

Proposal for an Office of Religious Congregations for Integral Ecology (ORCIE)

Fourth DRAFT

(May 2021: for internal conversation and development)

Meditation

In his reflection called “Participating in Movements for Justice,” Franciscan Richard Rohr describes what he sees as “three basic levels of social ministry.”

“At the first level, we rescue drowning people from a swollen river, dealing with the immediate social problem right in front of us: someone hungry comes to our door and we offer them some food, or invite them inside. These are hands-on, social service ministries, like the familiar soup kitchen or food pantry. Such works will always look rather generous, Christian, charitable, and they tend to be admired, if not always imitated.

At the second level, there are ministries that help people not to fall into the swollen river in the first place or show them how to survive despite falling in. In general, these are the ministries of education and healing. Most of the religious orders in the Catholic Church in the last three hundred years went in that direction, filling the world with schools, hospitals, and social service ministries that empowered people and gave them new visions and possibilities for their lives.

Finally, on the third level, some ministries build and maintain a dam to stop the river from flooding in the first place. This is the work of social activism and advocacy, critique of systems, organizing, speeches, boycotts, protests, and resistance against all forms of systemic injustice and deceit. It is the gift of a few, but a much-needed gift that we only recently began to learn and practice. It seeks systemic change and not just individual conversion.”

Ask yourself how well you think the various levels of ministry are being addressed in the Canadian Catholic church today...

A conjunctural reading of the “signs of the times” reveals impressive and important activity has been carried out on the first two levels. It is also evident that by now most of the historic institutional ministries of religious congregations have been transferred to various publicly funded bodies in recent decades.

These times call for something different. Intersecting crises of climate change, loss of biodiversity, the growing gap between rich and poor, racism, gender inequity and the exploitation of migrant workers mean that we must tackle the root causes which are common to all these crises if we are to create lasting systemic change.

Some religious orders are working to respond at the third level of systemic change by establishing Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) offices. However, most often, the persons in these offices work alone. This has led to three different, though sometimes, interwoven outcomes:

- JPIC staff-persons work primarily with local groups on local initiatives for justice;
- JPIC work is absorbed into internally focused awareness-raising activities with congregational members and associates;
- JPIC staff-persons collaborate within wider coalitions working for systemic change.

As beneficial as the first two foci are, they do not address the policy changes which must take place at provincial/territorial and federal levels if systemic change is to be achieved.

The third approach contributes to systemic change, but, with religious orders all but invisible in much of the coalition work, this approach undercuts efforts of religious orders to give public witness to the importance of this work. Without this witness, the wider Catholic Church in Canada is not challenged to take up the work of systemic change; work that Pope Francis has clearly elevated and urged in his encyclicals. Without this witness, we undermine the evangelizing task of linking the reign of God with the movement toward greater systemic justice.

To be successful in creating policy change, and to do so in ways which offer public witness to the centrality of systemic justice in Church life, the JPIC personnel of religious orders will need 1) support and training in the work of political advocacy; and 2) stronger structures for collaboration. The current JPIC networks, with limited

support available from the CRC Office, have provided occasional opportunities for collaboration; enough to make us aware that this structure is not sufficient.

So, what is needed?

Need for an Office of Religious Congregations for Integral Ecology

The question has been posed for two years now, after first being raised at a CRC JPIC Ontario gathering held at the Sisters of Providence motherhouse in Kingston: Has the time arrived for developing more concerted action among Catholic religious congregations, with a view to deepening policy change results at the federal level?

In short, what could be done to strengthen initiatives at that “third level” of social ministry by Catholic religious congregations? What more can be done to increase the collaboration among the Catholic congregations, ecumenical initiatives and broader social justice movements to engage in effective advocacy with all levels of government?

A proposal to establish such an entity might include the following aspects:

Provisional Title: Office of Religious Congregations for Integral Ecology (ORCIE)

A Spirituality of Integral Ecology

“Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (LS 240).

In the story of Creation, we see God’s love flowing into and interacting with earth and humanity: God in humanity, humanity in God, humanity as part of creation, and God at the heart of creation. Love flowing in and flowing out. This is the interconnectedness which Pope Francis highlights in *Laudato Si’* when he writes about “secretly interwoven relationships” (240).

With insights such as these, we are reminded that Communion is not, most fundamentally, a liturgical event, but rather, that liturgical event expresses the truth and depth of our interconnectedness. Growing in intimacy with God, and growing in right relationship with earth and each other, are intertwined and interactive movements which cannot be separated.

At the societal level, government policies and budgets shape, to a great extent, how we are in relationship with earth and each other. That is what makes them moral documents. For instance, government policies created a history of colonialism and, conversely, government policies can move us more deeply toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Likewise, government dollars have funded billions of dollars in subsidies to the fossil fuel sector, and, conversely, government dollars can help us to

change direction, investing in alternative energy sources, in the conservation of energy, retrofitting for buildings, and public transportation.

Because these policies shape how we're in relationship, it's important to let them be guided by strong ethical values. This is expertise which faith groups can bring to the public arena. But it's not enough just to identify ethical values; we need to do the work of connecting them with actual policies. Otherwise, the values remain at an abstract level, not having an impact on society.

The world is facing multiple emergencies: inequality, racism, colonialism, the Covid-19 pandemic, environmental degradation, species extinctions and climate change. At a surface level, these issues may seem disconnected, but a deeper examination reveals social, economic, ecological, political, cultural, and spiritual interconnections; it reveals secretly interwoven relationships. This is where we hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (LS 49).

Contemplative spirituality opens us to the ultimate reality of God's communion even amidst great injustice. Justice-making, be it through our work to change narratives, assumptions, policies, or systems, is the in-breaking of new ways of being in relationship. It's how we *participate* in God's communion.

Vision Statement

Weaving together energies inspired by the charisms of our religious congregations the ORCIE will advocate in Canada for a more just and inclusive social order and ecologically sustainable world. Where possible, the Office will collaborate on an international level with existing global networks and movements to strengthen the voice of Catholic religious for systemic justice, described by Pope Francis as "Integral Ecology."

Mission Statement

The ORCIE will enhance the capacity of Catholic religious congregations to collaboratively increase their impact on policy change towards social and ecological justice at the level of the Canadian federal government, at international levels and before large corporate business entities.

Initial Structure

The Office of Religious Congregations for Integral Ecology (ORCIE) will retain one staff member as Coordinator in a location based in Ottawa/Gatineau. Additional personnel may be attracted as internship and training opportunities emerge, or if project areas demand specific contracted expertise. (The intention is not for this office to grow in size, but rather in efficacy.)

The primary role of the Coordinator will be to motivate congregational energies towards impactful actions, strategically directed towards key actors in each policy arena the organization decides to focus upon. To do this, research, writing and analytical skills will be necessary, in order to motivate and educate religious congregations towards effective action. The preparation of briefs to Standing Committees and Ministries of the national government or business associations will be considered. Interest in advocacy with Designated Public Office Holders is a necessity, and the Coordinator must be able to register with the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying.

The Coordinator will skillfully engage with policymakers, collaborate with allied secular and religious organizations, and employ skills dedicated to directing congregational initiatives to impact policy directions towards beneficial change. The objective is not to duplicate current efforts of religious congregations on JPIC issues, but to assist them to deepen effectiveness in creating change. Similarly, the Coordinator will engage in a collaborative manner in ecumenical and other initiatives addressing issues of interest to the Office.

The Coordinator will be bi-lingual so as to allow engagement with broader Catholic communities, national decision-makers and to strengthen the relationship among English and French congregations.

Governance

A JPIC representative of each sponsoring religious congregation will serve as the Governing Board of the ORCIE. This Board will meet at least twice annually, optimally online, to set policy direction, receive financial and activity reports, approve budgets and evaluate ORCIE's work.

An Advisory Circle, appointed among the Board members, will provide on-going and more frequent direction and support to the staff. The Advisory Circle will provide the facility of quick approval for letters and declarations prepared by staff when time limits and/or the responsible exercise of leadership will not necessitate circulation to all membership organizations.

Members of the Joint Ecological Ministry (JEM) will assume these initial roles of the Advisory Circle until the Board officially meets and establishes procedures.

Budget

An initial total of \$100,000 might allow the ORCIE to begin operations. The largest expense would be salary and benefit costs, possibly totalling around \$80,000. Startup costs would include the purchase of a computer, Internet access and office supplies. Cell phone costs should also be assumed (depending on the pandemic situation, the need for an office should eventually be entertained, even if the

Coordinator might initially be more likely to work from home.) Travel expenses will not likely be a consideration for some time.

Eventually, the Board could decide on a logo, and the Coordinator could develop the accompanying letterhead, etc. A Facebook page can be established quickly without cost. Eventual development of a website may become a future project as communications strategies are developed.

Fundraising

If several congregations were willing to offer \$12,500 each year for three years, the ORCIE could be launched. Additional members could be solicited over time, and additional funds solicited for specific campaigns and purposes. Some congregations might prefer to make a legacy donation or a startup grant, without offering a person to sit on the Board. (Possible savings: a presence at Saint Paul University in Ottawa could be a possibility, sharing an office without cost with *Le Centre Oblat*. A desk is already available in this shared space. The administration could be lowered if an arrangement could be negotiated with OMI Lacombe's Ottawa office. Perhaps payroll services could be offered free of charge, or as part of an Oblate contribution to ORCIE?)

Next Steps...and Further Considerations

As mentioned, the original idea for such an office was presented at the CRC JPIC Ontario meeting six years ago. This DRAFT Proposal was developed and first presented to the members of JEM in late 2020, and after several discussions and revisions, a second draft was advanced in February 2021, and a third draft in March. This document is the fourth text in this discernment process, shared at the May CRC ON JPIC meeting, and is now ready for wider sharing.

A further definition of priority focus areas will occur during the process of sharing this draft with religious congregations, and assessing their interest and support.

In the final instance, the ORCIE Board will hire staff and mandate specific operations...such an office cannot and should not be expected to do everything and redeem the entire universe!

In the meantime, members of JEM will set initial processes in place. JEM will pay for translation of this document, and plan consultation with a wide range of congregations which might be interested in such a collaborative endeavour. The ORCIE envisions collaborative working relationships with congregations beyond Ontario - acknowledging these will be built over time as campaigns progress. The ORCIE does not intend to duplicate effort, but rather to increase the public impact of religious congregations in systematic change on JPIC issues.

The ORCIE could aim to begin operations in either late 2021 or January 2022.

For further enquiries as this process unfolds, please feel free to contact:

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