

Challenges and Directions for the Future
Response to Panel Presentations by Veronica O'Reilly, CSJ

If I may presume to be personal, I spent some time in the past tracking the relationship between vision and form. I've forgotten what my conclusions were, but I do recognize that the visionary papers advanced this morning are a bit too disparate for a neat and logical formal response. This is my excuse for a less than compact review: a few introductory remarks, some generalized concepts and then a casual canter through the papers to highlight again these insights and direction.

A few weeks ago, Father Michel Proulx, O. Praem., our CRC President, gifted us all with a delightful and profound reflection on Noah and the Flood as it related to our current situation as religious. Among other things, his final reflection encouraged us to patience and perseverance in our wait for the promised happy landing because the bird kept coming back twig-less – some of us are there.

Another biblical story comes to mind, one of a journey with a somewhat different trajectory: God's call to Abraham and Sarah, no longer in their green and salad days, to set out for a distant land and a promised future but with very little in the way of details. As St. Paul would say of Abraham in Hebrews, "he went forth not knowing where he was going" (11:8) and, in Romans, that he went forth "hoping against hope." (4:8) The operative phrase for us, I presume, is that he went forth, and that he and Sarah hoped, as we do and as Noah did, in the promise that in the midst of setbacks and sins and very few signposts they continued to dream a future with hope born of imagination and trust. They lived to experience in their very old age the birth of that promise.

Our panelists today have, among themselves, courageously and creatively limned the patience, the perseverance attendant upon our moment as religious, and they've taken a little flight here and there into the unknown. Both attitudes and actions are directional as our day together is intended.

Creative Imagination

Before I begin to address these directions, I want to say something more about this creative imagination, especially since it has been haunting me a little with the death of Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, who had the rare fortune to be revered alike by ordinary readers and the literary Academy. Heaney garnered this esteem because he inhabited in an intense way the universe of ordinary, earthy things like bogs, and turnips and harrow-pins, a child's death, a sunrise over Cassidy's hill, an armed B Special with watchful eyes. The magic was that Heaney found the perfect words and rhythms that evoked these unforgettably and at the same time allowed us glimpses through them to another reality both profound and transcendent. It wasn't Nirvana that this great-hearted man opened us to, but it was a space large enough, strong enough to sustain emotion and ambiguity and hold us there into a truth – and a hope in that truth. Some call his gift the Catholic imagination although I am not sure Heaney would.

But it was encouraging to me to experience a lot of that Catholic imagination going around here this morning, that which has propelled us through this past half century and remains with us yet. The imagination was there in that moving prayer to the Holy Spirit.

Most especially it was in the panelists' various approaches to the earthy reality which we all inhabit in this time: the deconstruction and reconstruction processes of our vowed way of life amid the detritus of tradition and unfulfilled dreams on the one hand and on the other our openness to hope in the substance of things seen and as yet unseen.

Many of us here have just come from the ATRI conference in Montreal where the theme was *Religious Life: Under Construction*. So to the panelists I say that your words, with their challenges and their directions, fall happily upon hearts and minds under serious cultivation. I thank you for them.

General Comments

All of the panelists reflect, in one way or another, their awareness of context and its importance. Historical, cultural, religious, theological, spiritual, ecclesial, scientific, cosmological, they acknowledge these contexts as essential to understanding who we are in this post-Vatican II moment and who God might be inviting us to become out of the chaotic mix we call modernity and post-modernity. Nothing is more meaningful than knowing who we are in this moment and why we are in this moment.

This was addressed, whether in the careful delineation of our wonderful mission efforts since Vatican II in the face of epochal internal and external revolutions, or in the process and consequences of de-institutionalizing and declericalizing, or in the challenging understandings of ourselves as participants in a new universe story of creation and incarnation that calls us to levels of greater consciousness. These are surely directional goals.

Then, too, listening to our panelists I became aware of the deep, assured faith that each one expresses. Just three years ago, I was asked to be part of a retreat entitled Hope in the Darkness, and I spent a good deal of time on the apophatic aspect of faith. I think I even knew what it meant at that time. I remember quoting a well-known theologian to the effect that "the characteristic of faith today is pervaded by a certain darkness, emptiness, silence, risk, the cross, akin to the dynamic of apophatic mysticism, even while the drawing near of the sacred is recognized in fragments of healing, beauty, liberation, and love in the human and natural world, understood anew as luminous sacraments of divine presence." (*Friends of God and Prophets*, Continuum: New York, 1998)

It seemed to me that, while this apophatic dimension remains real for some of us, there was a more robust and cheerful and deeply felt assurance among our panelists. I wondered about what Father Timothy called the Francis effect. I know I was moved several times in reading *Lumen Fidei* and never more so than with the passage that states: "Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey." (P.23. par2)

One other thing seems common and clear to our panelists: each of us in our congregations each hears from the God of her or his experience a clarion call and a sending forth in mission with others in Christ. This most basic ground of our being, and the necessity of living in it and from it, is expressed with passion in different fields of enterprises but, in each case, it touches into that spring of the first graces from which the hope of moving forward still draws its strength.

Then, too, all three, in various ways, touch on the person of Christ, ranging from the personal relationship that drew one to religious life and sustains one there, through the Cosmic Christ of Chardin who holds together the whole evolutionary presence and pulls it forward with us toward greater complexity and unity, to the Christ of the Trinity through whom God is revealed in our innermost being through the Holy Spirit. These seem to me to move us somewhere beyond more recent academic discussions of higher and lower Christologies.

Prophecy, that gift that we ideally offer in the Church and in the world, is variously modeled, from the serene witness of joy to the witnessing of loving patience. In our current demographic, it is modeled in our imaginative responses of prayerful partnering, generous support of new life, active loving care of each other, and contact where possible with those who are the flesh of Christ. Prophecy is modeled, too, in that openness to transformation through immersion in the world of the sanctified periphery, and in contemplative service of those needs, with energy that allows us to witness on the barricades of impasse and injustice, with hearts open to dialogue and alternate solutions. The sweetness and joy that gospel living engenders render powerful witness to restless and seeking hearts.

Jean Goulet's Presentation

Jean's current context is wittily and compassionately familiar. The listing of bright and hopeful and generous initiatives following Vatican II, and the wondrous things wrought by them; then the numerical decreases that have elevated our median age and made necessary new and different means of caring for our now aging members. Her empathetic challenge is to access the graces which will allow for peace and serenity in facing this care, those graces of resurrection and faith in God's abiding presence.

That is only one part of her context, for she sees a future for our way of life coming from a geographical elsewhere, the South, vocations to some of our congregations bringing with them new challenges of formation and ministry within alien cultures, intergenerational relationships. These are challenges for leadership and membership of those in western and northern societies, the uncomfortable questions about our lifestyles matching their expectations and our expectations of reciprocity.

I congratulate you, Jean, on naming issues like living alone and being able to relate to much younger people. These are real and not to be avoided, including the issue of praying together. But I was cheered up by your assertion that many relate better to grandmothers than mothers.

Your image of the Spacecraft with the intergalactical view and the guiding star is pure imaginative genius. There is both excitement and hope in the unknown, the promise of the as-yet to be discovered and for you it comes from new members, new stars, who will drastically change the face of future communities, who will become multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-generational. Most profound for me, however, is your passionate belief that a personal and unwavering faith in Christ Jesus and his Spirit's creative power within us will guide our response to these challenges in unique and creative ways. The serene, peaceful witness of our joy and hope and faith in this divine life within us is our way of allowing the light of faith to shine across the gulfs of culture and age into a future unknown but definitely possible.

Sue Wilson's Presentation

In discussing our context, Sue lists the familiar polarities around and among us, including those found at the family, community Eucharistic tables. She suggests, nonetheless, that we are attempting to move forward from the various places of impasse that could continue to define our current phase of deadlock or eventually drown us in a wash of postmodern relativism. Sue's hope and practical direction forward lie, among other things, in an awareness of how language can shape and express, even unconsciously, the violence occasioned by differences and the formation of polarities around which those differences cluster. For her, congregation-wide participation in tools of non-violent communication does indeed show that movement is necessary, is possible, and that it begins with us.

For Sue, as well, the long loving look at reality which is contemplation is becoming a means of conversion or transformation with somewhat startling results. Not only do the various contemplative practices in which we have been engaged lead us more deeply and courageously into controversial, even dangerous, works of justice and liberation, but we have found and continue to find in that engagement a newer way of thinking and understanding - a quantum leap of consciousness. (I've always wanted to say 'quantum leap' in some respectable context.)

One such leap is a deeper recognition of God as the divine energy immanent in all of creation from the beginning, part of all the mysterious energies set in motion. As she says so eloquently of post-Vatican II initiatives, "The challenge for people of faith is to recognize, in the midst of the social messiness, those sacred energies that were moving us toward greater liberation and equality so that we could cooperate with those energies."

Over a period of decades we began to realize that some of our ideas of right and wrong, justice and equality were no longer adequate, and this, Sue names, as an evolution of consciousness in the collective psyche of the human community. Many of us can blush and be grateful to forget some of our earlier convictions.

I recall beginning to wonder about my praying for the conversion of the world to God, essentially through baptism as Catholics – certainly not as Presbyterians or Buddhists. These post-modern challenges to modern thinking are part of all our experiences.

Having staked her claim that the energies unleashed amid the chaotic reversals and upheavals in much of the post-modern world hold the potential for greater good, I appreciated Sue's personal example of intellectual openness to the other in gentle dialogue with Pope John Paul's insight. The late Karl Votlya saw the real dangers of a pluralistic context that abandons any hope of establishing a shared sense of justice. Acknowledging the truth of this insight, she laments, nonetheless, his efforts to shore up rigidly the tradition and back away from places where the Church could maintain its core values rather than staying in dialogue with the transforming elements of post-modern values.

If we follow Sue's direction, we need the humility to accept that we have things to learn, that our current kit bag of consciousness tools may not be enough to face and get engaged in the complexities ahead of us. But with an abiding trust in God's presence in

all the chaos and an awareness of our limitations, we can reframe our prophetic tradition and pull forth the new values and ideas we need from our developing consciousness.

Contemplation at the inner and outer levels of reality on the personal and collective level opens our eyes to what is unjust in our world and calls us to do something about it. This is our prophetic tradition that keeps us aware of God's presence and activity in the world that helps us to see and trust God working well beyond our familiar parameters in all our earth community. We need faith to believe in that; we need trust and courage to stand in solidarity with those people and energies that are healing and transforming our world.

Timothy Scott's Presentation

Timothy's paper, with clear statistics, assumes the religious life and ecclesial contexts with which we are familiar, their demographic and institutional problematics, although, in the case of religious life, he tips his hat briefly to the possibilities of at least some new life emanating from the South. More generally, he envisions a future for apostolic religious life that is contingent upon how we respond to a specific call to conversion. There is passionate resonance here, with the call that has rung out from Pope Francis in many of his private and public utterances since last March.

As one would expect from a South American bishop who has participated in the maturing response of a church from Medellin, through Puebla, Santo Domingo and Aparecida conference documents, Pope Francis is hyperconscious of the option for the poor, and more than most aware of the complexities and disappointments that have marked the living out by clergy, religious and the faithful of that first fine careless rapture. Timothy has neatly caught, especially for religious, both the original and the remedial essence of that option and presents it to us under the rubrics of poverty and periphery. There is consolation of success in the recounting of our post-Vatican II initiatives among the poor and our constant re-jigging attempts at service of the needy in ways that fit our age and circumstance.

In a couple of ways, Timothy has urged us in directions that definitely cost. As part of the general de-institutionalizing he cites Francis' insistence that vacant properties not be used for income to sustain our current comfort level but be handed over in some fashion to the poor who really own them.

We just sold an empty house after a survey to see what needs it might serve, including our refugee communities, and when nothing obvious to us was forthcoming and we needed to purchase a larger residence for a formation house, we sold it and put the proceeds towards the second purchase. And I, for one, felt good about that. Now I wonder: should we have just made it available to persons on the waiting list for shelter? Were we not far enough out on the periphery to recognize that immediately? And speaking of bringing those on the periphery home to share life with us, have we, have I, the courage to overcome the fears of myself and our congregations and of the neighbours on the adjoining streets? Directions, Timothy, with very pointed arrows indeed. I was a lot happier when you moved on to praise!

I especially appreciated the insight that without the consciousness of our lives as inhabited by the dynamic of the indwelling Trinity our best efforts at apostolic service of the dear neighbour can lapse into ideology and self-referential spirituality. Prayer and worship, at best, lead us beyond ourselves to become fishers of men and women in joy

and in hope. This link to evangelical poverty is the gospel message, you say, to take up the cross, to die to self, to live in love with the God we cannot see, the God who reveals God's self in the poor, the suffering and the marginalized. You believe that there are those in our world who are restless, who are seeking for this God, and willing to joyfully respond. For there is indeed a future of joyful gospel living.