

“My Own Journey in Religious Life”
Panel Presentation by Joyce Harris, SSA

My own journey in religious life has been faith-filled and very challenging. I entered the Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria at 17 and left at 27 primarily because of a crisis of faith. I was imbued with the spirit of Vatican II, as was my order, but wrestled with Church structures and felt I could follow Christ more fully as an active layperson. During this period I completed graduate studies, participated in UN Human Rights advocacy and in justice and peace work in Central America and Canada. While in Central America I was so moved by the trauma and suffering of the people (meeting with Child Soldiers) that social action was not enough. Only profound prayer and major conversion of heart could break down so many oppressive systems and structures.

In this incredible “knocked off my horse” experience I responded to a call for contemplative prayer and joined the Franciscan Poor Clares. After being absorbed in this enriching tradition for several years, I experienced a personal integration which challenged me again to seek out my discipleship in apostolic ministry. The Sisters of St. Ann who knew me recognized that my journey was not about a “fickleness of heart” but one of deep desire to be faithful to an evolving understanding of Christ’s call within me.

Last year, I participated in a regional KAIROS gathering. Sarah Stratton from the national staff asked us: Do you experience the Church as a Monument or a Movement? Let’s ask ourselves this question: Do we experience Religious life as a Monument or a Movement?

Like many of you I have been steeped in a vision of religious life groaning. Grunting and galloping through the myriad of challenges, changes and chaotic upheavals unleashed since the Spirit’s powerful outpouring of dynamic love in Vatican II.

“New Wineskins for New Wine”

The questions were many and profound: Who are we? What is our charism? What does it mean to be a ministerial/apostolic community in the modern world? We worked tirelessly to respond but soon discovered that our world view and society were changing in quantum leaps and that we needed “new wineskins for new wine.” The Spirit, while “moving all over this land”, encouraged an unprecedented amount of creativity in science, cosmology, and technology so that we now need new lenses to view this evolutionary, relational, Christocentric universe. As you know, many theologians and religious are writing and speaking on these movements today.

As a woman religious, committed to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, I want to share how being on this learning edge of life in the 21st Century affects my lived-experience and opens me to the future!

God’s primary invitation to me is to recognize God’s evolving presence in the universe, in the world and in religious life. It is not science, technology, theology or any other “ology” of themselves that has brought us to this moment in history but God’s creative love incarnate in all creation, in Jesus Christ and through him in us as we continue to discover more, and participate in the very creativity of God!

So the call is to embrace this Kairos moment, not only as a year of Faith, but as an opportunity for faithful living, passionately incarnating Christ-love now. We strive to live our Prophetic stance in the Church and in our world with passion in response to the Christ who is the Way. And “passion” does not only belong to the young; it has been the gift of the prophet in every age however old or young. A prophetic stance is embodied in relationships: our relationship with God, with each other and with creation.

The CRC Administrative Council chose as one of its orientations for 2012-2014 that “in order to be signs and artisans of a Church of communion” the CRC is “to remain attentive to the issues of social justice and respect for creation.” Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation is our Gospel lens. At this Kairos moment our society needs us to mirror, model and mentor right relationships in a world fractured by abuse of power, violence, division, greed fundamentalism and terrorism.

Called to Protect the Marginalized

I had begun to mull over my thoughts for this presentation before the election of Pope Francis. As you might imagine his election has filled me with immense hope. His invitation to all of us to proclaim the Gospel with our lives, to protect those who are marginalized and vulnerable, to protect God’s creation, and to respond to all peoples with mercy, compassion and love certainly witnesses to the Spirit’s call to respond to the signs of our times. So we ask: Who are the marginalized in our society? Pope Francis highlights the elderly.

My community in our Western Province, like many of yours has been through profound change over the last few years. We’ve sold our major Residences and Retreat Centre and moved our senior sisters who need various levels of care into public facilities. On some level we still grieve these losses but many have a renewed sense of being prophetic by reaching out in compassion to each other and to the other residents with the same generosity shown by our foundress, Blessed Marie Anne Blondin. Empowered by their personal relationship with Christ, our elderly sisters continue to nurture community and give hope to others who are lonely, stressed and fragile. Is this not the face of justice?

Pope Francis also reminds us of the overwhelming presence of inequality and unjust structures in our society that keep men, women and children in poverty. I believe that we have a huge contribution to make internationally, nationally and locally. We can be proud that our CRC leadership has sent letters to our Federal Government supporting the work of the Development and Peace, holding our Government accountable for best practices nationally and globally. Locally, it is important that we encourage involvement in Development and Peace, KAIROS and Diocesan justice initiatives.

Making a Real Difference

Whether few or small in numbers, Religious who collaborate with each other and partner with other groups can make a real difference. Many of our communities have NGO seats at the United Nations. Women religious continue to pressure countries to stop the tide of violence against women and children especially in the area of human trafficking. Others commit their efforts for significant international agreements to Environmental protocols.

There is much unrest in our world as peoples and countries struggle towards real equality and true democracy. In Canada the *Idle No More Movement* addresses the

inequalities in our own country especially with our First Nations peoples. We still have a serious commitment to journey with our indigenous sisters and brothers towards full equality.

Several congregations are involved with Socially Responsible Investments. Our province belongs to SHARE a group who does research and writes letters on our behalf to companies, challenging them to more responsible and ethical practices.

There is an urgency throughout the world to protect our planet, our environment and to address the advancement of technology.

We have an opportunity to model responsible use of technology like the internet. As members of communities we value relationships. Whether we live alone, in community house or belong to cluster groups we nurture relationships with each other and can model this value in society. We work at positive, nonviolent communication with each other and bring these skills to those with whom we partner. Like Pope Francis we, too, can make significant changes by doing it. He is a real example! An Argentinian woman recently remarked: "I like Pope Francis, he's with the people and he drinks the same kind of beer as me."

Regarding the environment, it is incumbent upon Religious to offer wisdom, mentoring and enthusiasm when joining with others to protect God's creation. We now know that our human footprint contributes greatly to global warming and the possible destruction of our earth. It makes me shiver to think of standing before our God who is love and owning my responsibility for not caring enough for God's poor and God's creation!

"We Are to Be Headlights"

For me our mission as Religious is to engage society in the 21st Century with all its messiness and proclaim the Reign of God. As Coretta Scott King stated we are to be Headlights not Tail lights. We are called to be mystics, to see with God's eyes the best in each culture. In a sense we are to be a leaven that is intra-cultural not counter-cultural. Being against doesn't bring hope but being passionately alive as justice-makers, peace makers, women and men who value God's presence in each culture is a worthy vocation. As "headlights" we cannot be afraid to critique those structures and institutions which keep people and our earth in a new kind of slavery.

Some communities are diminishing, some are receiving new members. We are all about God's work whatever the focus of our particular ministries. Despite the many challenges before us I feel privileged to be passionately involved in the ministry of Jesus Christ as a Sister of St. Ann.

Whether I'm sitting with my sister friend who has Alzheimer's and letting her radiant smile and gentle touch dry my tears, or out standing on a street corner to raise awareness about the need for a poverty reduction plan in B.C., or as a member of Faith-in-Action meeting with MLA's to address affordable housing, or gathering at the Legislature with First Nations and others to protest oil tankers on our Coast, or helping to facilitate sessions on child sexual abuse by clergy, I'm impelled by contemplating the one whose love for each human being and all of creation gives me courage and hope to act.

As we mentor, model and mirror God's creative justice in our lived experience, we are a "movement" whose fearless commitment will renew the face of the earth! We, women and men Religious, are engaging the present and co-creating the future!!

I want to close with a quote from a friend of mine Dr. Denise Doyle. In her Convocation Address she challenged her University Graduates: "Fling yourself farther and farther and a bit farther still; keep your dreams and hopes alive; believe passionately in something!"