

Building a Partnership of Collaboration in the Mission

Is apostolic religious life capable of inventing new possibilities? The question touches into the very core of the frailty of the future of a good number of institutes of consecrated life. And yet, the frailty produced by the upheavals that affect our community life and apostolic achievements dispose us to discover the little breach that might allow an *otherness* to emerge for the good of the mission and our communities.

This transition requires that we proclaim in a prophetic manner that the Church is the People of God by accepting to share the mission with the laity. On this path of partnership we see that which is *already there*¹, *what has been accomplished and what remains to be done*. In order to better understand the meaning and the significance of this partnership in the mission, we will look at the ecclesial foundation on which it rests, try to understand the idea of partnership and identify some of the conditions for its implementation.

Ecclesial Foundation

Vatican II opened new horizons. It asked us to create a community based on partnership between women and men. It insisted that we enter into dialogue with one another and establish relationships founded on solidarity with the entire human family (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1). It identified the Church as the People of God, community (*Lumen Gentium*, 8) and communion (*LG*, 13) between brothers and sisters who are all equal in Jesus Christ, called to serve Christ because of our baptismal consecration and because we share a common vocation of holiness. (*LG*, 32 and 40)

It reaffirmed the missionary dimension of the Church (*Ad Gentes*, 5), the fact that all baptized persons, clerics, lay and religious alike are sent to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and to mutually help one another. The Church, says Vatican II, is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among men and women, unless there is a laity worthy of the name. (*AG*, 21) Because we are created beings and because we are baptized we are all partners in humanity and in the Church, and therefore co-responsible for the life and mission of the Church.

The Definition of Partnership

Exactly what do we mean by partnership? The word refers to a relational model where each person is considered equal and differences are respected, a model which includes a voluntary commitment of solidarity at the service of the mission. It supposes a movement from independence to interdependence, a relationship where each one is able to adjust her or his role and actions for the greater good of the other.

True partnership cannot be reduced to mere participation, collaboration, consultation or agreement. Although all of these elements are present in a partnership they are not what makes it complete. True partnership happens when all of the parties concerned are integrated, invested and co-responsible for the realization of the desired goal. Although a partnership does not require that all of the stakeholders be equal when it comes to means,

¹ See the experience of the Company of Jesus: "Collaboration at the Heart of the Mission", *Decree 6, 35th General Congregation of the Company of Jesus*, 2008.

status, and performance it does require an adaptation in the distribution of the roles and a commitment of unconditional solidarity with the other at the service of the shared mission.²

Conditions for a Partnership of Collaboration in the Mission

The transition to collaborative partnership in carrying out the mission of our congregations is not without risk. It displaces our borders, destabilizes us, questions our identity and our way of doing things after such a long time, forces us to rethink our relationship and actions with the laity and challenges us to see others as true partners in our apostolic action. It requires that we break with the familiar, relinquish our past glories, live a conversion of mentality and walk towards uncertainty, the unknown, the unforeseeable in response to the call to create a space of *visitation*³ and invent a new relationship by building together a sense of belonging and alliance in the mission.

Creating an alliance of true partnership and mutual responsibility between religious and laity at the heart of a project for the mission is going to be a major relational challenge. It means that each of the parties has to accept its incompleteness as well as its strengths and differences, establish a relationship where they allow themselves to be displaced by the other, each one accepting to let go in order to conceptualize the mission and build a common project together. (Lasida, 109)

Dialogue founded on respectful listening, trust and creativity leads to a project that can be classified as an alliance (Lasida, 111) where together we are able to accept the uncertainty and the unforeseeable, where risk is lived in a spirit of solidarity and where bonding is transformed into communion in the building up of an *apostolic corps*.

A partnership of cooperation brings the parties together in a relationship marked by co-responsibility and co-creation. The relational guarantee of this alliance requires accompaniment, formation, guidance to limit the risks, and the capacity to create a sense of belonging. (Lasida, 127) The pooling of the strengths and differences of each one, far from levelling them, contributes to the development of mutual respect and the validation of the subject at the service of the mission. That is how *prophets, wisdom figures and apostles* (Lasida, 286-288) combine their efforts to bring to the fore the creative imagination and collective intelligence of the group, to guide the group when dealing with the limits of the reality and to name the partnership being born.

Conclusion

The frailty generated by the crisis that has struck a large number of congregations can be an opportunity to liberate the future. It makes us search for possibilities, it forces us to reach out to the other, to risk a part of the journey together, to re-ignite relationships that allow life to spread, flourish and multiply. (Lasida, 133)

Such an experience is part of a long process that demands we make choices, that we get beyond our navel gazing, that we remain connected with our neighbour and enter into an alliance with others so as to dare to live the mission in a *different* way. The transition we've begun in a spirit of acceptance, openness and shared risk opens the way for the culture of

² Hervé Legrand, "The Importance of Tradition for Partnership between Christians in the Church" in *Pleins feux sur le partenariat en Église. Actes du symposium. Le partenariat hommes et femmes en Église*, Paulines, 1997, p. 106.

³ Elena Lasida, *Le goût de l'autre. La crise, une chance pour réinventer le lien*, Albin Michel, 2011, p. 99.

partnership⁴ that highlights a new way of being together, relationships founded on reciprocity and the creation of bonds that can lead to a renewed sense of the Church as the People of God. Finally, within this prophetic movement where a new alliance is created, the identity of each one is seen as grace, much to the surprise of the others as they discover the unique treasures present in each of the partners (Lasida, 225).

Questions for Reflection...

Name the reality in your religious congregation and what would allow you to risk a partnership with others in the carrying out of your mission.

A formation session entitled, ***Faire route ensemble vers une culture partenariale*** is presently being offered. For more information, contact the secretariat of the Assemblée des évêques catholiques du Québec (AÉCQ).

Gaétane Guillemette, NDPS
gaetane.guillemette@gmail.com

⁴ *Cahiers de spiritualité ignatienne*, “Vers une culture partenariale en Église”, n° 117, 2006.