

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

General Assembly of the CRC

The General Assembly of the Canadian Religious Conference (CRC) will be held in Montreal from **May 26 to 29, 2016**. The theme of the Assembly, *The Mission of Congregational Leaders: Discerning Hope amid the Challenges*, is also the theme of this issue of the CRC Bulletin.

The keynote speaker is Father Simon-Pierre Arnold. A Benedictine Abbot originally from Belgium, Simon-Pierre Arnold founded a monastery in Peru where he has been living for the past 40 years.

The General Assembly is held every two years. It is an opportunity for congregational leaders who are members of the CRC and their leadership team to meet, to reflect and to share on important issues, as well as to celebrate. At the end of the Assembly, the CRC members will elect a new Administrative Council and propose directions for the next two years.

You Can Follow the Assembly on the CRC Website

As it was done in the past, a daily update of the Assembly will be posted on the Canadian Religious Conference website at: www.crc-canada.org.

Planning Committee of the General Assembly

The members of the Planning Committee of the 2016 CRC General Assembly are:

Georges Smith, CSB, Chairperson;
 Sharon Fagan, PBVM, Atlantic Representative;
 Bonnie Moser, FCJ, Ontario Representative;
 Luc Tardif, OMI, Quebec Representative;
 Lise Paquette, PM, West Representative.

The UISG Has Launched a New Website

On February 19, 2016, the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) has launched a new website in six languages. The website www.uisg.org is part of a wider strategic communications project. The aim is to have an effective communication system.

The new website gives access to the latest news and to the various documents of the UISG, including that of the organization's Bulletin. A Facebook page was also opened and a Twitter account was created.

The UISG will hold its Plenary Assembly in Rome from May 9 to May 13, 2016. The theme *Weaving Global Solidarity for Life* will be looked at from different angles: *Care of the Planet; World Issues; Religious Life; Solidarity as We Would Like to Live It*. The Golden Jubilee of the UISG will be celebrated during the Assembly. Further information about the Assembly and the Jubilee can be found on the www.uisg.org website.



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Challenges for Religious Life Today

Timothy Scott, CSB

It is perhaps simplistic to assert that consecrated life face challenges at this moment in history. There have always been problems of one sort or another and I suppose there always will be. Still, an aging population of religious women and men in an increasingly secularized society such as our own suggests that we are at a crossroads. I would like to suggest five challenges for religious life today.

Relationship to an Evolving Society

The first challenge is how to negotiate the relationship of religious communities to a rapidly evolving Canadian society. A serious fallacy would consist in seeing religious life independent of the broader questions faced by the Catholic Church and indeed by all religions in Canada.

The diminution of religious practice amongst Canadians of European descent has been offset to some extent by the increasing presence in our churches of Catholics from south-east Asia, Africa and Latin America. However the sons and daughters of new Canadians have not as yet found their way into our seminaries and religious houses. Like other Canadians, they are more likely to describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” or even “nones” as the sociologists term them; that is, persons lacking any formal religious affiliation.

In the absence of a sense of Catholic identity or an identifiable connection with a community of faith, it is simply impossible to imagine young people discerning a call to the consecrated life. Unusually, however, the desire of many young people for a spiritual connection remains very real.

Engaging with the Weight of One's History

A second challenge for active religious communities today concerns how they engage with what I would call the weight of their own history. Vatican II suggested that the renewal of religious life involved a return to the original inspiration of our religious families.

Many apostolic communities of women and men came into existence in the decades following the French revolution and flourished in Canada because of a clear need in the areas of health care and education. We were blessed with a government and society more than willing to have us engage in such roles. Today, with the state having assumed primary responsibility in these areas, what is an active apostolic community to do?

Lay Association and Continuity

An third challenge for religious communities concerns what we often call lay association. Both single and married Catholics have discerned a call to be associated spiritually with a religious institute. This is by no means a new phenomenon, but it has taken on greater importance in recent years. As the number of professed members continues to diminish, is it possible to conceive of a kind of spiritual continuity, where the charism and mission of a religious congregation is carried on in some way by such committed lay people?

New Communities

A fourth issue concerns new communities composed of both consecrated men and women and

even married persons. Like secular institutes, in structure, dress and style of life, they draw much of their inspiration from more traditional religious congregations. In some respects, they are closer in inspiration to contemplative religious communities than active ones. Still, there are important pastoral and canonical challenges to what is a new and evolving form of the Christian life.

Contemplative and Monastic Communities

A fifth and final area concerns contemplative and monastic communities in Canada. They are numerically fewer and their history is rather shorter. The first cloistered contemplative congregation of women, the Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood, was founded in 1861. The first monastery for men, still in existence, is the Trappists of Oka, which dates only from 1883. While they are fewer in number, monasticism still holds an attraction for a small number of new members, as well as a significant attraction for the unaffiliated "nones" in their search for an experience of the sacred.

Ongoing Evolution

Religious life has been adapting from its inception in the Egyptian desert in the days of Anthony and Athanasius. Pope John Paul noted that is hard to imagine what the Church would look like without consecrated persons. As we read the signs of the times, we have every reason to believe that religious life will continue to evolve here in Canada, under the influence of the Spirit. ■



Discerning Hope amid the Challenges

George T. Smith, CSB

In the traditional and plentiful literature on contemporary organizational leadership, it is common to see authors draw a distinction between leadership and management. Organizations need both but they require skills not often possessed by the same person. In other words, it is often difficult to lead and manage and one often makes mistakes if one attempts to do both. A manager makes decisions; a leader empowers. A manager thinks creatively; a leader inspires creativity. A manager listens; a leader ensures understanding... and so on.

Is it Possible to Be Leader and Pastor?

In my recent ministry as a congregational leader, I see the contrast not so much between leadership and management, but between leadership and pastoral accompaniment. Too often, my confrères seem to expect both, and just as often I see the difficulty of providing both.

Collaborating with four other members of our General Council certainly helps me to remember that there is a wealth of gifts that we bring into service for the members of our congregation. Still, there are times when it seems that there is an expectation for me to make decisions for the good of the congregation as a whole, while at same time being pastorally present to those whose lives are most impacted (oftentimes in their minds negatively) by those same decisions. Is it possible to be leader and pastor?

So many of the decisions to which I am called to give leadership involve confronting our reality and evaluating the structures of common life and the modes of apostolic ministry that will be sustainable over the next 10 to 20 years. It is difficult to imagine that there is a congregational leader in Canada who is not experienced in this challenge. Aging membership and the declining ability to sustain ministry commitments provide enormous challenges which some congregations have met with grace and dignity, while others still struggle to face reality.

One can discern seeds of hope as old conceptions of common life and ministry give way to newer, more inclusive modes of living out radical discipleship and serving those most in need. But how does a congregational leader go ahead to guide the way (the classical definition of a leader) while at the same time accompanying those whom he or she is called to lead? Are leadership and pastoral accompaniment mutually exclusive concepts? Do the difficult decisions that a congregational leader is required to make render him or her incapable of ministering to those who feel hurt and abandoned by those decisions?

Key Insights for Discerning Hope

While there are no easy answers to these questions, a recent set of questions posed by Pope Francis to religious, and captured in *Rejoice! A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women: A Message*

from the *Teachings of Pope Francis*, issued in 2014 by the CICLSAL, has some insights for those of us looking for hope amid the challenges.

The language that Pope Francis employs to challenge us constitutes a lexicon of hope. As advanced in years as we may be, he asks us to search for the “joy of freshness.” He dares us to look into the “depths of our hearts” to find God waiting for us. He asks us if we are free men and women.

Is there any more profound or personal question that one religious can ask of another: “Are you living in freedom?” And if we are, are we still “restless for God?” In regards to our brothers and sisters in religious life, “do we still feel the restlessness of love” for them? Do we live in authentic Christian communities or “comfortable communities”? Do we have vision? Are we daring? “Do our dreams fly high?” These are the questions that inspire us to discern hope amid the challenges.

Called to Be “Gospel Ritual Leaders”

In his most recent book *The Francis Factor and the People of God: New Life for the Church* (Orbis Books, 2015), Gerald A. Arbuckle, SM offers a typically insightful analysis of the ministry of leadership in today’s Franciscan Church. The questions that Pope Francis poses to us as religious serve as a backdrop for the integration of leadership and ministry. Taken together with Arbuckle’s analysis, they suggest ways that congregational leaders can strive to be authentic leaders, capable of making difficult decisions while accompanying those whom they are called to lead.

Arbuckle’s analysis of the elements of pastoral leadership is as challenging as the Pope’s questions. Using lessons learned from Scripture, particularly through the lives of Moses, Joshua, Jeremiah and Jesus, Arbuckle introduces the concept of “Gospel Ritual Leaders.”

Acknowledging Loss

The first task of a ritual leader is to acknowledge loss. As the prophets encouraged people to name their sorrows, so Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* describes some of the causes of contemporary grief among the People of God (nos. 32, 70).

As congregational leaders, we must find ways to allow our communities and individuals to ritualize the loss that comes from the demise of familiar structures of common life and ministry, not to mention the debilitating struggles of aging and illness. But we must do so not as men and women above the fray, but as fellow mourners willing to publicly acknowledge our loss and pain.

Learning to Be Listeners

And we must be listeners, taking our inspiration from the listening ministry of Jesus, both in prayer and in his encounters with the men and women of his day. For Arbuckle, our listening must be hospitable and healing, and here we have so much to learn from the dynamic of listening that is at the heart of the experiences of Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen with the L’Arche movement. Central to this ministry of listening is the power of silence.

Those familiar with the work of Arbuckle will be aware of the importance he attaches to the creative power of chaos which, in its authentic biblical sense, describes the reality of many contemporary religious communities in the North American and European Church. From this chaos will come either extinction or refounding, but congregational leaders will need to learn to respect dissenters and cultivate a sense of humor. Pope Francis seems to be gifted at both, and has much to teach us about the simultaneous ministry of leadership and accompaniment. ■

Mission and Creativity of Congregational Leaders

Thérèse Meunier, csj

Our Constitutions describe the congregational leader as, “the spiritual and apostolic leader for the congregation and a sign of its unity. She calls forth and affirms the sisters in their efforts to respond to the Spirit in their life, mission, and ministry... she directs the congregation in fidelity to its mission and spirit, and encourages it to move always toward greater love of God, of *the dear neighbour*, and reverence for all creation.” (n° 91).

Support, Affirm, Encourage

While each congregation has a specific charism, the mission of the leader is always to call members towards greater unity and love within their congregation, their mission, the church, and the world.

Pope Francis articulated the mission of consecrated women and men as that of being “a beacon, a constant light in the life of the church.” Through living their consecration every Congregation has its unique way of being that light in the world. Each leader is called to support, affirm, and encourage members, and to hold before them their specific mission. In order to do this the leader must have a clear sense of the direction given by the founders and of today’s needs and challenges.

I believe that every challenge can offer opportunities and possibilities. Every challenge has the potential to call forth individual gifts and to invite us to be creative. We are called to be co-creators with God in this evolving reality.

This article will focus on the challenges in our present reality and in our ministries.



Creative Response to Changing Demographics

In looking at our reality, we are faced with changing demographics and use of living space. These situations involve a degree of change and loss. They can be overwhelming or we can ask ourselves: What are the opportunities? What is the new, the creative to which we are being called?

First, in addressing our living space, we responded creatively by inviting another congregation to live with us in our main residence where assisted living and long term care would be provided. A second creative response involved introducing change in order to accommodate sisters wishing to remain in their small communities while they aged. The invitation was for leadership to offer additional support that would enable them to do this.



We have developed alternate ways to enable our sisters to continue engaging in works of mercy, e.g., through hospitality and presence to programs. Another ministry opportunity was to invite 18 religious congregations of women and men to collaborate in ministry. 'Becoming Neighbours' was formed to welcome immigrants and refugees to Canada and to involve religious as prayer partners and as companions for the newcomers. We have also invited our associates, congregations, staff, family, and friends to work with us in sponsoring two refugee families.

Dealing with the Losses through Ritual

A third creative response was explored with a congregation no longer able to provide for their own leadership and administration. They approached us to be their sponsors: to take on responsibility for the care of their sisters and for their temporal goods. This invitation was for our leader and our congregation to be open to the new and to respond to the evolving needs.

Envisioning New Models for Ministry

In addition to the challenge of our demographics we had to face the reality of our apostolic works. Over time we have divested ourselves of our large institutions and ministries. This was another experience of living through change, loss and letting go. The role of the leader is to see these changes as opening up creative possibilities.

One of these was to envision a sustainable model for ministry. This led us to set up 'Fontbonne Ministries' a separate corporation with an endowment fund to carry on our works. Part of this sustainable model involved preparing others to carry on our mission and charism. Two of the tools we use are staff orientation (our history, charism, and ministries) and participation in Mission Effectiveness programs.

With any of these challenges congregations are experiencing change and loss. The leader can help members to deal with the losses through ritual. The leader needs to remember that members are not the only ones being impacted by the changes. For example, when we were moving out of our Mother House after 60 years, we gave sisters, associates, staff, family, friends, neighbours, and former members occasions to be involved in rituals: remembering, sharing stories, and grieving.

"Let Us Be Beacon of Light"

While these challenges open up new possibilities, the internal needs of the congregation can easily consume all the time of the congregational leader and the leadership team. Leaders need to remain focused on their role as both the spiritual and apostolic leader for the congregation.

This is the 'constant light' that Pope Francis calls us to be in the life of the church. Let us as leaders be that beacon of light in our congregation, in the church, and in the world. ■

The Dance of Leadership Today

Theresa Campeau, OSU

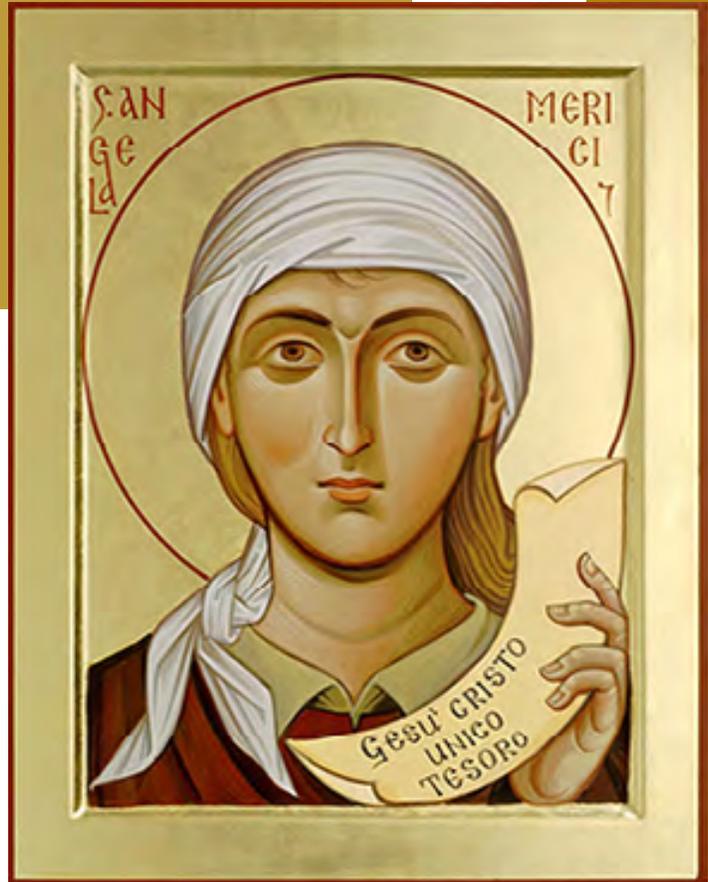
The Ursuline Sisters of Chatham is a small group of just over eighty sisters. Even as we diminish in numbers, we strive together to face the challenges of the future with hope and passion. With contemplative hearts we respond to the invitation to enter more deeply into life's mysteries and lean on the God who is always faithful. Together we are answering the call to be present to this new moment in our history with openness and creativity. We continue our mission to be proclaimers of the Gospel, to be signs of hope and joy for our world, to be, as we describe in our Ursuline Constitutions, "pilgrims in service, mobile and flexible, responding to the needs of the times."

We are strengthened by the words of our foundress, Angela Merici, who said that we would never be abandoned. True to her promise, we experience her presence with us daily. I will reflect here on three aspects of life that ground and carry us forward in the ministry of leadership: contemplation, collaboration and compassion.

Contemplative Approach to Life

There is no way to live a viable religious life today without being deeply rooted in the Divine Mystery. A contemplative approach to life calls us to be attentive, responsive and open to the surprises of the Spirit. This is the call for all leaders and for the whole congregation.

We are living in a time when, as Nancy Schreck, OSF, reminds us, the challenge is not only to work outside the box, but to get rid of the box altogether. Like Oscar Romero reflects, there is value to stepping back and taking the long view as we make collective decisions.



Saint Angela Merici (1474-1540), Foundress of the Ursuline Sisters (www.reflexionchretienne.e-monsite.com)

As leaders, we foster a discerning spirit among all community members, reminding each other of our deep roots and the constant call to attend to the needs of the most vulnerable. Not only are we called beyond ourselves to this mission, but contemplation develops in us a spirit of wonder and reverence for all aspects of creation. These elements nourish in us joy and gratitude and move us to reach out to Earth and her inhabitants.

A contemplative spirit fosters an experience of abundance which allows us to be generous and gracious as we approach challenges; trusting as we share what we have in order to bless the future with hope. We realize that this is a time rich with possibility if we are willing to be open and to move forward with new eyes, new learnings and fresh hope.

Energizing Ways to Collaborate with Others

As leaders in religious life, we work constantly to discover energizing ways to collaborate with others in the service of all. We facilitate work with other religious communities, neighbours on all sides, ecumenical and interfaith groups and other partners in the work of justice. It takes energy, enthusiasm and care to develop and maintain relationships. Today's issues demand concerted efforts, combining of forces and inclusive approaches; building bridges and making the path as we go. As Christopher Fry says, "Affairs are now soul size"¹. We work consistently at ways to share expertise, personnel, solidarity in prayer, financial and other resources for the betterment of all.

A major source of partnership for Ursulines has been the steady growth of the network of Companions, women, inspired by the spirit of Angela Merici, who journey with us and extend beyond us. At the same time we maintain strong bonds with various circles of women in Peru, a connection established and nurtured for over 50 years. These relationships are important to us and we work at maintaining their viability.

Compassion for Others and for All of Creation

As leaders we encourage a way of life marked by compassion for others, especially for those who are most vulnerable in body, mind and spirit. We strive for ways of communicating that are respectful, inclusive and timely. As we face changes within, among and beyond ourselves, we approach each other with reverence and care, searching together for the most merciful and just solutions to the challenges we face personally and communally.

This spirit of compassion is extended to all creation. For many years we have focused our attention on the cries of the poor and the cries of Earth and on the plight of women and children. As leaders we try to keep this outward focus in the forefront, as the Community members have mandated us to do so.



Saint Angela Merici, Foundress of the Ursuline Sisters
(www.reflexionchretienne.e-monsite.com)

Dancing Forward

Holding the history of our lives and standing at the threshold, we are poised to hear a tune both distant and near, as we learn new dance steps. The dance of the Spirit invites and inspires us to continue living our story with the same vitality and courage as the women who have gone before us. Who knows where the Spirit will lead us as we dance forward! ■

¹ Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners*, (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1951. First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1971).

We Have to Keep Up OUR HOPE!



Josephine Badali, CND

Shortly after the captivity of our Sister Gilberte Bussièrre, Fathers Gianantonio Alegri and Giampaolo Marta, I was speaking with Sister Gilberte's 97 year old mother. In my head and heart, I was trying to encourage and to support her, to listen to her fears and to assure her of our prayer and our accompaniment during those days of the unknown. In the midst of our conversation, Mme Bussièrre said to me: *Well, we have to keep up our hope!* I was taken aback to hear these words from a mother whose daughter might well be dead! My heart was moved. She gave me hope.

This simple, loving comment embodied the mission of our Congregation Leadership and Administration during those challenging days. *We have to keep up our hope!* In other words, we needed to hold on to God; we needed to hold on to one another.

How Did We Attempt to Do this?

First of all, we beseeched God to listen to our prayer. We prayed and we asked others to pray. We tried to search deep into the roots of our charism and to find there the wisdom, the strength, the courage and the hope to take the next steps, even when there seemed to be no steps to be taken. We needed to communicate hope and trust to the Congregation sisters and associates, to our families, friends and collaborators even when we had no news to communicate.

With simplicity and humility, we asked for help when it was possible; we collaborated with others who had more information than we did and who could not share it with us; we tried to maintain relation-

ships of trust with all involved. In this world of mystery and grace, we had to believe that God was always doing something more. We had to keep up our hope!

A Changing Era

Not all the challenges facing Congregation leadership in this era are as public and dramatic as this one, but, perhaps the experience exemplifies some of those that Congregation leaders face today. Our world is moving in increasing complexity and greater consciousness. As Pope Francis has noted, *we are living not in an era of change but in a changing era*⁴!

In the midst of this fast-paced, individualistic society, Congregation leaders strive to dig deeply into their roots to reframe their particular charisms in a manner that responds to the present needs of the Church, of society and of the cosmos. They do this respectfully and courageously in the light of their particular reality with regard to demographics, financial resources and administrative needs. They do this through contemplative practice, empathic listening and creative imagination that enable them to envision what does not exist and to invite it to take form.

Embracing the Opposites

Herein lie other significant challenges for our day. How do we continue to foster the mission of the Congregation and to participate meaningfully and appropriately in global issues of peace, justice and care for our common home? How do we promote unity in the midst of the rich diversity that is ours? Interculturality and intergenerationality are significant elements of our leadership.

We experience diversity in age, health, culture, language, experiences, personalities, talents and interests. How do we assure that everyone has a voice and that her/his voice is heard? How do we balance the common good with individual needs?

How do we encourage the hopes and desires of our newer members and allow new life to emerge while being present and caring of those who have given their lives to the mission? How do we support those who are unable to change or who do not wish to? Advances in technology can improve the circulation of information, interconnectedness and a sense of shared participation. Yet, not everyone has the same level of expertise or access to the devices and their functioning.

In the midst of ambiguity, conflict and newness, can we embrace the opposites and live in creative tension as peaceful, loving, faith-filled and hope-filled people?

Journeying with Others

Indeed, Congregation leaders are not alone on this journey. *The group gathered is the great grace*, said George Aschenbrenner, SJ, many years ago. We pray and serve with other team members who share wisdom, grace and responsibility. Community-building, forming a we, promoting conversations of the heart, visioning together and taking bold initiatives to prepare for the future are all challenges we meet regularly.

We collaborate with associates, other religious communities and groups with similar interests. We take measures to be faithful to the Church while questioning some of its practices. Compassion, mercy, tenderness, transparency and trust are our companions. But we are human and sometimes we are tired!

Indeed, Congregation leaders face many questions and the answers are often illusive. But Jesus, the Christ, is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We believe that God is always doing something more and all we need to do is *keep up our hope!* ■

⁴ On July 27, 2013, Apostolic journey to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on the occasion of the World Youth Day



FOSTERING HOPE in a Troubled World

Peter Novecosky, OSB

Hope can be an elusive quality to hang onto. Especially in troubling times. Some of us are prone to see the darker side of things and ignore the lighter side. Others are prone to see the good that surrounds them amid the corruption and evil.

St. Paul says Christians are blessed with faith, hope and charity; only charity abides into the next life. Yet it is hope, the way hope manifests here on earth that we need to cultivate.

Charles Dickens began his book *A Tale of Two Cities* on the French Revolution: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Does this make sense to the reader? The answer I propose is "Yes"; good and evil do co-exist, but what is a person to focus on?

One ditty gives the same message: "Two men looked out from prison bars . . . one saw mud; the other saw stars."

"Goodness Abounds!"

Most Rev. Doug Crosby, in his 2015 Christmas message as president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, spoke about seeing hope amid the troubled world we live in. He titled his message: *Goodness abounds!*

He wrote, "This Christmas, as a counterpoint to the destructive forces of misery and terror that we have witnessed these past months, we must not forget that goodness abounds! More than not forgetting, let us be ready to point it out when we see it."

He wrote that this fall he was invited to join a small group of people who help at the *Out of the Cold* breakfast program in Hamilton. These good folk agreed to get up early every Thursday morning from November through March to prepare a hot breakfast for over 120 men and women.



As he helped at the various kitchen jobs, he said time passed quickly. He commented: "Even before I left, I knew that I had participated in something good, something beautiful, something sacred!"

Quiet and Unassuming Kindness

"The same thing happens every day in many communities in our country and around the world," he continued. "Terrorists may get front-page media coverage, but quiet unassuming goodness such as I experienced that morning wins hearts and souls! It won mine, and I know it won the guests. Goodness abounds!"

Christmas, he wrote, is a time to remember that in spite of the horrors of evil, goodness abounds. When we look for the goodness of others and allow the good in us to shine, God's compassionate mercy is revealed through simple, everyday kindness.

Focusing on Being Grateful

As I was finishing this article on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, I heard an interview on CBC radio about gratitude. The lady explained how focusing on being grateful for the good things in her life had completely changed her life.

She used to be depressed and filled with self-pity. A counselor told her she needed to focus on the good things in her life. So she began to develop what she called a “gratitude radar.” She began to write down at the end of the day three things that she could be grateful for. She was amazed how many things she had overlooked or ignored in her life — things that were positive and hopeful. Over time, her gratitude radar changed her way of looking at things — and it changed her life.

The Primacy of Grace

Being a hopeful person is more than being an optimist. I think of Mother Teresa who brought hope to many dying people in Calcutta and who inspired people around the world. Yet, after her death, it was revealed that she often suffered the dark night of the soul during her lifetime. She felt God was absent in her life and work. Hope was not an emotion she felt; rather, it was her faith that sustained her hope.

In his apostolic letter *Entering the New Millennium*, written in 2000, Pope John Paul II said that one of the seven pastoral priorities for the Church is to acknowledge the primacy of grace.

He writes: “If in the planning that awaits us we commit ourselves more confidently to a pastoral activity that gives personal and communal prayer its proper place, we shall be observing an essential principle of the Christian view of life: the primacy of grace. There is a temptation that perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God, of course, asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that *without Christ we can do nothing.*”



Goodness Continues to Abound

Religious communities have been a major player in the short history of Canada. We have been involved in pastoral work, education and health care. Countless people have benefitted from and have been inspired by our work and example.

We live in changing times. Our numbers are diminishing. Others are taking up many of the works religious communities have started.

Our focus cannot be just on what is past history. God’s grace continues to work through others. Goodness continues to abound. ■

Joyfully Listening and Praising the Lord

Gabrielle Audet, osc

A sentence from the Scripture motivates all my commitments: “No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) Laying down or giving one’s life has many meanings. The meaning evolves as experiences are acquired and challenges are met.

The experiences of being in service to sisters and of having the joy of working with the Canadian Union of Contemplative Women Religious are both rooted in the mission of my deepest inner being. In this article, important aspects of each of these experiences will be highlighted. They are as follows:

Following Jesus Christ —the Poor and the Servant

Laying down one’s life to make present the charism of Sainte Clare and Saint Francis in our time. Giving one’s life to maintain the unity of the community. Listening to every single individual and wanting to take all the appropriate decisions—as a community—to walk together as sisters, following in the steps of Jesus Christ the poor and the servant.

The years between 1995 and 2001 saw a period that promoted the role of the sisters in community decisions and developed their capacity to speak up, using monthly meetings of the Conventual Chapter to do so. Choices were opened up to us during this time of adaptation with a new sister serving in authority. The establishment of an association for monasteries in Quebec also fostered the community’s renewal. This time of adaptation presented quite a few challenges in terms of maintaining unity, solidarity in difference and respect for one another.

Adjusting to “God’s Today”

Nourished by the Word of God, fraternal love fosters meaningful decision making. The collaboration of sisters, aided by resource persons and mento-



Crucifixion (detail), Gentile da Fabriano, Milan (Italy), 1410

ring, enabled us to adjust to “God’s Today” and to be creative. Accompanying, listening, serving, even foreseeing the future and promoting the mission of the monastery in the diocese have been at the heart of serving the community.

Personally, I discovered more fully the human person with her strengths and her weaknesses. For certain nuns, it was hard to accommodate my way of being: a person with an overall vision, forward thinking and showing solidarity with others; a person who leaps into action with a dynamism and creativity that both stimulates—but also bothers—others.

Challenges of Humility and Truth

The merciful justice of the Lord remains a fulcrum in this ecclesial mission; a certainty that He alone adjusts life experience to his Love. Sometimes changes are carried out too quickly without sufficient account being taken of vulnerable people in need of more attention, more presence, more listening. Being forgiven is also part of the reality of any person who agrees to lead a community.

Challenges of humility and truth continue to be very present throughout the duration of a service, no matter what role is accepted. The following of Jesus Christ is brought up to date by the path followed by the sisters. Saint Clare constantly invites mercy, freely given: "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation." The Lord calls upon us to live in faith and joy. Pope Francis speaks along those same lines and wishes for prophets who glow with the joy of the gospel.

To summarize, I would say that the biggest challenge is keeping the community of sisters faithful to its charism. To know how, as a community, to question and challenge ourselves:

- to remain a contemplative community on a mission, a prophetic sign of communion;
- to be a free and liberating community in service to values and not to structures;
- to evangelize as a pilgrim, open to relationship "while overcoming every temptation of autonomy, of protagonism, of self-sufficiency and isolation" (Giacomo Bini, OFM).

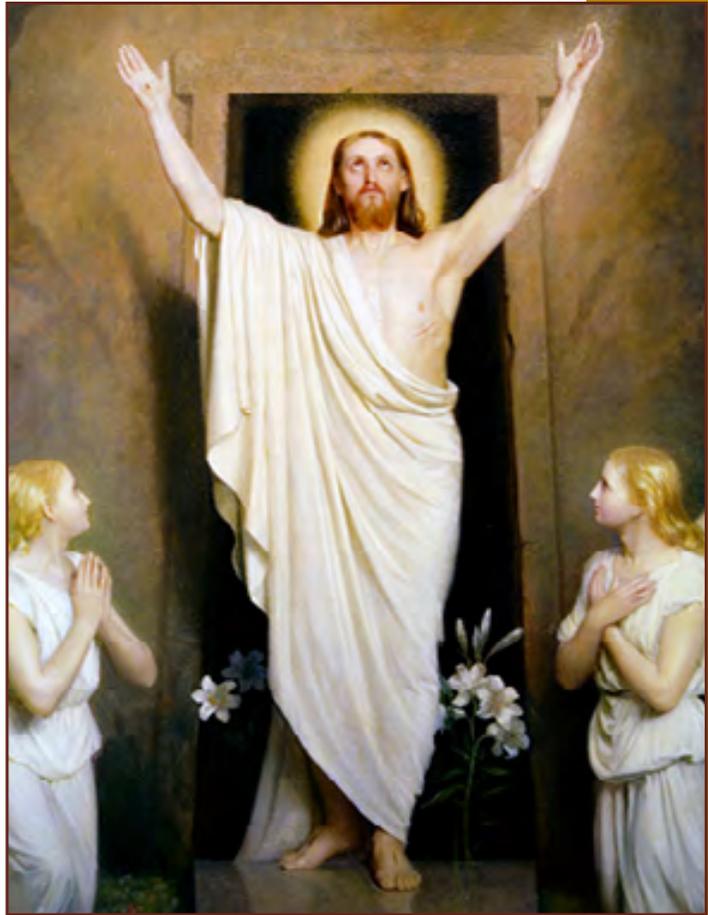
The contemplation of Jesus Christ, poor and crucified: What grace, what joy!!! It helps us to stay focused on the strengths of the resurrection. The choice is a form of life: living the Gospel in the manner of Saint Clare takes courage and determination in our secularized society.

Serving Contemplative Women Religious

This different experience presents objectives that are both similar to and distinct from the preceding one. It entails serving and facilitating the different Monastic and Contemplative Institutes who are members of the Canadian Union of Contemplative Women. Bonds of alliance and belonging are created by the major superiors meeting together at general assemblies or formation sessions.

The objectives of the Union and its role in Canada are multifaceted and leave room for creativity. The main role is to ensure linkages among the communities and to organize specific formation activities in the life of contemplative women religious.

This task shows the field of activities to focus on during a mandate. The president makes most of the decisions in communion with and transparency to the Council.



Resurrection, original by Carl Heinrich Bloch, 1875

Since there is no interference in the internal life of the monasteries, the Council has a great deal of latitude to carry out its work of listening, representation and formation. Distance and language remain challenges, but the love and the joy of being together in meetings enable fruitful and constructive dialogue. The members' formation gives strong foundation to the Union.

Being Sign of a Presence

Today this service is witness to great transformation in the monasteries. The reduction in the number of sisters, the aging, the lack of vocation and the closing of monasteries are creating a period of adjustment. The mission of contemplative life in Canada remains a challenge to be a sign of identity and transparency of a Presence: *God-with-us*.

In the experiences highlighted in this article, that of service and leadership, beautiful moments of growth and resurrection have come true. Like Jesus Christ, at the heart of these experiences, is *laying down one's life* through love. ■

“Community Life and Mission: Toward a Future Full of Hope”

Kevin Mannara, CSB

The Center for the Study of Consecrated Life at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, held its symposium: “Community Life and Mission: Toward a Future Full of Hope” featuring Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, OP, on February 5-6, 2016. It began on Friday evening with a video of Fr. Radcliffe in which he stated that it is the role of religious to go outside of the Church, to go where “Christ is not named,” then continued with a panel of religious discussing how they discovered their call.

“Being the Body of Christ”

On Saturday Fr. Radcliffe offered a presentation on *Being the Body of Christ*, both corporately and also individually. Noting that ours is an embodied faith and addressing current cultural ambiguities and dualisms of the body, he asked “how can we be Christ’s Body today?”

He stated that we have nothing to say until we have first listened, and then asked us to consider “who am I afraid to listen to?” The beginning of preaching the gospel involves looking at peoples’ faces, are there faces we fear? Our human vocation and personal sanctification is to be the face of God so we must also learn to read the faces of others.

Welcoming Crises

Religious life must be abundant life: alive and joyous! We cannot be ambassadors of the God of life unless we have joyful lives. Sadly, religious life for

many has slipped into survival mode. Rather than fear crises we must realize that crises are the way we grow up, for it is in the rhythms of life that God works. “Religious life is going through a crisis; thanks be to God!!”

How we live this will determine how we flourish, mindful of and directed towards the crises in civilization. Religious today should look at such crises including the refugee crisis, fundamentalism, the rise of religious violence and the threat of ecological catastrophe.

Intergenerational Dialogue

As he concluded the day, Fr. Radcliffe encouraged intergenerational dialogue among religious. He noted that big differences in religious life today are generational. Orders that thrive will accept, rather than be afraid of, the differences. Such orders must trust the young to be different.

He said our vows should be a vibrant invitation to our contemporaries to live, saying something about what it means to be alive. It’s not that religious need to get a life; we need to have a life! ■

To learn more about the Center for the Study of Consecrated Life got to: <http://www.ctu.edu/consecratedlife>

Kevin Mannara, CSB, is a seminarian with the Basilian Fathers. His book, “That All May Be One: Consolidating Church Buildings when Parishes Merge” was recently published by Liturgy Training Publications.

