

Life in Community: A “Voyage of Discovery” Panel Presentation by Jean Goulet, csc

Introduction

These are challenging times for religious communities, especially for those of us with leadership responsibilities. How do we support our sisters and brothers in the community while many of us are beginning to feel the ‘bites’ of the aging process ourselves: the achy bones, the questions “where did I put that” or “what was I saying”? Some communities are dealing with the reorganization and perhaps amalgamation of different provinces while others are choosing or have chosen to close their doors – not easy decisions!

I am impressed with the congregations who have realized that their congregation has lived out the mission for which it was founded and now entrust that legacy to others while they themselves make arrangements for those remaining to be well cared for until the last one is called home. Here we see the generous collaboration of congregations to care for those with health issues. As we anticipate new life, for resurrection, the challenge for me, for us, is to live this in-between time with peace and serenity, knowing with full confidence that our God is with us and will continue to be with us!

Influence of Vatican II

Those of us who have lived the pre-Vatican II and post Vatican II lifestyles know there is quite a difference between the two. Much has been written and commented on regarding the external changes we made in our daily routines – no longer bound to walk two by two or strictly to obey a well-regulated horarium or eat our lunches in a specified lunch room apart from lay staff - and much has been written about the change of habit to a more contemporary dress. What has not been given much press coverage is that which is not so visible: the change in prayer forms. We moved from prescribed morning and evening prayers and other pious devotions to the Liturgy of the Hours and, after making a thirty day retreat which was a widespread movement in the 70’s, became committed to a more contemplative form of prayer. The tendency before Vatican II was the education of children and youth; post Vatican II, the education of adults took a greater focus.

How many sisters became involved in establishing the RCIA in parishes and with the accompanying need for higher education in theology! Fr. Barnabas Ahearn told us in class one day, a day which he said was a great day for America since Sr. Mary Milligan was receiving her doctorate from the Gregorian, that in order to have influence in the Church we needed to be as educated as the clergy. He had great hope for us! Moreover, with more lay people becoming qualified, it was time to leave the schools in their hands and branch out in service to the poor and marginalized. The Synod on Justice made us aware that action on behalf of justice is constitutive of the mission of the Church. In more recent years, with the work of Fr. Tom Berry and Brian Swimme, we are aware of the challenges facing our globe, and the changes in our thinking demanded by the Universe Story. Leadership in our communities encouraged us in these endeavours and we thrived!

However, there is one other theme from Vatican II that affected us probably more than we think: the “universal call to holiness.” That meant lay people too were called to

holiness! We all knew that Baptism carried with it the call to discipleship but it seemed that those with vows had an “extra” call, a special vocation as it were. We have grown in awareness that there is more that unites us with the lay women and men in our Church than divides us. A hymn called “One Love Released” speaks of “one bread, one body, one cup, one call ...” I believe that Christ calls each of us to discipleship, to intimacy, and we respond to that divine call according to the gifts God has given us – as a married person, as a single person, as a person committed by vow in a community of like-minded human beings, or by ordination to the priesthood.

Those were exciting years after Vatican II. Who could have foreseen the exodus from our midst and the almost complete lack of interest among young people, mostly in North America and Europe, to join our communities and journey with us in faith?

The challenge now for those in leadership positions is to adequately provide for the needs of an aging population. It is becoming the aged looking after the more aged!

Today

But is there a future? Would we invite young people to live in senior citizen residences? Although everything points to a disappearance in North America, I maintain that there is a future. Our future will come from the South where the Church is today. Young women from South America, Africa and Haiti, are choosing to enter communities, at least that is the experience in our community. Our new members are in the South. The leadership in these communities is challenged with providing security and care for the aging members while at the same time providing suitable formation for the new members, always mindful of the age gap between the two groups, with few in between.

Where will these new members find the theological, spiritual and psychological help to adjust to living in our communities? Our congregation has found an international novitiate program in Lima, Peru to answer our needs at this time – CONFER is sponsored by the Conference of Religious of Peru. Yes, our postulants from Africa and Haiti go to Peru for their novitiate! The main challenges here are the need to learn Spanish during their postulate, and the great distance from their families. But they seem to take this challenge in stride, knowing that living in a community with roots in North America will probably ensure that most of their lives will be lived far from home! A concern for the future is integrating these young people into older communities in the north. There are those who maintain that the needs of the South are so great that they are needed there and who could disagree with that?

However, the needs of the North are also great – different but great. I feel that there is a need for reciprocity – the North has supplied personnel and funding for these missions for years; could not the South reciprocate in some way. I am suggesting that new members come for a period time, perhaps a few years, for a particular ministry, an educational opportunity or to learn English, since that is a requirement for several university programs. Why then could they not come to learn English in an English-speaking environment?

The challenge for us in North America is considerable: are we ready to welcome these new members into our residences? Are we willing to give up our apartment living to give them a home in our midst? For some of us, living in an apartment is a necessity – for a period of time – because of ministry commitment or studies. Living alone is nice – we do

not have to pay attention to anyone else and for some of us, having lived in community for many years, it is almost a luxury to live alone.

However, young people today are looking for community – they do not want to live alone in an apartment – they could do that as lay people. Our formation directors tell me that the new members also want communal prayer – they prefer praying together. And, if possible, they wish to serve with other sisters in a particular ministry. When most of us entered, that was the norm, but now, when we all need to find our own “jobs,” that becomes problematic!

Questions abound: Why invite new members to live in senior citizens’ homes? I do not think that it is impossible, nor would it be forever. From my own experience, I have lived with young lay students for the past few years and we got along just fine. There are adjustments needed on both sides, for sure, but it is possible! Often young people get along better with their grandmothers than their mothers!

Our “Voyage of Discovery”

While writing this reflection, I felt almost like a Voyager Space Craft as it spins far from earth to explore the outer regions of our universe. As I pondered their travels, in mid-September NASA confirmed that one of two Voyagers, launched in 1977, is more than 15 billion kilometers from earth and is now in what is known as interstellar space between the stars. It is exciting, wondering what they will see and send back – I too wonder what our future is going to be like.

We do not know what the world in twenty years will be like, with the advent of Facebook, tweeting, smart phones, and these amazing advances in technology. So how can one imagine what religious life will look like? But if I rely on what is happening today, I will try to imagine it. As the Voyager uses the stars as reference points I too look to see what is happening now. The new members in our communities are our stars! Most are from the South...

Given this phenomenon, communities of the future will be multicultural, multilingual, and multigenerational. This type of community will have many challenges and will not be easy, but it could be very rewarding and enriching.

The star who guides all our voyages is the Star of Bethlehem – our Star, Christ Jesus. I do not know what people mean when they say that they have “gone beyond Jesus!” That statement puzzles me. To me, Christ is the reason we are here and why we stay – at least why I stay! This also is the reason why young people enter – they are searching for Christ! Christ is the star around which our spacecraft revolves.

The Spirit will guide us into the future to respond to challenges in unique and creative ways. Tom Rosica in one of his reflections states: “Authentic disciples are faithful to the person and message of Jesus yet they are not trapped in the past. It is the Spirit that enables flexibility, adjustment, adaptation and newness to occur, always within a context of fidelity” (*The Advocate Gives us a Reason for our Hope*). Our Mission is to give witness to Christ’s presence in our lives by living joyfully and enthusiastically every day. The charism of our communities will continue in ways that we could never imagine! On T.V. the other night, they were discussing the “fad” of the super-rich – that of being a “space-tourist” – and that eventually travel to Australia would take only 2 hours by going through space. One never knows what the future holds.

The transmission of the faith not only brings light to men and women in every place; it travels through time, passing from one generation to another. Because faith is born of an encounter which takes place in history and lights up our journey through time, it must be passed on in every age. It is through an unbroken chain of witnesses that we come to see the face of Jesus. (*Lumen Fidei* by Pope Francis)

In light of this transmission of the faith, I am not sure what mission we are called to, other than to be open to the surprises of the Spirit and live our commitment each day with deep joy, abiding faith, fervent hope, generous love and abundant courage!