

The Hope and Promise of New Life

The National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors

In his *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, Pope Francis, quoting from the earlier Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, reminded us that we have “not only a glorious history to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished.” With the special Year of Consecrated Life, religious communities have been given a moment in time and in grace to “look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion and to embrace the future with hope.” This represents a remarkable invitation and opportunity for each of our communities. It also offers us a vital opportunity for enhancing and developing a Culture of Vocation right across our country in the here and now.

At the beginning of the Year and at a country-wide level, the National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors (NAVFD) reflected carefully on the call embraced by these goals in order to become more deeply and expansively a national presence and service. The National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors (NAVFD) recognized that individual dioceses and religious communities were putting in place special events in celebration of the Year. Rather than duplicate such events nationwide a decision was made to invest commitment and energy into some longer-term and sustainable initiatives that the gift of the Year might “go on giving” beyond 2015/2016.

NAVFD Initiatives

NAVFD has taken “first steps” toward a stronger national presence by updating (a work in progress) the national website, <http://vocations.ca>. Facebook and Twitter accounts are now active and “alive” and a monthly newsletter has been launched for members.

With much gratitude to the Morrow Foundation, NAVFD has recently received its first grant to begin producing vocation materials for use by members in their vocation ministries. It is hoped that within a short time it will be possible to publish such materials in both official languages. NAVFD has also been invited and is poised to present an application for substantial funding for a national strategic plan and capacity building initiative. The aim of this is to enliven a “culture of Vocation” in Canada and to provide relevant and practical services to vocation ministers.

International Event

Recently, Canada, represented by the President of NAVFD, was privileged to take part in an unprecedented international meeting on vocation organized by the National Religious Vocation Conference (U.S.A.) and held in Rome (a full report of the meeting is posted on the <http://vocations.ca> website). The meeting was generously underwritten by the Conrad Hilton Foundation. The goals of the meeting were threefold:

- (1) To learn about the wider vocation picture beyond one’s own country;
- (2) To identify common areas of convergence in needs for vocation animation and awareness; and
- (3) To explore future areas for global collaboration in promoting new membership to religious life.

The meeting was a resounding success filled with a spirit of God’s hope. Representatives together with the Secretaries General of the Union of Superiors General, the International Union of Superiors General, the Vice-President of the Union of European Conferences of Major

Superiors and a representative of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life were able to discuss a variety of urgent and emergent issues.

Common Characteristics of Newer Members

Participants shared information and wisdom on characteristics of discerners and newer members today who are formed in a postmodern world in which life and professional choices abound. The desire of newer members for community living, profound personal and communal prayer were highlighted as prevalent across the globe. Significantly, it was noted that labels such as “traditional” and “liberal” no longer seem to fit their profile. For example, new members may have a strong devotion to Eucharistic Adoration and the Rosary and be equally committed to the alleviation of poverty, working for systemic justice and caring for the environment, all based in contemporary theological reflection.

Signs of hope expressed at the meeting included the vitality garnered at this first international gathering, a strong sense that the Spirit is leading all religious at this time to revitalize the charismatic gift and prophetic dimension of religious life, the number of new foundations being established, increasing support of the laity for religious life and solidarity and unity in our shared passion for vocation.

Re-energizing the Commitment to Vocations

Notably, the group identified the need to address, as well as external vocation initiatives, a commitment to re-energize “vocation” within religious institutes through leadership choices, especially through the impetus of General Chapters and by local and creative initiatives.

One such initiative for re-energizing commitment to vocations and expanding vocation awareness is being proposed by NAVFD from the examples of Ireland and the U.K. NAVFD is inviting religious, priests and laity across the country to form “Horizon Circles” or reading groups based on articles published in the quarterly international vocation journal, “Horizon”. Details relating to setting-up such groups may be obtained from NAVFD and special subscription rates to “Horizon” have been negotiated for members.

NAVFD National Conference

In 2016 (April 25-28), in Winnipeg, NAVFD will be holding its national conference entitled: “*Live the Word Courageously: New Voices in Vocation Culture.*” A local conference committee alongside the NAVFD Executive is working hard to ensure a lively and life-giving gathering. Keynote speakers will be Scripture Scholar and author, Fr. Scott Lewis, SJ and Sister Amy Hereford, CSJ an attorney and canonist who recently published the book, *Religious Life at the Crossroads: A School for Mystics and Prophets.*

The Primacy and Heart of Prayer

In a recent letter to Father Xavier Cannistrà, OCD, General Superior of the worldwide Carmelite Order, and in celebration of the 500 centenary of the birth of St. Teresa of Avila, Pope Francis stated: “Teresa left us [all] a great treasure to renew consecrated life today full of concrete proposals, ways to pray that far from closing us in on ourselves or leading us only to inner balance, always make us start again with Jesus and constitute a genuine school to grow in love of God and neighbour.”

The Holy Father pointed to St. Teresa’s “total self-giving to God,” her tireless communication of the Gospel and her call to authentic community life. “As she did then, even today, the saint opens new horizons for us; she calls us to a great undertaking, to see the world with the eyes of

Christ, to seek what he seeks and to love what he loves.” She did this, Pope Francis says, because Teresa was first and foremost, a “teacher of prayer.”

In recognition of the primacy, foundation and heart of prayer as we move out beyond this specifically designated Year of Consecrated Life, NAVFD is planning three retreats for religious to be held in the summer of 2016 in the East, the West and the centre of the country. Sister Elizabeth Davis, RSM will direct these retreats as a way for us to pray and reflect on “what next in hope” for consecrated life as we endeavour, ever more deeply, to be men and women of joy and promise in the World and the Church. Details of these retreats will be published soon.

Moving Forward in Unity

Speaking of current world crises, in his *Apostolic Letter to Religious*, Pope Francis reminds us all that “it is precisely amid these uncertainties, which we share with many of our contemporaries, that we are called to practise the virtue of hope.” To do this we must, he says, be “men and women of communion – witnesses and architects of the plan for unity ... sharing our respective gifts.” We already have a wonderful legacy of religious life in Canada and yet we continue to have a “future to build” together.

It is with gratitude to all religious, to CRC and to our members that NAVFD hopes we can move forward in unity in this country, with God’s promise of life abundant, building an ever-stronger culture of vocation. We hope that many more communities, individuals and groups will join NAVFD to make that hope a reality. For as Pope Francis says, as men and women of hope we must “have the courage to be present in the midst of tension, as a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit who inspires in human hearts a passion for all to be one.” What gift to our country, Church and world to have each and every charism of religious life and the gifts of individual Catholics and organizations represented in our national organization so that together we can “embrace the future with hope.”

Mary Rowell, CSJ
President, NAVFD