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THE WEBZINE OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN CANADA

Hope in Times of the Pandemic



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Becoming a new world

Sabrina Di Matteo, Executive Assistant - Mission, Canadian Religious Conference

The year 2020 has been marked by nine months of pandemic, especially here in Canada. The duration of a pregnancy: an apt metaphor, perhaps, for we have witnessed our world evolving in the past months to “accommodate” the foreign body that has nestled into our daily lives. Of course, this foreign body is a virus, not a baby we are looking to welcome. Yet, like a delivery, something new will be born: a world in the midst of transformation – starting with ourselves.

A baby comes into the world and continues its physical growth and intellectual and emotional development. Its genetic makeup will determine a big part of its transformation. Its family and social environment will also play a part and influence the moral and spiritual aspects coming into being. That said, besides the child, the parents themselves are transformed by the confirmation of the pregnancy and will continue to be throughout the child’s life.

Just as the mother’s body changes throughout the months of pregnancy and bears its marks, so do our social, ecclesial and community bodies bear the marks of this pandemic, for better or for worse. We have seen the privilege of societies whose governments mobilized unexpected resources to alleviate

the consequences of lockdown and temporary unemployment. Paradoxically, in these same societies, we witnessed the inequality in the living and working conditions of certain parts of the population. This is not to mention the variable evolution of the pandemic and the differing public health measures from one country or continent to another.

All have been affected by the pandemic in some way or another. Communities of consecrated life were not spared. Isolation, outbreaks, deaths, adaptation of community and spiritual life, working remotely, perseverance in the mission and mobilization for social justice:

 **Like a delivery, something new will be born: a world in the midst of transformation.** 

these constitute a mosaic of experiences to reflect on.

This issue brings to light some reflections and outlooks on the experiences within consecrated life in the face of the pandemic. “Behold, I make all things new,” says God through the prophet Isaiah (43:19). With God, we give birth to this new world and are ourselves called to become new women and men. What will we become? What will this world be? It is up to us to reveal its beginnings.



General Council of the Antonian Sisters of Mary: Sisters Doris Gagnon, Ginette Laurendeau, Gisèle Larouche and Andrée Lalancette.

Facing the pandemic: **Acceptance, understanding, action and adaptation**

Sister Ginette Laurendeau, AM, General Superior, Antonian Sisters of Mary

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, religious congregations have faced similar challenges to those experienced by the majority of people living in societies impacted by lockdown, isolation, and deaths due to COVID. It has been a journey marked by grief, the desire for transformation, and prayer to discern how consecrated life might change as it emerges from this experience.

During a webinar organized for Francophone members of the CRC, on September 22nd, 2020, Sr. Ginette Laurendeau, the superior general of the Antoniennes de Marie in Chicoutimi (Quebec), gave a presentation. She recalled her reflections as a leader and her community's experiences – the first religious congregation contaminated by COVID-19, starting on March 31st. Sister Ginette herself was infected but luckily

did not suffer from serious symptoms or consequences. This is her testimony.

Our community numbers 50 sisters, 20 of whom live in our private infirmary. A COVID cluster was declared at the end of March and we were confined for 26 days, during which time six of our sisters died. Throughout those weeks, my motto became: accept, understand, act and adapt.

There were obviously feelings of loss and grief during the confinement. The isolation deprived us of our usual fraternity within the community. We could not see each other. The infected sisters felt excluded, while the healthy sisters feared catching the virus. However, the most difficult part was that they were deprived of being at the bedside of their dying sisters. Additionally, some of the sisters who beat COVID are living with after-effects.

In terms of our larger network, it was impossible to welcome families and friends. It was also a challenge to get in touch with the relatives of sick sisters. In this sense, isolation and lack of connection was hurtful to many relationships. As fall started, we finally began organizing the funeral services for our sisters who had passed in the spring. This long wait certainly extended our mourning.

Time, bearings and fears

As consecrated persons, we had to rethink our daily life of prayer and the sacraments in the absence of liturgy. In the Church in general, we felt isolated and somewhat disconnected, mostly receiving instructions from the public

health authorities and information from the CRC.

Postponed or cancelled meetings, conferences and chapters marked our schedules. Everything was paused. At the same time, we felt a kind of loss of control that was sometimes impressive. With all the sisters confined, we were dependent on staff. In fact, we even lost some staff due to preventive withdrawals or to COVID infections. Some people were afraid to work with us because of the pandemic, and others felt fear or rejection from their own families. Even delivery people were scared! The Antoniennes de Marie were associated with COVID and fear.



We have realized how much leadership exercises a form of motherhood, by reassuring, accompanying, being close. The role of the superiors of the small groups and the role of our council have been essential.



Weaknesses and Strengths

This ordeal has made us even more aware of our fragility. Our staff was taken away from us, so our human resources team worked very hard. Fortunately, we are independent in our management and this is a strength. Our community resources were weakened, given myself and some of our leadership had COVID. The other obvious fragility, given our average age of 83, is that there is no succession for administration and leadership in the structure of our institute. However, among our strengths, I wish to emphasize the adaptability of the sisters, their collaboration with public health directives and the co-responsibility we enacted. In addition, the fragmentation

of our community into groups, which existed before the pandemic, was a strength in that it prevented the virus from spreading any more than it already had.

On the spiritual level, the priest our chaplain presided daily liturgies of the Word, which were broadcast to the sisters in the infirmary and were of great support to them. In the end, this whole experience allowed us to return to what is most fundamental: the thirst to be together, to see each other, and to pray together. It has been a grace to experience a communion in our shared actions and experiences throughout the stages of confinement and deconfinement.

Looking to the future...

We have realized how much leadership exercises a form of motherhood, by reassuring, accompanying, being close. The role of the superiors of the small groups and the role of our council have been essential in helping the sisters through the physical, psychological and spiritual trials of the pandemic. Many of us had never experienced trials of this kind before.

The fragmentation of our community into small groups has been and will continue to

be helpful. It is a small-scale fraternal life, anchored in prayer. It is a witness for the world, as Pope Francis reminds us.

Leadership must organize and adjust itself. It must help to minimize stress and humanize daily life as much as possible. We must not hesitate to ask for external help and to maintain these connections for the future. These collaborations are positive.

All of our sisters who have passed away were able to experience this last stage at home. Personally, what gave me impetus and led me in my actions, with the support of my council, was to take care of my sisters until the end, so that they could be at home, with their family, their community.



Sr. Ginette Laurendeau with Andrée Laforest, Deputy and Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, in front of the Antonian Sisters of Mary Motherhouse in Chicoutimi (Quebec).

Radical trust in dark times

Sister Rebecca McKenna, CND, Provincial Superior, Congrégation de Notre-Dame

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, religious communities have faced similar challenges to those experienced by most people in societies affected by lockdown, isolation, and deaths due to COVID. The journey has been marked by grief, a desire for transformation, and prayer to discern how religious life might emerge changed from this experience.

from elementary school to university, and taught theology at St. Thomas University in Fredericton. She also worked in spiritual direction and facilitation, with training by Parker Palmer and the Centre for Courage and Renewal to facilitate Circles of Trust retreats. We hope you will find Sr. McKenna's perspectives helpful in renewing your outlook and your trust in these times.

In a CRC webinar offered to members on September 24th, 2020, Sr. Rebecca McKenna, province leader of the Visitation Province of Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal, offered her insightful reflection to other leaders. She has ministered in education

<https://youtu.be/QGWm-Qn2LJM>

When faith meets trials: **Creating a culture of resilience**

Father Daniel Renaud, OMI, preacher and spiritual director

We often believe that faith can sustain us in the face of any trial. However, traumatic experiences force us to look into dark corners of ourselves, to confront our notions of life, God, suffering and even death. In the end, we need to derive meaning from the experiences we weathered, and create a personal or communal culture of resilience.

was addressed by Fr. Daniel Renaud, originally from Quebec and currently ministering in the American province of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. In this interview, he offers encompassing perspectives on the challenges of grief and isolation, especially in religious contexts, to foster resilience for those facing such situations.

Many religious communities in Canada suffered as they faced lockdown, often unable to be at the bedside of their dying sisters and brothers, and grieved them while funerals were sometimes deferred. During webinars organized for the CRC members in September and October of 2020, the theme of resilience

<https://youtu.be/4sAXMmKtQ7Q>



“Behold, I make all things new” : A biblical insight on transformation

Father Michel Proulx, O Praem, professor and member of the CRC Theological Commission

I was asked to meditate with you on this wonderful phrase, “Behold, I make all things new”, taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 43:19. An inspiring passage!

It is even more inspiring when we know the historical context in which this prophecy was proclaimed. The prophet intervenes at a tragic time. The people of the Covenant have just experienced a great catastrophe. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar

conquered Jerusalem: he set the city on fire and destroyed the temple, the symbol of the presence of God. He killed all the king's sons and deported him to Babylonia along with a large part of the population.

You can imagine that the deportees are completely discouraged. They are in the midst of post-traumatic stress disorder. They have so much grief to process. They all know people who were killed. In addition,

 **The prophet therefore invites to an exercise of discernment. He invites us to be attentive to see what God is cultivating, at the very heart of the disaster.** 

several were torn from their families to be deported. This is reminiscent of the situation of the Acadians in 1755. They also have to mourn their liturgy: they can no longer offer sacrifices to the Lord, since they no longer have a temple. Far from their land, they feel like they are separated from their god and can no longer pray to him. This is expressed very well in Psalm 137: "How would we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?" They have to somehow mourn their god. Anyhow, they no longer understand their god YHWH quite so much. If they are his chosen people, how is it that such great misfortunes have happened to them?

It is in the midst of this serious crisis that the prophet makes the word of God resonate. It is already extraordinary news to discover that the voice of God can reach them even in their exile. God did not forsake them. If He speaks to them, it means that God is there with them, at the heart of the crisis, and what God tells them is astounding. "Here I am doing something new."

We too have experienced a lot of grief because of the coronavirus and the confinement. Many of us have lost loved ones. Many of us have had to mourn certain liturgies, gatherings, activities that were close to our hearts. We are hurt by it all. We have been through a crisis and it is not over yet.

Let us go back to our text from Isaiah: "Behold, I make all things new." It is worth listening to the whole verse and the one that precedes it (hence, 18 and 19):

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The prophet says that the novelty is already emerging at the very heart of the crisis, at the very core of the grieving situation. The new is here and sprouting. And to speak of sprouting is to speak of something that starts small, but that carries a dynamism of growth.

The prophet therefore invites to an exercise of discernment. He invites us to be attentive to see what God is cultivating, at the very heart of the disaster. God speaks in the present tense. In fact, in Hebrew, there is a present participle: "here I am doing something new." This is an ongoing action. I would even say that the ruins of the disaster become the fertilizer for what germinates.

The prophet also employs other very inspiring images. He announces that God is going to open a way in the desert. A path is what allows one to move forward, to pass through. God will therefore offer the way out of the crisis. Moreover, he promises an abundance of water in arid places. Water is life! We understand that God will make life spring from situations of death.

In order to perceive the newness of God, welcome it and enter into it, the past must be renounced. The prophet calls us not to be caught up in the past or to desperately cling to it. He asks us to "forget the past."

Did you notice who the subject of the renewal actions is? "I make all things new", "I am going to make a path pass through the desert..." It is He, God, who is active. He doesn't require us humans to be able to be creative. God will take care of it. What He is asking is to be attentive to what He is bringing up. He invites us to trust Him. Are we ready for this?

The proclamation of the 2nd Isaiah is taken up by John of Patmos, the seer of the Apocalypse, in 21: 5. Once again, this word of God is heard following a terrible drama. This time we are in the Roman Empire, probably in the early 90s. The young Christian community has experienced traumatic events. The great persecution unleashed by Emperor Nero has left deep marks. Many Christians died violently, including Saint Paul and Saint Peter. These persecutions are over, but the Church faces another threat: the assimilation of Christians. The whole Roman propaganda machine seeks to make Christians citizens like the others. Moreover, several Christians, to avoid any problem and any form of persecution, have joined the ranks and abandoned their faith (Rev 12: 4). The Church is experiencing a new crisis. It was then that John made the voice of God resound: "Here I am making all things new."

According to John, since the present world seems corrupt and as the Roman Empire seems humanly invincible, he announces that God is going to create a new world. And again, God does not require humans to be able to effect this transformation on their own. It is He, God, who will bring about this radical novelty.

Surprisingly, John proclaims in the next verse: "It happened!" (V. 6) How can John announce that the new world has arrived? Why not say:

"it will happen, it will come!"? Instead, he talks about it as something already done. Why?

It is because of the paschal mystery. Another crisis, another mourning from which God was able to bring about novelty. Jesus' death looked like a failure. This death on the cross caused distress and despair (Lk 24:21) among the disciples. However, God had made something new, something unexpected out of it: he raised Jesus from the dead. John is convinced that the new world has started because Jesus has already entered it. And since Jesus is in this new world, we are also there in a certain way since we are grafted onto him by our faith. He is the head and we are his body (Eph 5:23.30). Personally, a woman and mother of five children helped me to understand this when she explained to me that the most difficult part of giving birth is getting the baby's head out.



God does not require humans to be able to effect this transformation on their own. It is He, God, who will bring about this radical novelty.

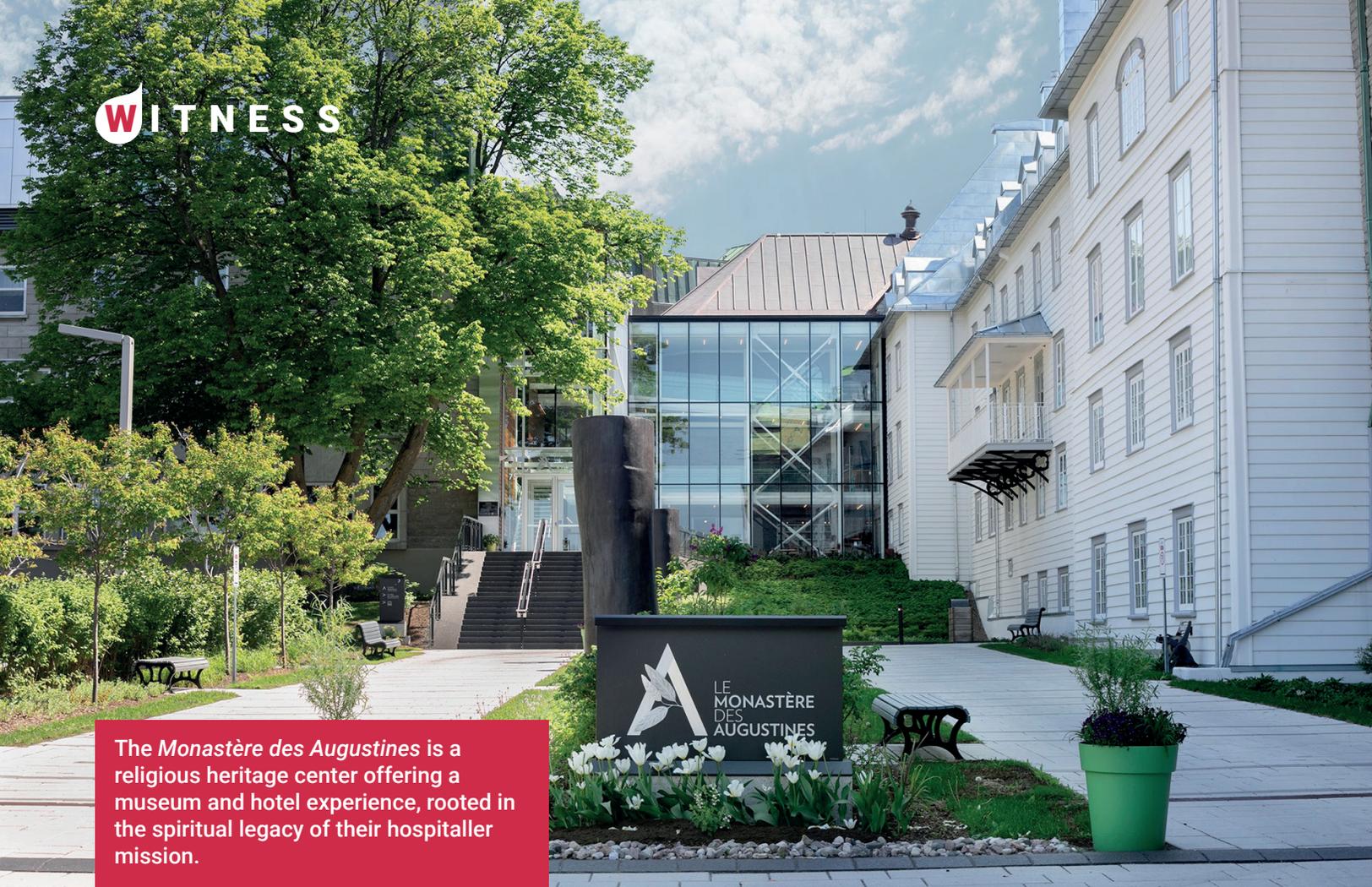


Once the head has passed, the rest of the body comes out easily, since the passage is open.

The same is true for us. Our head, Christ, has come to new life. He entered this radical novelty. The rest of the body will then follow.

Yes, God is at work bringing about the new world. Let us not cling to things from before, or to past ways of doing things. Let us open our eyes. Can we not see it?

* Fr. Michel Proulx, member of the CRC Theological Commission, presented this reflection as part of the September 22 and 24, 2020 webinars proposed to the CRC members.



The *Monastère des Augustines* is a religious heritage center offering a museum and hotel experience, rooted in the spiritual legacy of their hospitaller mission.



Augustinian Sisters' march: Simplicity and creativity

Sister Lise Tanguay, AMJ, General Superior, Federation of the Augustinian Sisters of the Mercy of Jesus Monasteries



For 20 days, from June 15 to July 4, 2020, the Augustinian Sisters took up the challenge of walking one hour a day to support the caregivers they admirably call their “natural heirs”. They mobilised with compassion to show their support, but also to ensure that the social mission of the Monastère survives the current crisis and that respite and healing stays continue to be offered to the health care staff who provide an essential service. Sister Lise Tanguay, Superior General, Federation of the Augustinian Sisters of the Mercy of Jesus Monasteries, looks back for us on this community adventure lived in the midst of the pandemic.

1. Could you tell us what this project consists of, how it came about and why?

2. How was this project welcomed by the Augustinian Sisters?

3. How was the fundraising walk carried out?

4. Is this project a success? How many carers were able to take a retreat and rest period thanks to the funds raised?



5. Was the community surprised by the reaction of the public?

6. Have you received graces through this community journey? Are there any testimonies that touched you?

7. Can it be said that the sisters, despite their age, can have an impact in society?

A testimony from a healthcare worker after her stay at the Monastère:

Since 1637, the sisters' care for persons is at the heart of their action. I was deeply moved during my restful stay of two nights at the Monastère des Augustines in Quebec City. What a marvelous idea it was to actualize their mission, with a holistic approach, by taking care of those who care for others, be it by working in various healthcare environments or as unpaid caregivers. The Monastère welcomes anyone, whether they are believers or not, healthcare workers or not. You can take part in the prayer services or the Masses, and even have a conversation with a sister who will know very well the reality of your commitment to caring for people.

Marie Lyne Boucher, Recreational therapist in long-term care facilities.

On the front lines of the pandemic

Sister France, FMJ

How does a young religious end up at the bedside of patients in a rehabilitation center during the pandemic? This is Sr. France's story, a member of the Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem. Her degrees in spiritual counseling and social work – earned years before she entered religious life – caught up with her and became precious during the pandemic. As the province of Quebec's public health services recruited aides to support the overwhelmed regular personnel in long-term care facilities and seniors' homes, Sr. France joined one of her fellow sisters to the front lines.

Sister France quickly ended up offering spiritual care to patients, symbolically taking

their pulse and measuring their morale throughout their stay, sometimes in isolation. She also connected the patients' families with them, while experiencing in some degree the daily challenges of healthcare personnel. In this interview (dubbed in English), she shares an overview of her experiences and recounts how they helped her deepen her prayer life, her commitment as a consecrated person and her understanding of the community of Jerusalem's charism.

<https://youtu.be/x4mWgnqSYUA>



Group photo during a trip to Taizé organised each year by the Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur. Bottom left: Sr. Marie-Pierre Delorme.

The “460”: A community of young people and sisters

Sister Marie-Pierre Delorme, SSMN

Sr. Marie-Pierre Delorme joined the congregation of the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur in 1998, following her studies in engineering. She is currently responsible for the mission of the “460”, a student residence and chaplaincy for young adults in Ottawa (the previous chaplaincy and residence was known as “101 Parent”). She shares her thoughts on the experiences of the pandemic in this context and her hopes for returning to a “new normal”, and a more embodied one...

The inspiration and the mission

The mission of my congregation especially inspired me thanks to its work with youth. Growing up, many teenagers and young adults

live their faith in solitude, given the aging Church in North America. This was my case, and I wished to offer something to help ease this isolation. The mission at 460 allows me to do so.

In 2019, we moved from the previous residence at 101 Parent Avenue, in Ottawa, and took on ownership of a house that had belonged to the Lasallian Brothers. We were happy to reinstate the home into a mission for the student community and for young workers, given our location on the University of Ottawa's campus. There is an ecumenical chaplain on campus, and though there was a strong religious presence, mainly oblate with

 **it is essential to create activities and opportunities to meet youth. Then, [...] they can do so through projects like an international cooperation trip, which generates a longer commitment and deeper faith development.** 

Saint Paul University, in the past, our mission offers community experience and activities for young Francophones, in a setting where religious presence is diminishing.

Practically speaking, our home has 14 rooms. We are four sisters so we can welcome 10 young women to stay with us and take part in our activities. The student residence has its own internal program (shared meals, prayer times, Bible studies...), and we offer a number of activities open to the public. In this ministry, it is essential to create activities and opportunities to meet youth. Then, if they wish to pursue this connection, they can do so through projects like an international cooperation trip, which generates a longer commitment and deeper faith development.

The impact of the pandemic

This year, including us four sisters, we are 13 women living together. Remote studying

during the pandemic has encouraged many students to stay home with their parents; while international students chose to stay, otherwise the time zones would interfere with their schedules. We see many apartments for rent around campus and student housing is rather empty or even closed.

With regards to COVID-19, we consider our home a "bubble" and we act consequently.

We ask the girls to take precautions with any exterior contacts. Our house is large enough to allow us to host a few people, with masks and distancing. We are a younger community but safety remains necessary, especially since our enthusiastic superior, Claudette, is 83 years

old. Our youngest sister, Mona, is a high school chaplain, and Françoise takes care of maintenance and material needs for our home.

During lockdown, we had to set aside our public activities were put aside. This gave the student residence the chance to flourish. The girls didn't have any exterior activities so they were glad to contribute to our communal life, and it was enriched both socially and spiritually. It has been a blessing in our ministry.

Generally speaking, our experience contrasts with what we have heard about isolation and mental health concerns among youth. We try to stay in touch with the youth of our wider network who don't live here and who may feel fragile due to isolation. We call them and check in. We started some online sharing and prayer activities and we're happy to see them join in on occasion. The biggest challenge, currently, is the reality of online schooling or

working from home. It is especially tiring and exacting, and people are fed up.

Each year, we usually offer two “awareness” or cooperation trips in the Dominican Republic, and a pilgrimage to Taizé. At the end of March 2020, we had to cancel our plans, given the situation. This was particularly sad for the two groups preparing for the Dominican Republic, who had worked on fundraising and learning Spanish since September 2019. We now hope to be able to travel with these groups in May and July 2021, if we can receive the vaccine on time. Meanwhile, the participants are perfecting their Spanish.

Most of our 2020 participants will be able to join the 2021 trips. In San José de Ocoa (DR), they will discover our local partner organization, founded by a Scarborough missionary. The youth will get to know the daily life in the Dominican countryside and contribute to a project such as building a house, a school or latrines, or working in reforestation. As for the trip to Taizé, we will plan that for 2022.

Towards a hybrid ministry?

Will the future of mission and ministry imply a return to in-person activities or a hybrid approach combined with virtual activities? I think that when COVID-19 will be “over”, we will have to work to rebuild the community dimension of our ministries. We have learned much working in virtual environments and we forged new habits. We save time by not having to travel to and from school, work and activities. It makes it easy to do many things at once, like listening to an online class while cooking. However, the in-person disposition is different: we are more available and vulnerable, and that is difficult to imitate when videoconferencing. I believe we will have to renew the value of in-person encounters. We will see. We still have both feet in this challenging reality and perhaps we cannot yet see the issues clearly. It boils down to a real and embodied presence for others. Be it the underprivileged people of the Dominican Republic or my sisters and students here at home, this embodied presence is the core of our Christian mission.



The group of sisters and young women residents of “460”, a home run by the Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur in Ottawa.



Members of the congregation of the Daughters of Wisdom sewing masks. Photo: Courtesy of the Daughters of Wisdom.

Sisters sew masks for their infirmary's staff

François Gloutnay, journalist, *Présence - Information religieuse*

This article has been released on April 2, 2020, on the website www.presence-info.ca

If today goes as planned, the sisters' sewing workshop in their Ottawa home will produce its 300th mask for the staff of their community infirmary.

On the phone, Sr. Francine Gauthier, Councillor of the Daughters of Wisdom, explained that the community's infirmary, currently under lay administration, is located on the same site as their home, "Maison Accueil-Sagesse."

In the early days of lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, "the staff members of our home took an inventory of the available equipment," explained Sr. Gauthier. "They quickly realized that in the event of an epidemic, it wouldn't suffice."

They tried to purchase more, but equipment was unavailable – as was the case "for everyone else". "There is a shortage, and given

we are a private institution, we understand that hospitals will be prioritized.”

The idea to make their own equipment came from the man responsible for maintenance at their large residence in Ottawa.

“On YouTube, he downloaded a video showing how to sew masks. When we saw the staff work on that project after working hours, we offered our help,” recounts the congregation’s councillor.

Some sisters adapted the pattern found on YouTube. The final product is made of fabric, not paper, stated Sr. Gauthier. “It features three layers, cotton on the outside, and flannel on the inside, to make it more resistant.”

As of last Friday, eight Daughters of Wisdom are busy sewing, while others are cutting the fabric or assembling the pieces. “It’s assembly-line work” respecting social distancing. Sr. Gauthier describes the picture of one of their two teams of sisters working on production in separate rooms.

“Today, we think we’ll be able to complete our 300th mask,” she says proudly. The masks are to be washed and disinfected once used.

Once production is completed, the sisters do not intend to return to isolation immediately. “We are already planning to sew medical gowns. We are missing those too,” explains Sr. Gauthier. “A sister found a pattern for a disposable gown and we are adapting it to make nylon gowns.”

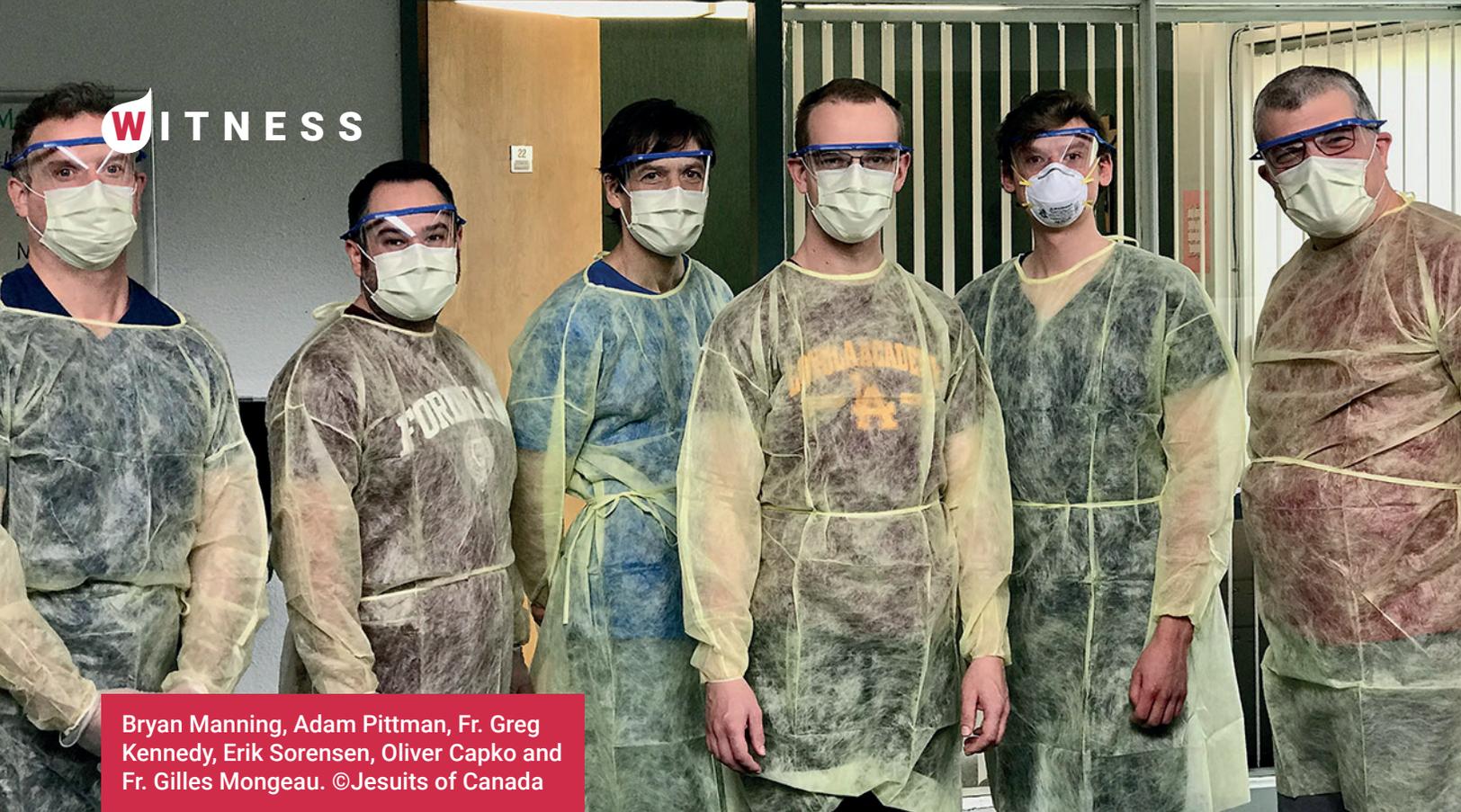
She admits it was a challenge to procure the necessary materials for this new project. However, one of the religious has a relative in Toronto who works for an important fabric retailer. “She was able to help us. The fabric should be delivered today in fact,” added Sr. Gauthier.

For the last two weeks, the 88 Daughters of Wisdom and 20 other religious of various congregations who live at the Maison Accueil-Sagesse have been in isolation. All is well, said the councillor. “We had a small cluster of seasonal flu in the infirmary about a week ago. But there were no COVID-19 cases.”

In this residence, both the religious and the lay staff who care for the sick sisters have to follow strict guidelines. “Employees cannot enter the residence without having their temperature taken.”

Sewing masks and gowns in their residence is a gesture that ensures the protection of the infirmary staff. “In all fairness,” says Sr. Gauthier, “we must protect them because they protect us.”

The Daughters of Wisdom are an international order numbering 145 sisters in Canada and living in 12 homes across the country. Their average age is 84 years. The Daughters of Wisdom were especially active in the healthcare sector, and directed the Ottawa Montfort hospital, which is close to the Maison Accueil-Sagesse. The last sister to work as a paid employee at this hospital retired in 1998.



Bryan Manning, Adam Pittman, Fr. Greg Kennedy, Erik Sorensen, Oliver Capko and Fr. Gilles Mongeau. ©Jesuits of Canada

A call to keep loving:

Jesuits scholastics care for their elder brothers during COVID-19 outbreak

Oliver Capko, S.J., Gilles Mongeau, S.J., and Adam Pittman, S.J.

C COVID-19 has made its way to every corner of the world. And, as we know, it has shut down economies, created “physical distancing”, and even altered our religious practices. Throughout the growing pandemic in Canada, many of us felt untouched by this virus until we received word that our most vulnerable brothers had contracted the disease. On Wednesday, 22 April 2020, Erik Oland, Provincial of the Canadian Province,

received notice that an outbreak of COVID-19 had been declared at our infirmary in Pickering, Ontario. Even before a request could go out to the Province, two scholastics, then a third and a fourth, had already volunteered to go. By Monday, 27 April, five Jesuits had arrived to provide personal care and custodial support – a much welcomed addition to a dwindling staff.

During the first week, five Jesuits died, two of which died in hospital. The remaining three were accompanied by the Jesuit volunteers, so that not one of them died alone. As staffing continued to be a concern, three more Jesuits arrived to help, as well as the sister of one of the scholastics, who is a nurse. But despite our best efforts, we were losing the battle against the virus, and a sixth Jesuit died accompanied by his younger companions.

As of this writing, there has been a seventh death, but the remaining Jesuits are returning to health. It is true that being present to our dying companions brings much sadness. There has been abundant consolation as well. Because of geographic distance, few of the scholastics had met the Jesuits of the infirmary before coming to help. But in these past weeks, graces of genuine friendship in the Lord have been given, as the young men sat with their older companions. As one scholastic said to his dying Jesuit brother: "We have become good friends, and I am grateful to have known you. I love you." Most of us had similar experiences of deep fraternal love. One of the infected Jesuits, now recovered, gave us at the height of his struggles the only thing he could: his blessing.

There were moments of real powerlessness: sitting at the bedside of a Jesuit struggling for breath, losing the fight against infection. But these moments opened onto a deep freedom and humility, in our suffering companions and in ourselves, to receive the help being offered by others. All of us were deeply attentive of the movements of the Spirit in our hearts, among us as we shared in spiritual conversation, and around us in the generosity of so many.

We have also become conscious of ourselves as an apostolic body sent by the Lord. More than one of us has been aware that this time together has been our "Venice experience*."



The Jesuits Infirmary in Pickering, Ontario. ©Jesuits of Canada

The fraternal love we have known with our older companions and among us is a call to keep loving. Yes, seven of our brothers were taken home to the Lord, but we don't leave this place in sorrow. The charism of "friendship in the Lord" first experienced by Ignatius and his first companions and lived out in community – regardless of age, stage in formation, or grade – has borne fruit to be shared with the Canadian Province and our partners in mission.

* The experience of working together in hospices for the poor and sharing prayer and a simple life together in the city of Venice, Italy, in a time of plague was foundational for the first Jesuits.

“The door is open”: Serving the most vulnerable

Sister Chita Torres, Carm. OL

When the pandemic hit earlier this year, the Archdiocese of Vancouver initiated the “Church Never Stops” campaign, and religious men and women have been essential in the Church’s ministry of bringing the light of Christ to all, including migrant workers, homeless, and students in schools. The Carmelite Sisters of Our Lady of Monte Carmelo Community have been on the front lines of the #Churchneverstops movement as they serve hundreds of meals a day at the Door is Open drop-in Centre. Sister Chita, co-manager of the Door is Open, wrote the following reflection.

It does not matter if you are serving indoors or outdoors because when you are called to serve in the Downtown Eastside you cannot completely sever the ties with those whom you serve. A warm welcoming smile still accompanies the “Hi” and “Hello”, answering an invitation to help old men and women, their hands already shaking, holding hot soup and hot coffee. What can we do but to come near and help them – not forgetting the threat of the virus, but drawing as close as we can, given the precautions of masks and gloves, and physical distancing. While we normally do not hesitate to embrace our brothers and sisters, we have to remember that physical distancing is as much for them as it is for us, given that our guests are amongst the most vulnerable in our population. I pray that God will put His selflessness into our hearts so that we can

offer to love every person who comes to us for help. The pandemic hit in Lent, a reminder for us that Christ gave His life – why can we not do the same. Matthew 16:25 “for whoever saves his life will lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”



Sister Chita Torres wearing the mask and serving meals at “The Door is open” drop-in ministry.

Thinking on our feet

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the consequences of lockdown and isolation on consecrated life and liturgy have had us thinking on our feet. Reflections on leadership in religious life, online Masses and faith activities, and expectations about our future reality cannot be escaped. Some of the contents of the CRC fall webinars are part of this issue. The following suggestions may also enrich your ongoing reflections. Click on the pictures below to access the referenced contents.

UISG webinar: “Being Superiors in a Time of Pandemic”

Pr. Tonino Cantelmi, of the Institute for cognitive interpersonal therapy in Rome, was the guest speaker of this webinar held on December 2nd, 2020, and organized by the USG/UISG Health Commission. His talk explored the evolution of leadership in times of crisis and in connection with various factors that are themselves undergoing change.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icBRBsFASCY>

“Church selling the Eucharist 'short' says professor”

Since the first lockdowns in March, in a flurry of improvisation, many priests started livestreaming their daily Mass, and many of the faithful started scrolling through online options for prayer and the Eucharist. Thomas O’Loughlin, emeritus professor of Historical Theology at the University of Nottingham, addresses the theological and ecclesial issues emerging from these practices.



“We Shall Be Changed. Questions for the Post-Pandemic Church”

This book is a collection of essays edited by Mark D. W. Edington, currently the bishop of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe. The contributors bring ecumenical perspectives to questions raised by the challenges of ministry, liturgy and the future of being Church at the crossroads of virtual connection, with younger generations.



About

The CRC

Established in 1954, the Canadian Religious Conference (CRC) is an association that brings together 250 leaders of Catholic congregations of religious men and women in Canada.

The CRC is both a voice for and a service to leaders of religious institutes and societies of apostolic life. Our mission is to encourage our members to live fully their vocation in following Christ. We support them in their prophetic witness to justice and peace within society and the Church. The CRC looks for innovative ways of interpreting faith and life so as to embrace the new vision of the universe.

Mission statement adopted in 2010

ad vitam

Launched in 2019 by the Canadian Religious Conference, ad vitam is a webzine and a window into consecrated life in Canada. Featuring articles and audio-visual media, ad vitam proposes theological and pastoral reflections on the Catholic Church and consecrated life. This resource aims to serve religious communities and their leadership, as well as readers interested in consecrated life and Church issues.

Theological Commission of the CRC

The Theological Commission was established by the Administrative Council of the CRC in September 1999 to deepen the meaning of consecrated life according to a theological approach that integrates the contributions made by human and social sciences. The Theological Commission proposes future directions that will inform consecrated life in a creative and prophetic way while taking into account the various charisms of the congregations.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Sabrina Di Matteo

PRODUCTION

Jean-Michel Bigou

COLLABORATORS

Ginette Laurendeau, AM; Sister France, FMJ; Daniel Renaud, OMI; Rebecca McKenna, CND; Marie-Pierre Delorme, SSMN; Michel Proulx, O Praem; Lise Tanguay, AMJ; Chita Torres, Carm. OL; Mary Sabina DeMuth, OP; Jesuits of Canada; Présence - Information religieuse.

CANADIAN RELIGIOUS CONFERENCE

2715, chemin de la Côte-Sainte-Catherine, Montreal, Quebec H3T 1B6

Tel.: 514 259-0856
info@crc-canada.org
www.crc-canada.org

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