

CRC PRESIDENT'S REPORT

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

May 26-29, 2016

Au cœur des défis,
discerner
l'espérance

Discerning
hope
amid the challenges



CRC 

President's report

Discerning hope amid the challenges

Rita Larivée, SSA

PART 1

I. Introduction

1. Two years ago at the last general assembly, following my election as the president of CRC, I wondered about what I had gotten myself into after I said yes to serve. You see, it was during this assembly of 2014 that we were presented with the 47 recommendations from the report of the committee for the future of the CRC. This should have been enough of a challenge for a new president such as myself. However, there was a second challenge as well. Just prior to the assembly of 2014, the executive director at the time, Fr. Yvon Pomerleau, OP, had submitted his resignation for September. This, of course, meant that we had to immediately begin a national search for a new director. And third—because things like this always seem to come in threes—the evaluations of the last general assembly called for more dialogue and greater participation among its members at these assemblies, and for the new council to find a way that would allow us to engage with issues of concern while we are together—which we hope we have done and that you will be part of on Friday and Saturday.

2. Needless to say, at the end of our assembly in 2014, I took a deep breath the day after everyone returned home.

3. I had no previous experience serving on the administrative council of the CRC; so, in a way, this was my baptism of fire into a commitment that today fills me with gratitude and joy for having been allowed the opportunity to journey with you, the women and men religious of Canada.

4. In considering what to say in addressing you, I believe our theme *Discerning hope amid the challenges* is a good starting point. There is *hope* and there are *challenges*, certainly. But a true spirit of *discernment* will always lead us to a place of peace at the end of the day.

5. This evening, we are beginning a journey, together, for the next three days. We will speak about many things and we will have much to reflect upon as we listen to our

guest speaker, Fr. Simon-Pierre Arnold. We will try to balance the challenge of who we must be in the world as women and men religious and the context of our lived reality. We will take time to celebrate on Saturday evening to honor who we are as the Canadian Religious Conference. And we will review where we have come from as a group, where we are now, and where we hope to be as religious in the Church today. A conference, such as this, is an ending point to the work already accomplished, it is a point for assessing our reality, and it is a starting point for continuing our presence in the world with renewed courage and audacity.

6. As we get started, I wish to share with you the first of three short reflections on our life as the CRC. The second reflection will take place on Saturday afternoon and the third reflection will be presented on Sunday morning. A copy of these reflections can be found in the folders you received at registration. I encourage you to review them as we journey together during these next few days.

7. As I said earlier, at the last general assembly, the administrative council received 47 recommendations. During the past two years, 2014-2016, much of our work has been in response to these recommendations, with a view to creating an organization that will take us into the future as leaders of religious communities.

8. As we look into the future and as we look around this room, we can ask ourselves: who will be sitting here in ten years and what will they be doing?

9. We know all too well the daily challenges that most leaders today must address, such as aging membership, selling of houses, restructuring, and on and on.

10. Of course, not everyone in this room has these challenges. There are the young among us and they have different challenges.

11. Our responsibility as a conference of religious leaders is this: amid our challenges we must continue to be witnesses to the reality that the Spirit is always among us and is always at work, moving us toward the next horizon. We are always on mission.

12. At this point in its history, the CRC is in a planning and restructuring phase. This is the best way for me to describe what is happening. We are looking to our future as an organization amid our challenges. And, like all of our congregations, the CRC, as an organization, is called to live daily our theme of *discerning hope amid these challenges*.

13. Just as is true for our congregations, the old models for operating may no longer be able to carry our hopes. The way we have always done things may not be sustainable. As president of the CRC these past two years, and with the other members of the administrative council, I had the time to study the history of the CRC, to engage in many

conversations about the CRC, and to review and analyze the work of the future's committee (very good work). This evening, as well as on Saturday, and Sunday, I would like to share with you in this report some of my reflections. Due to our tight agenda, we decided that breaking my report into three pieces would be best, rather than waiting until our final day together to present these comments.

- *The CRC is in a planning and restructuring phase for this part of its history.*
- *The forty-seven recommendations shaped the work of the CRC for 2014-2016.*
- *The way we have always done things may not be sustainable.*

II. Search for a new executive director

14. The first challenge we faced was to find a new executive director. About five years ago, the CRC accepted to have an executive director who would serve half-time because it was difficult even then to find someone who was available full-time. Two years ago, at the general assembly of 2014, the CRC accepted the recommendation that the position of executive director needed to be full-time. My experience and that of the administrative council affirm this recommendation. In order to set a direction and to allow for the depth of conversation needed to advance our deepest desires as leaders, anything less than a full-time director would present a serious compromise for our hopes.

15. I raise this because I do not know what will happen the next time we are presented with this situation. We owe our gratitude to the former executive director, Fr. Yvon Pomerleau, OP, who was part-time and who served beside me for my first seven months until a new executive director could begin on January 1, 2015.

16. It was not an easy search. We had to identify a member of a religious community, who was available to work full-time, bilingual, able to travel, someone who had the experience and knowledge to represent us as leaders with the bishops of Canada, other professional organizations in service to religious, other conferences in the world, and would be able to respond to the recommendations given to the new administrative council.

17. As an administrative council, we had to begin the search more than once. And so you can imagine our delight when Fr. Timothy Scott, CSB, accepted our offer to come on board. Many of you have already met him as he has traveled across Canada to meet

with as many of you as possible; you also know him through his communications over the past 17 months.

18. I say all of this because it reflects the same challenge that many of us are having within our congregations as we look for leadership to serve our communities. As a conference of religious leaders, the CRC may require more creativity as we look for leadership in the future. It will be a challenge, and we will need to enter that future with discerning hope that the spirit will lead us to the place we need to go.

19. We hope Timothy will stay with us for as long as possible, but eventually we will need to prepare ourselves for other possibilities. What will this be? When will this be? I do not know. Full-time leadership for the CRC is crucial, but it is not an easy objective to attain.

20. For the future, stability and continuity in the leadership of the CRC will be one of its biggest challenges. And the dynamics of finding religious willing and able to serve on the administrative council as president and vice-president are similar.

21. Thank you, Timothy, for saying yes. And we thank his Congregation of Basilian brothers for saying “yes” in allowing him to serve.

- *CRC will need to address future leadership for the conference.*
- *Stability and continuity in leadership are critical for setting a direction.*

III. Restructuring so as to go forward

22. The next challenge for this administration was discerning how best to implement the forty-seven recommendations presented by the committee for the future. It was a daunting task to say the least.

23. As we looked around the room at our first meeting of the new administrative council, we realized that there was no one among us who had served on the committee for the future and that, although we had the report, we did not have the actual working experience for continuing this important work.

24. So we decided to create the “Future II” committee that would continue to work with us in helping to address each of the recommendations. This new Future II committee was established in the autumn of 2014 and began its work with the new

executive director in January 2015. We asked Alain Rodrigue, CMM, to continue his work as chair of this committee and to invite others to work alongside him, those who were familiar with the CRC and the work done during the previous two years. They are: Yvon Chalifoux, OSM (liaison to the administrative council), Lise Barbeau, SCSL (former member of the committee), and Ann Lewans, OSU (former member of the committee). I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their service to us all.

25. Among other recommendations, we received the mandate to restructure the offices of the CRC so as to better serve our needs in responding to our commitment, primarily in the areas of ongoing formation, JPIC (Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation), and communications. As all of us in leadership know, making a recommendation is not the same as implementing a recommendation, particularly when it involves members of the staff who have worked hard over the years to respond to our needs. All the recommendations were available to the staff prior to the start of the new administration. We owe them our gratitude and appreciation.

26. Five of the recommendations address specifically the need to use as effectively as possible the new social media tools and other Internet options for sharing information, facilitating conferences online, and providing opportunities for our members to interact more frequently.

27. We are most grateful to Sister Louise Stafford, FSP, who will continue to oversee our written publications. And we are most pleased to have with us Jean-Michel Bigou, who is now beginning to develop these ideas, which we hope to implement within the next year.

28. In addition to the recommendations I have already highlighted, we also established a regular monthly meeting of the executive council, president, VP, secretary-treasurer and the executive director. This allows for a stronger coordination of our efforts.

29. And as many of you already know, we have continued the development of regional meetings to better understand the concerns and needs of each particular region. We are pleased with our efforts, but we will need to continue to find even better ways to empower and support our regions.

30. So, did we implement all 47 recommendations? No, not yet. However, we were able to address each recommendation at an initial level. And... Some were implemented completely, though many of the recommendations are works in process that will need ongoing development by the next administrative council.

- *Restructuring must be kept simple and feasible.*
- *Changes involving personnel must be addressed with compassion and transparency.*
- *After two years of work, it is clearer how some of the goals perhaps can be modified and / or implemented in multiple steps.*

31. As you can see, we have been busy. And there is much more to share. Yet, it is very encouraging work. As leaders within our communities, we are preparing the way for the future. It would be easier to keep the status quo, but even Pope Francis will not let us get away with taking the easy road. As he told us during the year for consecrated life: We must wake up the world.

32. This evening, we continue to go forward to build upon the foundation we have received as a CRC, so as to respond to the new challenges in front of us. On Saturday afternoon, I will share Part 2 of my reflections. Thank you.

PART 2

IV. New communities and membership within the CRC

Why is this important?

33. As you read the statutes of the CRC, you will note that they state clearly that the CRC is composed of the Major Superiors and their equivalent in religious institutes and societies of apostolic life of women and men in Canada. As many of you are witnesses to, religious life today is in flux. There are new groups among us that do not fit the canonical requirements for becoming members. Yet, they are public associations of the Christian faithful that practice the traditional religious vows or promises in one way or another.

34. Religious life at its core never changes. However, we are at a moment in the Church, and in the world, where men and women are organizing themselves as communities in ways that are different from the lived reality that most of us have known. Their chosen way of life does not fit into the traditional norms. In a sense, they live outside the box.

35. The CRC general assembly of 2014 asked us specifically to look into this and to:

1. take concrete steps to continue the conversation with the new communities;
2. to implement the new statutes and by-laws that provide a path for others to join with us.

36. With us today is the general superior of the Community of La Famille Marie-Jeunesse, who was granted affiliate status by the administrative council as permitted by our new statutes and by-laws that were approved at the last general assembly.

37. This is an important change for us that could be duplicated with other communities in the future. We leave this topic to the next administrative council to carry on the work. Its significance speaks to the future of religious life and the need to remain open to the work of the Spirit among us.

38. Does this mean that everything is clear as to who should and can be a member? No. The committee that worked on the revised statutes and by-laws did wonderful work. But, it is in the application and practice of these new articles to our way of operating that questions emerged which lacked clarity on how best to proceed.

39. The articles concerning membership will need further study so as to arrive at greater clarity and simplicity for their implementation. I encourage you to read the new statutes and by-laws, now that we are two years away from the conversations, and you will most likely understand what I am referring to.

- *Further study of membership is needed.*
- *We must remain open to groups that do not fit the canonical norms, yet live the traditional vows.*
- *We might want to consider simplifying the new statutes and by-laws in this regard.*

V. The Year of Consecrated Life

40. This past year was also the Year of Consecrated Life, as declared by Pope Francis, from December 2014 to February 2016. All of us participated in one way or another in celebrations, workshops, conversations, and liturgies in recognition of this special time to study, reflect and honor this tradition and life form within the Church. It was an important moment for the CRC as we highlighted the year with various activities. Perhaps most significant of all the sponsored events was the collaborative liturgy with the bishops of Canada in September of 2015 at Saint Joseph's Oratory, here in Montreal. This collaborative moment allowed us for the first time to write and publish to all Catholics in Canada a joint letter by the bishops and the CRC, entitled: *Celebrating and giving thanks for the gift of consecrated life*.

41. In addition, this special year allowed us to enter into conversation with many groups about our identity and our prophetic role in the Church.

42. When we speak of our identity as consecrated women and men, for some, it is not clear who is included. Often in our day-to-day conversations, we interchange the phrases *religious life* and *consecrated life* as if they mean the same thing. Consecrated life includes secular institutes, the eremitical life form, and consecrated virgins, the largest of these being secular institutes, which are becoming more organized and increasing in numbers which each passing year. They even have their own conference: CCSI (Canadian Conference of Secular Institutes).

43. The CRC, however, is for leaders of religious institutes.

44. Our new statutes require that we continue an active search for what the future might be for religious life as it evolves and responds to the new insights emerging from the new groups within our midst. This leads to many questions. For example: How do we navigate the gray area during this time of transition? Where is consecrated life going? And what does this mean for religious institutes?

45. Within the CRC, we have taken first steps, albeit small steps, but we must do more to encourage the next generation of women and men called by the Spirit to respond to this vocation within the Church. Our statutes, which are now a *fait accompli* and officially accepted by the Vatican, must stretch us beyond our comfort zone to new ways of living the vows. The outgoing administrative council accepted an important responsibility that must now be taken up by the incoming council.

We must continue to find ways:

- *to navigate the gray zone between religious institutes and other forms of consecrated life.*
- *to nurture the next generation called by the Spirit to this special vocation within the Church.*

VI. Encouraging and assisting the young among us

46. There is a small but important note that I would like to mention about our work with the youngest religious among us—“The Benjamins”, as they call themselves.

47. This past year, as we found ways to honor the year for consecrated life, the youngest of our women and men religious of Quebec hosted a gathering of about 70 religious who are either under 50 years of age or under 15 years of profession. The purpose was to build stronger links and networks of support for the individuals in those age groups whose numbers are often represented by one or two members within a congregation.

48. The CRC walked alongside them as they prepared and organized for a three-day meeting that took place last November at La Maison de la Madone, Trois-Rivières (Quebec). It was a wonderful success and another way in which the CRC responded to the 47 recommendations.

- *The CRC must continue to assist its members to cultivate leadership among our youngest.*

VII. Being a prophetic voice

49. A very important point that I would like to address is the ongoing need for the CRC to find its place as a prophetic voice in the Church and in our world. It is constitutive of who we are as religious in the Church. How have we demonstrated this during our mandate? Among other things, we have written letters of support and affirmation.

50. This morning, I spoke of the commitments made by the administrative council of the CRC in support of two important issues: (1) the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and (2) the St. Francis pledge on climate change. There have been other smaller letters, as well. In addition, our Web site has been tracking the commitments made by religious congregations to help the Syrian refugees. Fr. Timothy Scott will report on the JPIC activities during his report on Sunday, as well as the CRC's link to KAIROS and other groups.

51. During these two past years of change, we have had to give much time to rebuilding, but we realize that we must give significant time, as well, to a process that will allow us to put our name on the urgent needs of the day. Timothy will speak more about this in his report for finding ways to have more people involved across Canada on important issues that require our attention and our voice.

- *CRC needs to develop a clear process for making public statements.*
- *Whatever process we use, it must allow us to respond in a timely fashion.*

PART 3

VIII. A few words about the Theological Commission

52. In 1999, the CRC established the Theological Commission to deepen the meaning of consecrated life according to a theological approach that integrates the contributions made by human and social sciences. Today, seventeen years down the road, the Theological Commission continues to contribute to our lives as leaders and members of religious institutes.

53. In keeping with its tradition over the years, since the last general assembly, the commission published its bulletin for the winter of 2015: “The Apostolic Exhortation: The Joy of the Gospel” and its bulletin for the winter of 2016 which focused on Interculturalism and Consecrated Life. The current members are:

- Lorraine d’Entremont, SC (Co-Chair)
- Michel Proulx, O. PRAEM. (Co-Chair)
- Margaret Patricia Brady, OSB
- Gill Goulding, CL
- Gaétane Guillemette, NDPS
- Louis Riverin, FMJ (Famille Marie-Jeunesse)
- Antoine-Emmanuel de la Sayette, FMJ (Fraternité Monastique des Frères de Jérusalem)

54. We are most grateful to each of them for the time they give to this important work.

IX. We continue to have partners outside of the CRC with whom we build bridges on behalf of the religious of Canada.

55. Over the years, other organizations working on behalf of men and women religious have emerged in response to specific needs. One of the recommendations we received is for the CRC to begin conversations with some of our partner organizations so as to avoid the duplication of services or the multiplication of forums. It has been a concern from time to time that there has been an overlap of topics or a conflict of dates. We are pleased to report that these issues are being addressed so as to provide the best services possible.

56. The CRC offices are working with:

- ATTIR and ATRI: The associations for treasurers of religious institutes (French and English);
- Legal Formation Institute: Sessions on Canon Law for religious institutes that take place at St. Paul University in Ottawa, usually during the month of June;
- KAIROS: Canadian churches working together for justice and peace;
- Development and Peace: the official international development organization of the Catholic Church in Canada.

X. Inter-American meeting and presence at other conferences of men and women religious

57. We continue to participate in the Inter-American meetings that brings together the presidents and executive directors of the CRC, LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States), CMSM (Conference of Major Superiors of Men in the United States), and CLAR (Conference of Latin American Religious). Some of us who represent these conferences met as a group in Bogota, Columbia, in 2015. The group also met here in Montreal this week.

And, again this year, as we do every year, we made sure that either Timothy, our executive director, or I would be present at the general assembly of the LCWR and CMSM.

XI. Keeping good relations with the bishops of Canada and with the Vatican

58. We also responded to the recommendation that we continue to develop good relations with our bishops at the national, regional and local levels. In addition to attending the annual meeting of the CCCB, we also attend regularly the meetings of the bishops of Quebec and, when possible, the regional meetings of the bishops in other areas of the country. And, if possible, when the administrative council meets in one of the regions, we try to have a meal with the local bishop. This has been very successful and all our meetings have opened doors to a stronger understanding of each other and our different roles in the Church. In addition, we are most grateful for the ongoing support and encouragement of our Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Luigi Bonazzi.

Vatican visit

59. Just this month, May 3-7, Timothy and I traveled to Rome to visit with, among other offices, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, where we had the opportunity to visit with Cardinal Braz de Aviz on behalf of the CRC and the religious of Canada.

XII. Conclusion

60. In closing, I would like to acknowledge the excellent work of the members of the administrative council. There were nine of us who took on this two-year mandate 2014-2016 as we attempted to address the desires and wishes expressed by you, the members. Every two years, we look for those who will accept this important work on behalf of all of us and we are most grateful to the congregations who have supported those of their members serving the CRC.

61. I am particularly grateful to the other members of the administrative council. Their wisdom and thoughtful responses gave me the courage and energy to continue the work.

62. I would also like to thank Father Yvon Pomerleau, OP, the executive director until December 2014, who was willing to continue as the executive director of the CRC until Timothy came on board. He helped me to understand the inner workings of the CRC, the current issues, and the broader challenges. He is not here today, but I hope his brother Dominicans will share my gratitude with him.

63. And last, but not least, I wish to thank Timothy Scott, CSB, who so graciously said yes to us and has been by my side these past 17 months. His experience and devotion to our mission has made this work enjoyable and fulfilling.

64. Blessings to each of you as we go forward together discerning hope amid the challenges.

Thank you.