

Father Simon Pierre Arnold, OSB

Dear Sisters, Dear Brothers in Christ and in Religious Life:

First of all, let me thank you for the trust you have shown me by inviting me to open your assembly and accompany you for its duration. Although I may have had the good fortune in recent years to accompany many of your religious families from Quebec, I'm just a humble theologian monk who has been living in Peru for more than forty years, who has been involved with Latin American Religious Life. So, I am coming from a reality that is very different from your own. You will therefore have to excuse me for my conjectures concerning your Anglophone reality, which I barely know anything about. But since you have entrusted me with this responsibility, despite my obvious limitations, I venture to share with you my insights, my concerns and my utopias.

I. Historical Retrospective of Religious Life in Canada.

Although my knowledge in this area is quite relative, I find it essential—for any subsequent analysis of your current challenges—to recall and take into account a few fundamental aspects of your history that will help us to understand a little better about what is happening today in Canadian religious life.

A History that Is very much Tied to your collective National Identities

First of all, it is important to recall the role of the Catholic Church—and, especially of Religious Life—in the configuration and identity conflicts between the two cultures (Francophone and Anglophone) that have forged your national reality. In fact, Catholicism has played a leading political and cultural role in Quebec ever since Canada was founded. That explains why this Church has long been a power of Christendom,¹ linked to power, but also to the battles of your people, especially of the poor farmers.

On the English-speaking side, no doubt the view is very different. In a religiously plural context marked by the churches of the Reformation, didn't Catholicism configure itself from a pluralistic and ecumenical perspective with less direct influence on the political, cultural and economic scene? If I am wrong, please correct me. Thank you in advance.

A final important founding trait for understanding your Church and your Religious Life: its deeply missionary character, both inside and outside your country. This dimension is still having a powerful influence on your current appearance on the world stage.

An Anti-Religious Reaction

This deep missionary characteristic of Christianity, simultaneously powerful and popular, explains—as it does in other countries where Catholicism has long been confused with national identity—the current anti-clerical reaction.

In that sense, Quebec (what about English Canada?) is much closer to the European secular evolution than its American neighbour, which is still marked by religious faith groups and a broad landscape of Christianity.

¹ I use this concept in a very precise sense, namely the model of relationship between the Church and the world, gradually forged ever since the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the birth of an imperial Church intimately linked to political and cultural power as a legitimizing ideological instrument.

A Model Secular Democracy

Viewed from the outside with European eyes, Canada has emerged today as a model of secular democracy. In that context, I am surprised and full of admiration for a Religious Life which, overall, has changed with the times to fit this new situation, despite the “anti” currents it must face.

This aspect of your current life contrasts strongly with other European countries in a similar situation. Whether talking about Spain or Poland, for example, the anti-clerical and anti-ecclesial crises there have sparked a defensive withdrawal or turning inwards, even in Religious Life, that is dangerously reactionary and contrary to your current situation.

A Religious Life on the Decline yet Nevertheless Prophetic

I like emphasizing this aspect of your reality. Despite the alarming figures of your aging and the almost total absence of Canadian recruitment, at least in your traditional spiritual families (we will speak about the phenomenon of new movements a bit later), you have chosen to die prophetically, or to become a “minority-leaven-in-the-dough” of your society and your Church.

You have deliberately chosen this new “place” in Canadian society. I think it qualifies you to accompany all Religious Life, at least on the American continent, in its necessary process of metamorphosis, of chrysalis, as I point out in my new book.²

II. A Subjective Reading of the Present

I would now like to propose a “close-up” on some aspects of your present reality that I think seem to contain the seeds of a rich and prophetic renewal.

A Quick Sociological Overview

I have already spoken above of the accelerated aging of your communities. The phenomenon, as you know, is irreversible and therefore contains an urgent call of the Spirit.

First, I want to emphasize the extraordinary fraternal end-of-life care that all your religious families are offering your brothers and sisters. From what I have been able to see, it is a gesture of gratitude that in itself contains a prophetic seed of renewal in love. You thus learn the gratuity of a thankful love, which will most certainly be a prominent feature of your recreated future.

This choice is both evangelical and clearly intelligent. Most of your institutions have chosen to give your seniors a high-end professional service that may, in the future, turn into a specific social space designed for other citizens.

But this massive and rapid aging also has another important prophetic aspect. Unlike many Southern congregations who still dream of the glories of the past, Canadian Religious Life seems to have abandoned those illusory nostalgias. It prefers to courageously explore new paths that have ecclesial and societal presence and impact.

With respect to small congregations, many have decided not only to die with dignity, but to offer their lives up to the last drop in the realities and areas that have priority. Bravo!

But that does not stop me from wondering (and asking you!) about other choices that are more questionable, less realistic and, in my opinion, not very promising for the future. I am

² Simon Pierre Arnold: *Dieu derrière la porte. La foi au-delà des confessions*. Éditions Paulines – éditions Lessus, Montréal – Bruxelles, 2016.

referring to the importing of young recruits from Asia or Africa (since Latin America is already on the road to secularization). Allow me to doubt the effectiveness of this alternative in the very short term. While it may delay somewhat the paschal process of the death of our congregations, this option also delays their resurrection in “the era of the butterfly.”

Your Choices to Have an Impact

To get back to Canadian Religious Life as a whole, its choice to be present in key alternative places is being felt beyond your borders. I am thinking, among other things, about your decision to lobby in order to pressure large Canadian mining companies that are operating in the Global South and generally have little respect for cultures, peoples and ecology.

Another very significant activity is the entry of many of you into the integral psycho-spiritual care of people, especially for men and women religious who are in crisis or are seeking [counsel], from all over the world.

Finally, another critical choice is your commitment, especially by women, alongside your sisters in the United States, to a new theological quest, even if that causes you quite a bit of misunderstanding on the part of hierarchical sectors in the Church. Bravo again!

III. Emerging from Christianity: A Challenge and an Opportunity

Faced with the rapid changes in our Western societies, but also of the emerging societies caught up in the throes of a process of accelerated global Westernization, the model of the Church of Christendom is definitively proving itself to be obsolete and even dangerous.

The Perilous Temptations of “Neo-Christianity”

And yet, ever since the advent of John Paul II, the temptation to recreate what I would call a “neo-Christendom” is very present in the Church. Coming from a “national-Catholic” society like Poland, his pontificate systematically and everywhere promoted sectors carrying a message of reconquest, at the price of a lot of blockages and even scandals (see, for example, the terrible history of Marcial Maciel and the Legionaries in Mexico).

Benedict XVI, in a completely different style, never hid his sympathy for a Europe becoming the nexus of this alternative of a Christian “*Reconquista*” of the world. The icon of this kind of option was the failed attempt to reintegrate the traditionalists of Monsignor Lefèvre into the Roman fold.

The Mirages of the Young Churches and the Ambiguous Message of the “New Movements”

In the young churches of Africa and Asia (e.g., Korea), the model of Christendom could represent, unconsciously, the mark of a distancing with local cultural and religious traditions; a mark that would be illusory in my opinion. There is a real risk of favouring an artificial identity, copied from a “Christian Europe” that no longer exists and has not existed for a long time. I find this to be a dangerous illusion both for these churches themselves as well as for the nostalgic sectors of our own Western Church.

Your missionary congregations are present in these countries. They are doing great and good work there. But at the same time, they are being radically transformed in the wake of these new trends. It is a sign of the times that should be discerned with caution, beyond the limited framework of your survival, in a global analysis of the reality of the world and the Church of today.

I would put in the same vein the success of what are currently being called the “new movements” (especially in the economically privileged sectors of our societies). In fact, these

chiefly lay sectors, do not really represent an alternative to evangelical revival (except for some admirable exceptions), no more than they represent a risk of competition for Religious Life. They move in spaces that are not ours. To fear them would be a lack of faith. To imitate them would amount to losing our own charismatic soul.

Finally, there is no denying the growing influence of the “New Age” sensitivity in our communities. I am struck by two concerns about that: the first is theological. It is important to ensure that this new “liquid” speech remains compatible with the intellectual, social and spiritual rigour of the gospel. The second pertains to its subjective—even individualistic—rooting, to the detriment of a true consciousness based on community and solidarity.

Lights and Shadows of the Charismatic Movement

I know that the Catholic charismatic movement originated in large part in your country and continues to exercise a strong influence here. Despite certain sectarian and emotionally fundamentalist risks, I think that the Catholic charismatic movement constitutes the “Good News” on the ecclesial stage today. It could be seen as one of the possible escape hatches leading towards renewal and is full of the hope that exists in the model of Christendom.

Many men and women religious are engaged in this movement. But their commitment is often viewed by their brothers and sisters with suspicion and kept at arm’s length. I am launching the challenge to “de-marginalize” this sector, to propose an active role for it within our communities because it can enable Religious Life to seek out and create the new languages of faith that we urgently need.

The Urgency to Think About and Create a New Style of Presence in the World.

The challenge, in fact, is to find new ways to move out of this pattern,³ which is inconsistent with the reality and emergencies in the world. We need to reconnect with the gospel, with our origins as minorities, as marginals, as martyrs and prophetics. Moreover, that seems to be the path that Pope Francis is proposing for us, which earned him the strong opposition of some conservative sectors.

In this area, as I pointed out above, I think that Canadian Religious Life has a head start, and we have much to learn from that. You are in a process of emerging from the Christendom model and undertaking the first halting steps of establishing new presences as a prophetic minority, a process that is certainly painful, yet enriching.

Is There a Gap Between Leadership and Communities?

A question remains with me: is there not a gap between the consciousness, initiatives, utopias of the governing bodies of your congregations and their members and communities? Indeed, I fear there is a contradiction—even an incoherence—between on the one hand, strong discourse conveying a preferential option for the poor as well as making clear commitments to meaningful fields of evangelization and on the other hand the individualistic lifestyle and gentrification of communities, without much horizon or illusion. In my opinion, complacency and discouragement are the two diseases that risk frustrating the necessary and beautiful metamorphosis of our communities and institutions. So here is a priority for those assuming leadership today: motivating and persuading the base of our religious families.

³ The model of Christendom.

IV. Towards a “Recreated” Religious Life

It is no longer the time for reforms, even radical ones such as the “refounding.”⁴ We are in a time that is simultaneously both paschal and apocalyptic. Paschal because it is a question of dying (not only in numbers but especially in our styles of life and thought) in order to resurrect. Apocalyptic, because we are called upon, by the God “who makes all things new,” to welcome the New Jerusalem, our Church and our Religious Life.

A Crisis of Mystical Experience and Faith

Our internal crisis is neither first and foremost sociological (the numbers) nor ethical (the scandals that have shaken the Church), but rather mystical. If we continue (like a driverless vehicle drifting off course) to repeat and teach the words and motions in which we no longer believe or which, in any case, are no longer life-giving for us, we have to recognize the risk: losing faith and the mystical experiences that nourishes faith. The top priority is to relearn how to believe, to pray and to live in God's presence. Our communities need to rethink themselves as schools of disciples; believers, persons at prayer and community builders, both for their own members as well as those that they address. Otherwise they will disappear completely, having lost their reason for being.

Becoming Again a Lay, Non-Clerical and Prophetic Minority

This mystical and believing renaissance necessarily requires a radical shift. Religious life is a lay, not a clerical, option. We must denounce, just like the pope, our clerical abuses, whether they exist among men or women. We have often forgotten to pay attention to the margins in order to devote ourselves almost exclusively to the perpetuation of the ecclesiastical system and its institutions.

We were born on the margins of the world, in the desert. That is where Jesus and the world are still waiting for us. Let us become once again the followers of the “Pool of Bethesda” (the healing pool).⁵

The Challenge of “Inter”

Postmodernity is the civilization of the *inter* at all levels of society. Today, the important thing is not competition among us through the excellence of our social, pastoral or educational works. The secret of this age is in the art of being interconnected.

I believe that the future lies in small, pluralistic communities that are intensely connected. We must reconvert ourselves into the intercultural, interreligious, intergenerational, becoming human network specialists (the communion of the saints of our creed). Our celibacy, among other things, must become an alternative sign of a new kind of relationship. Otherwise it can only be seen as a trivial enigma or perhaps even a testimony against the new kind of relationship to which we hope to bear witness

So I dream of a Religious Life that prioritizes the areas where we discuss our differences; a school of non-violence and dialogue, both for its own members and for those to whom we are sent (or in whose midst we live). Let us become again the “soul of the world,” as it says in the *Epistle to Diognetus*.⁶

We have to open and expand small, mutually connected spaces: spaces of God and for God, where the mystical experience of the intimate and communal encounter with Jesus Christ will once again become possible for ourselves and for everyone.

⁴ Proposal chiefly drawn up some ten years ago by CLAR (Confederación Latinoamericana de Religiosos).

⁵ Jn 5:1–17.

⁶ The *Epistle to Diognetus* is a text from Christian antiquity describing how the first Christian communities inserted themselves into the heart of the pagan civilization of the Roman Empire.

Finding a New Cultural Leadership

The growth of our Religious Life has become severely stunted. We have confined ourselves to very limited areas, forgetting our great historical contributions to the culture and progress of humanity. Where are the Fra Angelicos (Dominican), the Luthers (Augustine) or the Teilhard de Chardins (Jesuit) of our time? It is urgent to reclaim the lost spaces on the stage of the world's destiny: art, science, politics, thought, poetry, etc.

Because, in fact, the major challenge of our time for believers is in recreating a language of faith that is consistent with the requirement of the new paradigms. If we are no longer there to explain the world (that is now the role of scientists), our "post religious"⁷ responsibility is providing community-based ways for building meaning and hope in the midst of the intense night that envelops us. It is this last concern that makes me emphasize the role of the pioneers of a new language being practiced by women theologians in your country and in the United States. In point of fact, that is where the future awaits our Religious Life.

V. A new "ad gentes" mission

There are no more "*terra incognitas*" to conquer. Has the *ad gentes* mission thereby become obsolete in the postmodern context? I would like to explore this issue by starting with the dual warning of Pope Francis in his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: denouncing the persistent clerical temptations that are always threatening us and renouncing competitive proselytism. The mission, in that sense, no longer has anything to do with the *Propaganda Fidei* of the still recent past. We must opt for outreach evangelization in the heart of a respected pluralistic world.

We are the new "pagans!"

In contrast with the illusion of "neo-Christianity" that we talked about earlier, we are compelled to note that the world is increasingly invaded by what I would call a global "neo-paganism."

This current neo-paganism is very different from the phenomenon of secularization and de-Christianization of the past century. What concerned the Church in the twentieth century⁸ were the atheistic ideologies and "agnostic" evolution in the Western world. On the contrary, as André Malraux was already predicting, the twenty-first century seems increasingly religious. But this observation is not necessarily good news.

In fact, postmodernism gives the impression of a chaos of the most diverse beliefs that support such contrasting projects as fundamentalist Islamism, the American extreme right, the liberation movements or the "New Age" phenomena of this shifting civilization.

In this burgeoning religious market, Christianity is certainly not the priority pathway. On the contrary, it is often considered as just one product among many others, an object of mistrust because of its speech against the flow of the current values of a liberal, individualistic and hedonistic society.

Moreover, in this neo-pagan religious "melting pot," Christians find themselves among the top ranks of consumers of hybrid beliefs and the "worldly" behaviours of the majority. Of course, this remark also applies to our own religious communities.

⁷ Neologism invented by various currents of theologians who seek to redesign the metaphor of God and of religion. There is also talk in the same sense of anatheism (see: Richard Kearney: *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*).

⁸ Let us recall the success of the book by Henri Godin, *France, Pays de Mission*, published in 1943.

The religious character of our times brings us back, in a way, to the multiform paganism of the low Roman empire, in the midst of which the Good News of Jesus had the effect of a bomb that was at once liberating, purifying and alternative. I have a suspicion that a return to the roots of the early Christian communities could also have this invigorating effect in today's neo-pagan context. But this will only be possible if a "school of disciples" is proposed, one that is stripped of the flashy trappings of the history of Christendom and its heavy institutional debt.

The urgency of a Theological and Pastoral Decolonization

In Latin American countries with a strong indigenous presence, we are increasingly talking about the decolonization of speech, attitudes and practices.⁹ The problem with colonial language is that it has become unconscious and that it conveys perverse archetypes even into the value systems of the oppressed peoples themselves.

Even though well-intentioned, our theological, pastoral and missionary approach still remains very paternalistic and rarely questions its own preconceptions, which can be racist, patriarchal, ethnocentric and more.

The emergence of contextual theologies, arising from new spaces, is a great opportunity to break with our western and Euro-centric biases, and undertake a new journey with other experiences of the Kingdom and of the faith.

Religious Life, as a multicultural space, could become a key player in this process, provided it does not fall into the trap of the neo-Christendom mentioned above. A truly intercultural Religious Life (that is to say, one in which each culture contributes on an equal footing towards developing an original project and action) could become good news for the Church and a missionary alternative through outreach work, not by proselytism.

The Priority of the Kerygma

Finally, I would like to advocate a return to the primitive kerygma of the Church. I do not mean the old confessions of faith as they appear in the story of the first dogmatic councils. This proposal was the basis of the proclamation of Benedict XVI on the Year of Faith. I do not doubt the sincerity and good intentions of returning to the Chalcedonian and Nicene Creeds. However I am skeptical about their effectiveness in the neo-pagan context that we are exploring here.

No! When I talk about a "kerygmatic" mission, I am referring to the early announcement as presented in the gospel. We must return to the "come and see" of the Gospel of John, the convincing announcement of encountering Jesus that changes lives. Only the testimony of a life reconstructed and liberated by Jesus Christ is able to convince today. But then, the condition of our mission is in our conversion. Who among us could today invite neo-pagan youth in our communities, saying: "Come and see"?

Yes, the fruitfulness of our catechesis depends on our metanoia. The announcement and return to mysticism are intimately linked in today's world. Only a mystical Religious Life can say something to this world hungry for meaning incarnate.

Simon Pierre Arnold
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⁹ See the chapter devoted to the mission in my book, *Dieu derrière la porte*.