of the temptations (Lk 4:1-13), Jesus rejected the devil by using the words of God. Moreover, when the tempter suggests to him to change a stone into bread, he will reply: "Human beings live not by bread alone." (v. 4) In short, it appears that listening to the Word was at the heart of Jesus's spiritual experience and that he nourished himself deeply from this Word.

Mary joins him in this experience. With her, he shares what he has heard. He invites her to the table of the Word from which he himself is nourished. Would it be going too far to think that he welcomes her as a commensal and that they nourish themselves together from the same Word that transcends both of them?

Does not this call upon us, in the domain of male-female relationships in the Church, to place ourselves side by side in mutual service and in an attitude of shared listening to the Word?

Questions for Reflection:

- What is new for me in this interpretation of the account of Martha and Mary? What reflections arise in me?
- Concretely, how could we experience in our community this type of mutual service and this type of joint listening to the Word? ■



Br. Antoine-Emmanuel, FMJ

“Male and female he created them.” (Gn 1:27) There is the great wealth of our humanity, but also the big challenge! Do we, the consecrated, have anything to say today about this relationship between man and woman? Better yet: do we have something to live that is a sign, a luminous and joyful testimony for our world?



From Domination to Reciprocity

Let's look at the origins of this relationship in the biblical context. In the first days of our creation, original trust reigned. Trust in God, mutual trust between man and woman, who could expose themselves in their vulnerability without shame or fear.

Then came the loss of trust in God and His Word under the instigation of the serpent. The consequence of this defiance is known: “Your yearning will be for your husband, and he will dominate you.” (Gn 3:16) How true this word turned out to be in human history! So many desires and dominations have existed historically in the male-female relationship...

When the Kingdom Begins to Appear

When Jesus, the Word made flesh, appears and when the Kingdom breaks into the “here and now”, what do we see? We see the emergence of reciprocity. Is it not a woman, Mary, who leads Jesus to make his first sign at Cana, also known as the “arche” [beginning, origin] of all signs?

In the same way, it is a woman—a Syrio-Phoenician—who leads him to extend his ministry to the pagans. It is a woman, Martha, who leads him to fulfill the ultimate sign that will lead to his Passion. It is a woman, Mary of Bethany who, by anointing him, will preside at the opening of his Passion. It is a woman, his mother Mary, who will be infinitely close to him at the hour of the infinite offering of his Life. It is thus women who allow Jesus to give all that He is. Covetousness no longer has the last word; spiritual motherhood can now unfold.

Conversely, Jesus is indeed the one who leads Mary towards the mystery of her intimate union with the work of redemption, towards the fullness of her motherhood. It is Jesus who leads the woman of Samaria to her full freedom. It is Jesus who frees the adulterous woman accused by men of the Law. It is Jesus who leads Mary Magdalene from the slavery of her seven demons to the freedom of the Gospel. In all that, there is no domination; on the contrary, Jesus gives himself up so that these women may come into their own, in other words, come to their vocation.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman, relief on the baptismal font in the church of Saint Matthew in Stitar, Croatia – Photo: Zvonimir Athletic (Shutterstock)

Women enable Jesus to give all that He is, and Jesus gives himself up so that women may come to their vocation. Admirable reciprocity!

The Spring of Reciprocity Flows Henceforth

Then came the hour of his Passover, when Jesus definitively took upon himself the drama of covetousness and domination of the sexes. What was already beginning to appear in his public life, as we have just seen, is now offered to all. The spring of reciprocity now flows like a powerful stream that is offered to our own narratives.

Saint Paul will be deeply moved by this reciprocity and will proclaim this gift in Chapter 5 of his Epistle to the Ephesians, saying to men and women: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Eph. 5:21) He will preach about submission that is the gift of self to the other so that he or she can reach the fullness of their being. The gift of the Kingdom is not the abnegation of the sexes but their baptism in the reciprocity of love. “There can be neither male nor female—for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

The Kingdom opens a reciprocal interiority between men and women. That which was never possible, is now possible. It has been offered. It is a fundamental manifestation of the Kingdom, perhaps the most beautiful, the most eloquent. When the cross of the Suffering Servant is received, the model of macho domination collapses; when the Passion of Mary is contemplated, feminist domination collapses as well, because fear no longer reigns. And when one’s gaze plunges into the mystery of the risen New Adam and the New Eve that shares His glory, the follies and errors of covetousness and domination are healed. For it is this mystery that reciprocity comes to its fullness and glory; it is from this mystery that mercy overflows.

Consecrated Life, Laboratory of Reciprocity

If it is true that consecrated life is a laboratory of the “Kingdom’s” own new relations, then, we, as consecrated persons have work to do! It is not the kind of work that manufactures the Kingdom in

the laboratory; but rather *welcomes* and *cultivates* the gifts of the Kingdom and especially this gift of male-female reciprocity in Christ.

It is no longer the place of men that must be defended or overthrown, nor is it feminism that must be preached or fought against. It is the mutual relationship between men and women that must be plunged into the Paschal Mystery. Consecrated life becomes a laboratory of male-female reciprocity. This is true of the new communities that bring together men and women in various ways. It is true of the new structures in which elderly consecrated men and women live; it is true for all consecrated persons!

How to work in this laboratory? It seems to me that a process—long but fruitful—can be described by these six steps: listening together to the Word that opens us to the Other and to one another; prayer that connects us to the energies of the Kingdom; mercy mutually welcomed and always chosen as a priority; listening and the opening-up of the heart to go outside of oneself and make room for the other; plunging into the kenosis of Jesus to consent to be poor in front of others; the renewed choice of chastity in celibacy, anchored in neither fear nor law or ideal, but oriented towards the Kingdom.

All of this however, cannot flourish except by the ray of God’s grace. Unity and communion comes only through a death of self, which left entirely to human nature is impossible. This laboratory of reciprocity cannot “work” without its principal source, which is the Eucharist. It is in Jesus-Eucharist that all the connections of genuine love are woven on this earth.

Is there a more beautiful prayer than the one made in 1949 by Chiara Lubich¹ and Iginio Giordani,² which I would translate as: “Jesus-Eucharist, seal thyself, on the void of myself and the void of himself (of herself) the covenant that you yourself want.” That is the central focus of the “laboratory!”

For Further Reflection:

- Which path does one follow—both personally and as a community—in order to have a taste of this reciprocity that is characteristic of the Kingdom itself? ■

¹ Founder of the *Focolare* Movement.

² Italian politician and journalist, co-founder and key figure of the *Focolare* Movement.



A Closer Look at One Experience

Consecrated Men and Women in the Same House

**Solène Garneau, FMJ, 35 ans,
Louis Riverin, FMJ, 41 ans**

Life in a gender-mixed community, what grace and challenge! We are pleased to share with you the fruit of this experience, which has been lived in the Marie-Jeunesse Family for nearly thirty years,¹ and which of course is still ongoing. Our average age is still relatively low (33 years), and we have not yet exhausted our discoveries about the beauty of the relationship between men and women in community!

Where Do We Come From?

We come from a culture in which equality between men and women, at least in principle, is self-evident. On this point, we have reaped the fruits of our predecessors, including several men and women religious! As boys and girls, we grew up on the same school benches with the chance to feel that we could all exercise the same trades. It was quite natural that this co-educational experience be extended to community life, as it would be unthinkable for our councils and work and apostolate teams to not be mixed. The vigilance to preserve these two pearls—consecrated celibacy and mixing gender—has always been applied with care.



What was not obvious, however, was how to live our own true colours as men and women in a harmonious way. We are well aware of how all these definitions of specific masculine and feminine traits have historically been arbitrary and discriminatory. Nowadays, attempts to circumscribe femininity and masculinity are often frowned upon, yet we realize that they are indispensable for living together in a healthy way.

Whatever one may say, a woman is not a man; a man is not a woman. If the woman and the man are often an enigma for their own gender, how much more so are they for the other gender...

¹ Founded in Quebec in the 1980s, the Marie-Jeunesse Family brings together nearly 100 community members, men and women, on four continents, and devotes itself to the evangelization of young people. Our charism is to be there, simply, for the Beauty and the Joy of God!

The Grace of Being Male and Female

This process was mostly developed following the experience of one of our sisters who had never perceived more than two models of femininity: the doll and the tomboy. She had chosen the second option.

One day, following a retreat, she became aware of the femininity that was seeking to emerge from within her and felt the inner invitation to wear skirts. Previously the sisters were almost always in pants. When the other sisters saw this, they said to themselves, “Her, in a skirt?”, however they too gradually discovered and participated in this same grace, amazed at the joy, freedom and other fruits that resulted from it.

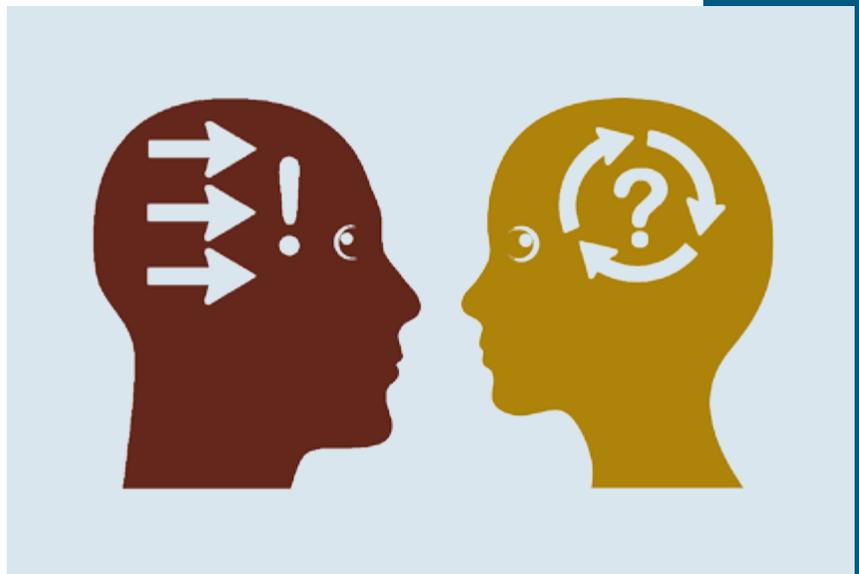
Mutual Enrichment

From that point on, we became aware of the need to reflect upon our being men and women, which shows up every day in a thousand and one occasions.

Living in a mixed-gender community sometimes means experiencing the impact of masculine and feminine psychology. The brother will not necessarily deduce that when the sister says, in a seemingly innocuous way: “Do you find it cold in the car?” which really means: “Can you please close the window!” A sister will not always understand the reason for the uneasiness created by a small remark made with the intention of improving a situation: the brother feels his skills challenged... This is where the reflections inspired by the psychologist John Gray² often offer some valuable help.

A mixed-gender environment offers above all a great mutual contribution in terms of complementarity. If a sister is asked for news about the house for which she is responsible, she will answer by giving news about every person who lives there; the brother will instead talk about the activities, the number of people who come there, the missions, and so on. These two attitudes are necessary and complementary!³

With time, brothers tend to espouse qualities that are “fatherly” in nature and they strive to make their way forward in life while sisters focus on qualities of understanding and on fostering a sense of stability. One difference between genders is that brothers are more naturally turned towards the outside, towards discovery. They help keep the doors open, and that is an asset for the mission. The sisters appreciate the support of the brothers, who sometimes help them to de-escalate and de-dramatize certain situations.



The sisters spontaneously focus more on experience, on the heart, on the interior... The brothers in that way learn not only to do things for God, but to take care of God, to express their love for God more explicitly. They learn certain skills with respect to the “presentation” of things, such as a centre-piece for a meeting or the design of the chapel for liturgy. They discover how to focus more on the “other”, especially in regards to the “little ones.” (Lc 17:2) Finally, the brothers also learn to pay more attention to what is happening within themselves, to go inside, to welcome their emotions.

² Cf. especially: *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, New York, HarperCollins, 1992; version française: *Les hommes viennent de Mars, les femmes viennent de Vénus*, Montréal, Édition Logiques, 1994.

³ Cf. Étienne Vetö, «La vie consacrée au défi de la mixité et de la communion des états de vie – L'exemple du Chemin Neuf», *Communio* 40 (5) 2015, p. 95-102.

A Treasure to Protect

Mixed-gender environments require a daily adjustment, a certain form of inculturation. This daily confrontation with “the other” is a powerful springboard for opening oneself up to the All-Other and receiving from Him our own identity. It follows that this daily challenge also requires of us to give ourselves the means to preserve the beauty of consecrated celibacy. The Marie-Jeunesse Family, it seems to us, has always taken the challenge of attraction between men and women in a mixed-gender community very seriously and consequently, we have developed the capacity to confront this sensitive issue with clarity of thought.

Among the concrete means adopted to do this, there is what we call the “rule of three,” that is, always being three people in the various situations of daily life, either for the mission, for work, or for daily tasks such as for shopping, etc. Our community’s formation activities also seek to educate members about open and healthy friendships, to live transparency and vigilance, to grow in emotional maturity and always to place ourselves before the Lord, to whom we commit ourselves first and foremost. But the most effective way of protecting this gift of mixed gender is being aware of the treasure that it represents: the beauties of our consecrated life lived together in a way that each of us can retain in their personal and community history.

Together for the Mission

We also experience how much a mixed-gender environment is an opportunity for growth in our mission. First and foremost, this reality allows us a greater versatility in our hospitality, which is mainly oriented towards young people from 15 to 30 years of age.

In point of fact, a young man of twenty is often spontaneously more at ease in a mixed community than he would be in an exclusively female community. In a world in search of making inter-personal connections, a visiting young woman shared with us that our mixed group offered her all the diversity of a family spirit. We would not be the Marie-Jeunesse Family in the same way if we were not mixed!

Second and more to the point, the testimony of chastity is undeniably relevant and meaningful for today. Young people discover with joy, a place where friendship is simple, true and without connotations. There was one day when, a young woman who had been visiting a house, thanked all the brothers of that house for their chaste look which had restored her dignity.

A mixed environment is a grace in and of itself; in its very requirements of its members. Undoubtedly, one of the most beautiful signs of this grace is that we can say, when we are among only brothers or sisters: “We miss our sisters, we miss our brothers!”

For Further Reflection:

Mixing gender has always been present in religious life over the course of the Church’s history, yesterday as well as today.

- What kind of experiences in mixed-gender situations have I had as a religious?
- How have I been enriched by these experiences?

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