

Consecrated Life and the Image of the Butterfly
Response to Panel Presentations by Elizabeth M. Davis, RSM

Weave with our God the Tapestry of the New Creation

“50 years after Vatican II, who have we become? Where is consecrated life in Canada going? Who are we called to be in the future?”

These three questions were the catalyst for presentation, reflection and conversation at a meeting of the CRC Administrative Council with theologians, leaders, and ministers in ecology and justice in the Atlantic Region. More than sixty participants met in Moncton, N.B., on March 20, 2014. Also in attendance, representing the Atlantic Bishops, was Most Reverend André Richard, csc, Bishop Emeritus of Moncton, who commended the participants for their commitment to religious life and for the valued ministry of women and men religious in the Church in Canada.

After a gathering prayer, a three-person panel made presentations rooted in their personal experiences on the question, “50 years after Vatican II, who have we become?” Dolores Bourque, FMA, générale superior of her congregation, spoke from the perspective of leadership; Auréa Cormier, NDSC, a social justice advocate, spoke from the perspective of JPIC (Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation); and Lorraine d’Entremont, SC, a member of the CRC Theological Commission, spoke as a theologian. After each presentation, participants had conversation at their tables and shared reflections in the large assembly.

As responder, Elizabeth Davis, RSM, summarized the key insights shared by the speakers and participants. She helped the participants move to the questions: “Where is consecrated life in Canada going?” “Who are we called to be in the future?” The summary of the day’s conversations was framed along six elements of transformation. Supporting each one was the image of a butterfly – a symbol of transformation, resurrection and the butterfly effect.¹ These points were echoed in each presentation and supported in the comments at the tables.

Transformation Does not Happen Suddenly or in a Moment in Time

In biology, the term “instar,” refers to the varied developmental stages through which arthropods move until they reach maturity. “Instar implies something celestial and ingrown, something heavenly and disastrous... The process of transformation consists mostly of decay and then of crisis.”ⁱⁱ Each presenter concluded that almost every member of a religious community in Canada has experienced the transformation of religious life in the echo of Vatican II. But, in the spirit of all life-forms, the moment has come for another “instar,” another process of decay and crisis making possible another transformation.

Confidence that One Can Actually Do Re-Visioning

Women and men religious can have the confidence to enter another transformation because transformation has always been central to religious life from the original

Benedictine monks to the mendicant friars to the Jesuits and Loretto Sisters to the women's teaching and nursing congregations to the congregations who took seriously the words of Vatican II.

Today's women and men religious read *Perfectae Caritatis* through the lens of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium*, taking very seriously the opening words of *Gaudium et Spes*, "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well."

Women and men religious responded with radical renewal by returning to the Gospel and to their own charisms. Sociologists are astounded about the intensity of change for religious orders of women in the past fifty years without any central direction or control. That intense change occurred in every dimension of their lives: governance, visibility, participation in Eucharist, prayer, living arrangements, ministry, and relationships with hierarchical Church. Now this post-Vatican transformation has become the ordinary. Another instar is upon them.

Knowledge of the "Signs of the Times"

Each presenter emphasized the need to know the "signs of the times." Such signs are evident in the society: demographic shifts, the role of women, the changing family, cultural and urban diversity, violence and social discontent, poverty, attention to ecology, the impact of technology and social media, and appreciation for diversity.

John Allen identifies major trends in Catholicism: southern Catholicism, evangelical Catholicism, Islamic – Catholic alliances, the new demography, expanding lay roles, the biotech revolution, globalization, ecology, multi-polarism and pentecostalism.ⁱⁱⁱ In Canada, Roman Catholics are seeing major change in who participates in Church, its financial status, authority of Bishops with both governments and Church members, a new understanding of spirituality, ministry as a response to the baptismal call, and appreciation for diversity.

Identification of the Essentials

Of all the challenges facing women and men religious, the diverse visions of religious life among and within congregations is perhaps the most challenging. In broadest terms, there are three existing visions:

- (i) The non-elitist or inclusive vision whose members reject religious life as an office of the Church, choose not to participate in liturgy, do not hold the three vows as essential and see the canonical status of religious communities as a deterrent to growth.^{iv}
- (ii) The apostolic vision which understands the fundamentals of religious life to be consecration by profession of the evangelical counsels through public vows within a particular religious institute wherein members exercise some external apostolic works with emphasis on common life and religious houses and soundness of doctrine held and taught.^v

- (iii) The ministerial vision which imagines religious life as a charismatic life-form built on total, lifelong consecration to God to the exclusion of any other life commitment (perpetual profession), integration of contemplative life of personal and shared prayer with a whole-hearted commitment to full-time public ministry in service of the reign of God, community lived in mission (rather than in fixed abodes), renunciation of family and home (consecrated celibacy), total personal economic dispossession and interdependence (evangelical poverty), and ministry on a full-time basis (prophetic obedience in mission).^{vi}

Sensitivity to the New Images Emerging

The emerging transformation is evident in new or renewed images: the new cosmology, right relationships, the essential nature of diversity, recognition of our complicity in the woundedness of people and Earth, partnerships in ministry, participation of women in almost all dimensions of public life, social/ecological justice as an absolute pillar of faith, the influence of older people, a new form of visible presence for congregations/institutes, use of theological reflection processes, a yearning for God to be imaged as female as well as male, and acceptance of theology as contextual – God meets humans in this time in this place.

Identification of Key Questions and the Courage to Explore Them

Questions were raised in each presentation:

- ✓ What are the implications of truly living the new cosmology for our spirituality, theology, community and ministry?
- ✓ Do we need to reframe our vision and embodiment of community in keeping with new contexts?
- ✓ What is the new visibility to which our congregations are being called?
- ✓ Will religious life survive when so many congregations are dying?
- ✓ Should we continue to accept new members?
- ✓ Can the energy/charism of a founder who lived before the modern age inspire a community that lives in a post-modern age?
- ✓ Can the three visions not only co-exist in religious life but be a source of fruitful, blessed diversity?

Where can women and men religious turn to find some direction for their response? It was agreed that the response must come at multiple levels: personal, congregational, inter-congregational, organizational (such as the CRC), and collaborative with lay persons and organizations.

The Christian tradition suggests three inter-related forms of active response:^{vii} contemplative = to deepen our capacity as an act of faith and love; ascetic = to confidently adjust our lifestyle choices and daily actions; and prophetic = “God asks us to leave the nest that contains us and to be sent to the frontiers of the world, avoiding the temptation to domesticate ourselves.”^{viii}

Hopeful Signs

Participants asked, “Where do we find hope, energy, and passion in the messiness of transformation?” They reminded each other that it is not about women and men religious but it is about those with whom they walk and among whom they minister (in the words of Jean Debruyne, “Let’s go out; God comes with us”).

In this age with the intensity of social change and the growing fragility of Earth, women and men religious must be about this new thing (in the words of Lorraine d’Entremont, “New life is possible for us whatever shape it may take”). Women and men religious must be intentional in their focus, persistent in their pursuit, courageous in their undertaking, and confident, if this is God’s work, it will flourish (in the words of Arthur Melanson, “Do not be afraid to walk at God’s own pace”). And always women and men religious find hope, energy and passion in the Scriptures: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

Concluding Reflections

The participants reflected on phrases taken from John O’Donohue’s *Anam Cara*:

- ✓ May we awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet immensity of our own presence.
- ✓ May we receive great encouragement when new frontiers beckon.
- ✓ May we respond to the call of our gift and find the courage to follow its path.
- ✓ May warmth of heart keep our presence aflame.
- ✓ May our outer dignity mirror inner dignity of soul.
- ✓ May we take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention.
- ✓ May we experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.

The last butterfly shown was the “Lorenz attractor” of which Gloria Schaab says: “Like the strange attractor in the midst of chaos, the charism of the institute provides pattern and impetus for ongoing transformation in this dynamic age of religious life.”^{xix}

A communal reflection on Marcienne Rienstra’s poem, *To Weavers Everywhere*, followed. The final words of the poem read:

And She [God] invites us
Not only to keep offering her the
Shreds and rags of our suffering
And our work,
But even more –
To take our place beside Her
At the Jubilee Loom,
And weave with her
The tapestry of the New Creation.

The facilitator led the participants in personal and table reflection on the last two lines. These threads were woven through their reflections: images such as the butterfly and

the yeast give energy; a stance of welcoming openness to new ideas; present to God the rags of our suffering and the good things we do for God's tapestry; prayer for encouragement as new frontiers beckon; watering the new growth happening around us, we must and can find ways to include gifts from the three visions of religious life existing among us; reflection on charism can help transformation and unity; in the process of transformation let us be aware of God in God's works; as we commit to living the dynamic of the provisional, we are faithful to the life force that emerged from that original flaring forth of all being.

Holding in their hearts the colours of these threads and the strange attractor charism, the participants prayed with hymns, biblical readings and the symbol of the fire alive and active among women and men religious in Canada today. They rejoiced in the invitation to be co-creators with God, weaving the tapestry of the New Creation, a tapestry even richer and more beautiful than the old one was.

ⁱ Flowing from the new understandings of ecology, there is a belief in chaos theory that a small change at one place in a system can result in large differences in a later state – theoretically a hurricane can form because a distant butterfly flapped its wings several weeks earlier. The butterfly effect was so named by Edward Lorenz.

ⁱⁱ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), 81-3.

ⁱⁱⁱ John L. Allen, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

^{iv} Marie Chin, RSM, *Hunger for Right Relationships*, Presentation to the Congregation of Notre Dame Visitation Province in Halifax, Nova Scotia, July 2003.

^v Taken from the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Apostolic Visitation of the Religious Institutes of Women in the United States (December 2008). See www.apostolicvisitation.org/en/news/resources/InstrumentumLaboris.

^{vi} Sandra Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, Paulist Press, 2013.

^{vii} See the template in the CCCB Pastoral Letter, *Christian Ecological Imperative* (October 2003) with broadened application.

^{viii} Pope Francis, *Communique of the Union of Superiors General on the meeting with Pope Francis* (Vatican, New Hall of the Synod, Friday, 29 November 2013).

^{ix} Gloria L. Schaab, ssj, "Charism: The 'Strange Attractor' in Religious Life," *The Occasional Papers*, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Winter 2014, Vol 43, No 1, 6.