

Everything is Fragile... Yet Look! New Life!

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Our May Assembly, with keynote speaker Elena Lasida, was energizing as it instilled hope and an openness to possibilities despite every limitation, setback or obstacle. In fact, the presence of both fragility and limitation draw out creativity and new life. Life will always find a way to be creative and generative.

In our lived experience as religious, we are already entering into this energy. It was reassuring to be affirmed, strengthened on the journey and to hear each other's stories of both fragility and creativity.

We all can relate very powerfully to the realities of aging, decrease in numbers and the resulting need to let go of the buildings and spaces that have long been part of our lives. We are facing our sadness and grief together, and in moving through this time, finding the new vision of what we can leave to the world, the Earth, and future generations. Some of us are continuing to welcome courageous persons who seek to enter our communities. Inspired by the spirit they experience with us, they are ready to step into an unknown future of religious life.

Interdependence, a Need and a Gift

In all of this, we feel "in our bones" the reality of moving from a place of independence to a place that is at first a need and then a surprising gift: interdependence. In this year's Assembly, I could hear echoes of the previous Assembly. In the past, religious communities have often been able to function as their own entities with capable personnel and resources, proud to be following their own charism. The last two Assemblies have addressed a new reality.

It is fragility, now, which is making us realize that the Universe has always been a model of relationships amongst great diversity, collaborating very creatively for the sake of flourishing of life. We are learning from the Universe that we are stronger when we enter into a multitude of relationships, that we are enriched and strengthened by our various gifts; entering into dialogue and "taking risks together".

Inventing New Ways Together

All of this takes on many expressions. There are increasing examples of several communities coming together to pool resources for the sake of the needs of the most marginalized. The dialogue taking place builds strong bonds and a realization of our shared call to live the Gospel in ever-new ways. The emerging visions and actions are exciting and hopeful. As Elena Lasida would say, 'there is no set map for proceeding; it must be invented together through dialogue.'

For those communities who are welcoming new members, they realize that they no longer have the personnel themselves to carry on the formation that is needed, so this new life must be nurtured in new ways. Novices are crossing the globe to join with other novices, either of their own international community or of a mixture of communities. They grow in a much broader sense of solidarity and world-perspective. Together they face questions and issues that are critically relevant to this time in history. At the same time, they sink into the deep treasure of the essence of religious commitment.

In Dying, the Unexpected Emerges

Some communities such as my own, are moving through a process of radical letting go, acknowledging that their institute will not continue into the future. Yet, in the midst of this grief, we have looked at the Story of the Universe and the teaching of the Gospel. In dying, there is the emergence of new life! Life continues in a new way. In the “flaring forth” of our particular spirit, our history, our lives of love, our service and contemplation, we trust that unknown creative possibilities for life will unfold, beyond what we could ever imagine. In our case, our founder called us to be women of daring and risk; she demonstrated how obstacles could be met and transformed creatively with faith in a provident God.

Communities such as mine are creating new relationships with larger communities in “Sponsorship Agreements” or Covenants. The larger community respects our integrity and identity, while promising a caring leadership and attention to our growing needs. It is a process, requiring ongoing dialogue and creative response to each moment. We are discovering that this risk in relationship is life-giving for all. Other communities are developing their own unique relationships and arrangements as they look to an unknown future with trust and faith.

Partnering with Laypersons

A very important way in which new life becomes possible is by partnering with laypersons and groups. This interdependence is proving to foster learning and growth for all. The laypersons are strengthened by the faith perspective of the religious and the religious are inspired by the dedication and resonance of the laypersons with their values and mission. The religious also benefit greatly from the expertise of the laypersons in areas unfamiliar to them. This partnership is permitting the values and mission of religious to continue long into the future.

While at the Assembly, I marvelled at the courage of many communities who, to realize their legacies to the larger civic community, are undertaking immense projects of building and real estate. Their fragility has opened up a surprising energy in religious who are beyond retirement age. They find themselves developing entirely new skills and speaking “languages” they never imagined speaking.

Fragility Pushes Us to Surrender

Finally, our experience of fragility is calling us to a new and more profoundly contemplative way of being. With limitation and even a sense of powerlessness, we surrender ourselves to a Divine Love in whom, as Paul says, we can accomplish more than we could ever imagine.