

The Renewal of Religious Life Is Ongoing

Panel presentation by Gaétane Guillemette, NDPS

To describe our experience since Vatican II is not a simple task. However, I will try to bring out a few aspects in response to each one of the following questions: How has Vatican II set us in motion? Who have we become? Where are we going?

How Has Vatican II Set Us in Motion?

Vatican II awakened a spirit of renewal which never ceases to mark out the way of the baptised and that of consecrated persons. In its definition of the Church as People of God and Church of communion, *Lumen Gentium* signified that all the baptised, whatever their state in life, are called to holiness (LG 11, 32, 40). Tending to the perfection of charity (LG 41), they are to witness to Christ and announce the Gospel. All are consecrated and equal in Christ; they are sent to the whole world according to the gifts they have received (LG 32), and they are invited to manifest the unity of the Body of Christ.

Lumen Gentium influenced the renewal of consecrated life. It presents consecrated life as the profession of the practice of the evangelical counsils (PC 1; LG 43) and no longer as a state of perfection. Founded on Baptism, it belongs inseparably to the life and holiness of the Church (LG 44). Consecrated to God and to the mission of the Church, consecrated persons are called to be a sign and manifestation of the Reign of heaven (LG 44). Participants in the one vocation to holiness, they are not outside the people of God but at its very heart, forming the one People of God (LG chapter 2) on the way to salvation (LG chapter 7).

In the spirit of *Lumen Gentium*, *Perfectae Caritatis* insists on the following of Christ as the ultimate norm of religious life (PC 20). The document constantly invites us to return to the sources of Christian life, to the original inspiration of our institutes (PC 2) and to the spirit and specific intentions of our founders (PC 2b). Other ecclesial documents since 1966 continued to support the renewal of consecrated life.

The *aggiornamento* that was set in motion by Paul VI's motu proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae* in 1966 aimed at Christological, ecclesiological and pastoral renewal of institutes of consecrated life. The path that was opened by this process of renewal aroused a new dynamism which did not come to an end with the renewal of Constitutions as some might have thought. It was a starting point, not a destination.

At the same time that we were revising our Constitutions, there were many departures from communities, vocation recruitment fell apart, apostolic works were lost and our social effectiveness was eroded. Add to that the aging of our members, the difficulty of adjusting apostolic life to the ever-changing social realities, and the fact that some communities were disoriented and turned in on themselves. It is easy to understand that in 1980 it was still difficult to admit that we were in the midst of a crisis. In whatever way we faced the crisis, it was irrevocable and we found ourselves in the desert. Our journey had led us to necessary shifts.

Who Have We Become?

Having passed from enthusiasm to demobilisation, disillusion and breathlessness, with time we have become a small, fragile remnant, slowed down but always on the way. Several institutes took a long time to go beyond denial, which prevented them from taking necessary turning points to resituate themselves. There was a shift toward a more introverted spirituality, at times

a self-centered community life, a reclaiming of gifted persons for community maintenance to the detriment of mission, a somewhat neglected theological formation, a timid governance marked by uncertainty before the future and reduced commitment to the apostolate.

However, we must admit that several institutes showed a lot of openness, audacity and creativity in planning for their future. The complex and daunting challenges required a lot of foresight, openness of spirit, wisdom and courage. We are constantly being challenged and called forth by the events and happenings. On one hand, we want to be able to invest in an active and creative presence and to allow some members to move forward in this direction. On the other hand, we need to face our diminishment, to ensure the well-being of our aging or sick members and to make necessary decisions regarding our properties and buildings.

In all circumstances we live by faith and hope as we continue to be inventive regarding mission, either by choosing bold and unprecedented actions or self-effacing presence, attentive and compassionate with the people in our midst.

The call to “return to the sources” set in motion by the *aggiornamento* engaged us in the deepening and actualisation of the charism of our institutes. It has not been easy to make necessary distinctions between the charism of the founders, the charism of foundation, the charism of the institute or to name and articulate a synthesis of the elements of the charism known as spirituality, community and mission. Some things are still ambiguous and all is not clear for everyone.

However, having understood that our charism is a gift from God for the Church, we could not keep it for ourselves; we had to share it with others. The understanding of vocation and the place of laity in the Church encouraged us to share our charism with laity and clergy. On their own journeys, many mutually recognized a common vocation in relation to a charism and journeyed toward spiritual families where together they became heirs and co-bearers of this heritage.

The dimension of a community of sisters and brothers gathered and sent to the whole world, called to help each other (LG 32) is beginning to take on new meaning for us. Being increasingly aware of our need for one another, we can allow ourselves to share mission with others. We learn to move from self-sufficiency and independence to interdependence by taking the risk of establishing new relationships for the sake of mission. There are some experiments in this area, where responsibilities are shared among religious and laity, with organizations or between institutes for an apostolic project undertaken in collaboration or partnership.

There are other calls that give direction to our actions such as ethical and ecological concerns, social justice, struggle against poverty and abuse, the place of women in the Church and society. Within our communities, intergenerational and intercultural realities are a place of openness and learning about the richness of differences that lead to communion and apostolic solidarity.

Important efforts are made to develop formation programs for the pre-, inter- and post-novitiate but we still need to re-invent a process of formation that is appropriate for present generations. These approaches raise questions; Pope Francis is calling us to be lucid about our intentions and our behaviors.¹

¹ Pope Francis, “Firm and encouraging words of the pope to the major superiors of religious orders,” (120 major superiors of religious orders of men) Vatican, November 29, 2013, published in the Italian Jesuit Magazine, *La Civiltà cattolica*.

Who have we become? We could say that in the last 50 years, we have been in a perpetual state of learning and discernment. We seek the will of God, within our personal lives and in the life of our institutes. We learn to let go of many things and to advance in the desert not knowing where it will lead, filled with hope that our journey will contribute to the liberation of life.

Our present condition obliges us to consider and discern where we want to ... and can go. It reminds us that the goal of consecrated life is not to ensure its own survival and that it does not exist for itself but for the world.² Our efforts to be lucid, detached and creative will help us become more and more mystical and prophetic for our world today.

Where Are We Going?

It is not a question of knowing if our institute will survive or not, but rather of placing ourselves under the guidance of the Spirit, in a state of transformation toward a new reality of consecrated life which is being fashioned before our eyes and in which we participate.

As our institutes are experiencing increasing diminishment, new life-forms are being born and develop. The tree of consecrated life, as stated in *Lumen Gentium*, (LG 43) continues to branch out in admirable fashion and to multiply in the field of the Lord. During the last 50 years, several hundreds of new communities have been founded throughout the world; 59 of these are in Canada, 37 of which in Quebec.³ Some of these new religious institutes are mixed and others are multi-vocational.⁴ Even though this raises several theological questions and the frontiers of consecrated life become blurred,⁵ the Church accompanies these new groups and continues to discern these new gifts of consecrated life that the Spirit is entrusting to its care. For our part, we are invited to dialogue with these new life-forms and journey in the redefinition of our identity as persons consecrated to God and to the mission of the Church.

Our experience of necessary shifts brings us to a privileged path: that of being transmitters⁶ of life as disciples of Christ, "Transmitter," He who passed through death and rose to give fullness of life. Our walk in the desert calls us to give prophetic witness to Christ, "Transmitter," at the heart of the present mutation of consecrated life.

On one hand, we continue to stand in the presence of God, of our sisters and brothers in community, as Church and in communion with those who are most impoverished. Whatever the fate of our institutes, we must always watch for the dawn and for liberators of life wherever we are and for as long as we live.

On the other hand, the crisis that cracked open our cement walls dug a passage with an unknown destination from which something radically new can emerge. Although we may not see this newness come to fruition, we have the responsibility to sow it and to make it grow.

² Michel Côté, OP, *Que sera la vie religieuse demain?* (What will religious life be tomorrow?), conference given on August 15, 2004 and published in the magazine, *La vie des communautés religieuses*, November-December, 2004, p. 272-294. Note taken from www.dominicains.ca/VR/Avenir/cot-m.htm, p. 2.

³ Rick van Lier, *Entre tradition et innovation : nouveaux instituts, communautés nouvelles et nouvelles formes de vie consacrée au Canada* (Between Tradition and Innovation: New Institutes, New Communities and New Forms of Consecrated Life), soon to be published with the Acts of the colloquium *The State of Consecrated Life in Canada*, (Concordia University, Montreal, January 26, 2013), Wilfrid Laurier University Press (Waterloo), 2014.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gilles Routhier, « Lorsque les frontières deviennent floues », *Cahiers de spiritualité ignatienne*, « Laïques et personnes consacrées. Quel arrimage? » Actes du colloque 2004, vol. XXIX, n 113, mai-août 2005, p. 71-82.

⁶ Elena Lasida, *Le goût de l'autre. La crise, une chance pour réinventer le lien*, Albin Michel, 2011, ch. 3.

However, to secure the crossing, we have to become “transmitters” who, in faith and hope, dare to set out and accept to prepare the way and make it possible.

Our role as transmitters does not consist in prolonging the duration of the present model, but to read the signs of the times and to search for liberation of life, while creating conditions for dialogue, collaboration and communion among us and with others. It is urgent that we plan for the future which requires much energy ... but must we not leave a bit of room for creativity? It is our duty to make sure that members of our institutes, of all ages and functions, can open spaces within themselves and around them where it is possible to see and act differently. We must make choices to liberate shoots of new life that emerge within the community and for consecrated life.

Conclusion

Where are we going? Fifty years after Vatican II, the conciliar teachings remain the foundational pillars for the ongoing renewal of consecrated life. Whether we are crossing the desert or on a path of growth, long-term communities and new ones need to walk together as disciples of Christ and develop a deepening communion with the multiple forms and ways of life. In the Church-People of God, we need to work in the vineyard of the Lord in covenant relationships among ourselves and with others.

This is a way of new evangelization which allows us to show forth the unity and communion of the members of Christ’s Body called to be Church together in a new way and to proclaim the “joy de vivre” of our God.