

CRC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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CRC PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Following Easter, I was able to spend a few days at the Trappist monastery of Saint-Jean-de-Matha. As the monks went about the silent ministry, I began to think about our Assembly theme: "The nights are laden with life. Watcher, what do you say?"

In the past weeks, we have listened to St. John's Gospel and his account of the foot washing at the Last Supper, Jesus' passion, and the Easter Gospels involving Mary Magdalene, the beloved disciple, and Thomas the doubter. For John, darkness is a metaphor for disbelief and evil. When Judas leaves the fateful meal to betray the Lord, the evangelist tells us, « and it was night » (John 13:30) In the early darkness at the empty tomb before Easter morning, even Mary Magdalene can only conclude that the body of Jesus has been taken away.

Still, in a monastery the night is a time to be watchful. Nothing is more inspiring than those early vigils as the monks chant the psalms according to a calendar nearly as old as Christianity itself. The night and its accompanying vigil are laden with meaning.

We have heard a little too often that religious life is in transition, or to use a less friendly term, in crisis. For many communities born in nineteenth-century France, the coming decade may well constitute a conclusion. Still, ancient monastic and contemplative communities draw small but important numbers of women and men to continue their way of life. And in the emerging churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, new communities are springing up with their own set of challenges. We also witness new forms of consecrated life are taking shape, incorporating single and married women and men, often under the same roof and living a common rule of life. All this is more than a little unsettling and demands the kind of discernment suggested by Gamaliel in Acts 5: "If this plan is or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail, but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it."

The Canadian Religious Conference came into existence in the 1950's when novitiates and juniorates could not be built fast enough. In many cases, all that remains from those heady days is the architecture, now housing retired religious, or providing office space for lay-led Catholic institutions or sold off to secular enterprises of one kind or another. But let us look at with the clarity at who and what we are. Today, the CRC consists of about 260 "members", that is, major superiors of institutes or their equivalent, serving around 12,000 religious. The number of religious diminishes by about 750 each year, so in ten years' time, the Conference will look very different than it does today.

This year's theme invites us to keep watch as sentinels do, looking for signs of what is to come. In times past, sentinels were concerned with safety, ever on watch for an approaching danger. In contrast, I think our mission is rather to seek signs of hope and possibility. Perhaps corporate security should not be our goal. In our darkness and our insecurity, what are the signs that consecrated life will continue as an integral element of the Canadian religious and cultural mosaic?

Much like a General Chapter, our General Assembly needs to both review our past and plan for our future. Two years ago, I requested that we engage in a process of determining priorities for the 2016-2018 period. These priorities were the basis for the programming developed at our office. I invite you to review those priorities as we consider the needs of the CRC and its members for the next two years.

The Administrative Council

It has been a pleasure working with the Administrative Council. Sister Michelle has been a wonderful guide as president and has represented the CRC with grace. Our visit to Rome was of course a highlight of the past two years, but there were many other moments of note. Each meeting of the Council included a formation day in that city. It gave local religious a chance to meet the Council and to share experiences with the leaders from across Canada. There were also numerous visits with the bishops of Canada that called for prudence and tact.

These final months have been occupied with recruiting new Council members. I'm delighted that four of the current Council have offered to serve for the 2018-2020 term. I know how busy major superiors are, so I am grateful that four other major superiors are willing to stand for the new Council. I am particularly grateful to our Vice-President Louis Cinq-Mars for his willingness to stand for a term as president. This pattern of moving from the Vice-Presidency to the Presidency is common in other national and international Conferences of Religious, and, importantly, provides for continuity.

Staffing

Shortly after our last Assembly, both Jean Bellefeuille and Francine Cabana left the conference. As both had spent more than a decade working at the CRC, I wish to express my thanks for their generous service. Sadly, Jean passed away in December 2017; I was able to be present for his memorial service and express to his widow our condolences.

As I look at the staff today, I see is a mix of old and new. Among the "old guard", Nathalie Gauthier continues as our Financial officer, Sister Louise Stafford has responsibilities in

communications and publications, and Renée Ntagungira continues in the Quebec “priorités dans les dons” portfolio.

There were new additions to our CRC staff: Jean-Michel Bigou joined us just before the 2016 Assembly. His work in communications has been remarkable and it has opened new avenues for the CRC.

After the departure of Paul Demirelli in the fall of 2016, Sister Erika Martino moved into the role of my Assistant. She has brought great professionalism to our administrative services. I know that my work would be more complicated and less successful without her unfailing support. I would also like to highlight her work as secretary of the Administrative Council.

Stéphanie Gravel joined us in the fall of 2016 as Associate Director with responsibility for on-going formation. She has organized a number of activities since coming on staff. We are missing her these past months while she continues on parental leave and will be very happy to have her back in the fall of 2018.

Apraham Niziblian had important responsibilities for our last General Assembly and worked diligently as Associate Director in the JPIC portfolio in both English and French. We were sad to see him leave us in March but wish him well in his new work in the private sector.

We are in the process of hiring a new Associate Director (JPIC). I hope the process will be completed by the time of the General Assembly. For the interim, we have hired M. Louis-Joseph Gagnon as Conference co-ordinator. He has his hands full.

The work of the Executive Director

I very much enjoy the daily interaction with our staff. They are dedicated individuals with a clear understanding of our Mission. When I took the position, it was indicated that 25% of the time, I would be on the road. During the past two years, the travel has not been that extensive, but there are certainly tasks that require absences from the office.

Our contacts with the Holy See and the nuncio to Canada, with the CCCB and the regional bishops’ assemblies, with the national conferences of religious in US, Latin America and Europe all require time and effort. The President and Vice-President have given generously from their very busy schedules to represent the Conference at various events in Canada and internationally. These visits have lessened the burden on myself.

One task that particularly involves me is the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle, a Catholic coalition of Indigenous leaders, leaders of lay Catholic organizations, religious superiors

and bishops engaged in the task of reconciliation with First Nations in Canada. In a complex and challenging political climate, this project is slowly moving forward for the good of the Church and aboriginal peoples across Canada.

As well, I am involved in a number of Church-based projects that involve publishing, teaching and giving conferences. The CRC remains a partner with the Legal Formation program at St. Paul's University. As well, I've spoken at the Canadian Canon Law Society and at the Chicago Theological Union.

Another area I would like to mention is my contacts with contemplative communities across Canada. Their participation with the activities of the CRC is necessarily limited, but I think it is important that the contacts continue. The Contemplatives' committee will hold its biannual assembly in September 2018.

Finally, I would like to mention the important work of the Theological Commission. They are providing intelligent and thought-provoking commentary on issues of interest to our members.

The work of the staff

It has been a highly productive two years. I've established a pattern whereby staff members summarize their activities quarterly and report in writing to the Administrative Council. You will find in Annex 3 a list of all sessions planned and executed by the CRC. Let me highlight a few accomplishments.

Annex 4 contains a list of publications prepared expertly by Sister Louise Stafford. Our other publication of note is the annual directory; a gigantic task shared by Nathalie and Sister Erika.

Jean-Michel Bigou has done wonderful work in the Communications area. Over forty interviews have been broadcast in French on Radio VM including one with myself and Sister Michelle. Our new Logo and the branding exercise, the websites in English and French, the steady stream of newsletters and bulletins, and communications with major superiors across the country and beyond all flow through Jean-Michel's office. I am very grateful for his contribution.

The "Service de priorités dans les dons" in Quebec has done important work in evaluating funding requests made to religious communities from community groups. A committee of six religious has assisted Renée Ntagungira in analysing over 600 requests since our last General Assembly and recommending support for some 550 projects. This partnership

has benefitted both the groups making the request and the religious communities who are able to support these works.

Sister Michelle very kindly commented on the work of my secretary Sister Erika. There is also the work on the Canadian “Religious of the Day” that has continued. Appendix 9 lists over ninety biographies with more to come, in large part thanks to Erika’s work. As well, she manages meetings of the Theological Commission, the Finance Committee, the Administrative Council and other groups as needed. It is really a challenging position that she handles with grace and expertise.

I would be remiss not to point out the careful financial work of Nathalie Gauthier. As you can imagine, the decreasing number of religious in Canada means a decrease in our annual revenue. Only through careful managing of our accounts can the CRC continue to offer a range of services to our members. I want to express my special thanks to the Finance Committee of the CRC. The full financial report will be discussed at the Business meeting of the General Assembly.

For the future...

I thought it would be helpful to indicate some questions for the CRC to ponder as we move into the third decade of the twenty-first century.

A. Days of formation

While these continue to be important for the CRC, our aging membership combined with the challenges of Canadian weather limit participation in these days. Should days of formation be:

1. In person or on-line;
2. Directed only at major superiors or for all interested religious and associates;
3. Delivered separately in French and English or offered with simultaneous translation.

B. Protection of children and vulnerable adults

The CCCB will be issuing new policies with regard to this matter. The CRC will be involved in their implementation.

C. Some other questions we may wish to consider

1. There are important differences in our four regions (Atlantic, Québec, Ontario, the West). How can we best meet the needs of each region in our programming?
2. How should the CRC reach out to religious and other consecrated persons whose major superiors are not in Canada and so are not formally members of the CRC?

3. New communities and new forms of consecrated life pose special challenges. What should the role of the CRC be with regard to these groups?
4. The issue of interculturality has been significantly discussed in formation sessions over the past years. Where do we go from here with this issue?
5. During our visit to Rome, the issue of evangelization was raised by a number of offices. How do communities in Canada at this point in our history share in the work of evangelization?
6. Canada continues to be a haven for immigrants. What is the role of Canadian religious and the CRC in supporting immigrants?
7. Issues around death and dying continue to vex Canadian society. What role should the CRC play in the social debate?

Conclusion

I have now been working at the CRC for over three years. Canada is very large country and the issues facing religious vary from region to region. It is my hope that the CRC can build bridges among communities, increasing familiarity with issues faced by all religious.

Pope Francis is clear that it not sufficient that we be watchers passively awaiting the dawn. Our prophetic witness as religious requires Gospel-rooted action on behalf of the poor and marginalized. It is my hope that the CRC can be a catalyst for greater reflection and action by its members across the country.

