

Charism and the Prophetic Character in Consecrated Life in Canada: Future Reflections

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Our Reflections to Date

During September, October and November 2021, we were blessed with rich reflections on charism and the prophetic character of consecrated life in Canada by Gaétane Guillemette, NDPS, Daniel Cadrin, OP, Nathalie Roberge, OP, and Lorraine D'Entremont, SC, from the CRC's Theological Commission. Reflection groups then deepened these learnings with echoes from the lived experience of women religious and men religious across Canada.

Consistent themes resounded in these reflections. Charism was clearly understood as a gift both for individuals and for communities – flowing from the Spirit, rooted in Scripture, and intended for the building up of religious institutes, Church, society, Earth, and all creation. Charism is incarnated in history and is, therefore, dynamic and evolving. It is lived out in the proclamation of the evangelical counsels, the diverse expressions of spiritual life, the witness to life in community, and engagement in ministry.

Charism is the catalyst for the prophetic character, a distinctive sign of the presence of the Spirit, reaching out to Earth and to Earth's creatures. Prophetic action is closely linked to what is happening in the social, political, economic, religious, cultural, and environmental domains of our world. While prophetism is very much tied to the present, it is not locked in the present, but it takes place over a long period of time. It is rooted in a memory, it assumes an historical heritage, and it opens up a future based on promise.

Individuals, communities, networks, organizations, or coalitions can be prophetic. They "prophesy" through words and actions, gestures, projects, lifestyles, vows, meditations, writings, and social media. In today's world, prophetism focuses on such diverse realities as climate change, migrants, interculturality, violence and victims, belonging and identities, aging and care, governance and civic life, secularity and transcendence, and material and spiritual heritage.

Both charism and prophetism are lived in our time in a new awareness of the vulnerability of persons living the consecrated life and the vulnerability of the religious institutes in which they live. This vulnerability is in stark contrast to the realities of strength, influence, and voice of authority which characterized the religious institutes when most of us living consecrated life today entered religious communities. Even though at the time of our entering we were formed to see ourselves individually as humble and obedient, the religious communities in which we lived were powerhouses in education, health care, parishes, and social services across Canada. Our very presence in our distinctive dress marked us as special, as persons to be respected, and as leaders in the ministries which we founded, lead, operated, and often funded.

In the reflections in late 2021, many spoke of this time of vulnerability as a moment of dialogue with a call to be open to the Spirit, to see our fragility as a theological place of encounter with the Lord, and to entrust ourselves to God. Vulnerability frees us to truly hear the words of Pope Francis, "Do not fear limits! Do not be afraid of frontiers! Do not fear the peripheries! For it is

there that the Spirit will speak to you.”¹ Our newly realized vulnerability becomes an opportunity to open ourselves up to others, to establish relationships, to grow in solidarity, and to stimulate our creativity. It pushes us to go beyond our usual frameworks, to broaden our horizons, and to accept graciously the presence and commitment of our lay associates.

This is a very brief summary of what has been reflected and said thus far in the CRC’s focused attention to charism and prophetism in consecrated life in Canada.

To What Is the God of our Future Calling Us?

And so, we ask, “To What Is the God of our Future Calling Us?” Each one of us came into religious institutes with many gifts and graces embedded in our very being. One of the greatest joys of religious life has been the melding of these gifts and graces, over the years since our congregation was founded, into one special gift which we name as our unique charism. Our individual gifts did not disappear when we embraced our congregational charism. No, our diverse gifts were strengthened by the founding charism even as they, in turn, brought new strength and depth to that charism. The deepening continues each day in ways that we could never have imagined when we first made our religious profession.

As congregations and institutes who share the same founding charism merge or fuse, they help deepen their unique charism lived and shaped over time in different realities and in different cultures. However, we are slower to find creative and energizing ways to allow the charism of our individual institutes or congregations to strengthen and deepen each other’s charisms.

As mostly older individuals in our communities and as congregations/institutes with far fewer members, we are certainly more vulnerable today than we were from the 1950s to the 1980s. But we must be careful not to conclude that we now share the real experience of the vulnerability of persons who are poor or trafficked or abused or disrespected. Every one of us is safe and secure; every one of us has the privilege of having health care and protection when we need it; every one of us enjoys good food and clean water. Our vulnerability reflects a loss of some power and influence, but it does not reflect lives of want or despair or poverty.

We must be humble in acknowledging our new vulnerability and coming to understand it through the lens of charism. We must see charism as the opportunity to place our trust more deeply in the God who calls us into a new and uncertain future. We must see charism as the challenge to find the new ways of being prophetic by daring to walk the peripheries and the boundaries where new possibilities come alive.

Where are these peripheries and boundaries? Some are yet to be known, but many are already quite clear:

- ✓ ***the shattering of our theological understanding with the emergence of cosmology and of deep incarnation*** – we are growing in our awareness that the first incarnation of our God was the birth of the universe. The next incarnation was in the person of Jesus, and the ongoing incarnation is in the new life among us from the newborn child to the newborn star. Deep incarnation is that sense of Jesus the Christ, the Risen One, who is one with us in our suffering and in our pain – as humans, as other-than-humans, as the sacred communion of all creation.

¹ Video message of His Holiness, Pope Francis, to mark the 50th National Week for Institutes of Consecrated Life in Spain, May 17, 2021.

- ✓ ***the expansion of our understanding of ministry with the emergence of ecology and our call to care for our common home, Earth*** – we are one with a small percentage of people around the world who are taking seriously the need to care for Earth and all Earth creatures. We have learned from liberation theologians that the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor are one. We have learned this same lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by our failure to care for Earth and having its greatest negative impact on the most vulnerable persons among us.
- ✓ ***the joy of personal, communal, and global contemplation*** – for most of us when we entered religious life, contemplation was a way of praying that was personal to me and God. We have grown much more deeply into the practice of communal contemplation as (in the words of Constance Fitzgerald, OCD) “a constant questioning and restlessness that waits for and believes in the coming of a transformed vision of God... a new and integrating spirituality capable of creating a new politics and generating new social structures.” In more recent times, we have entered into global contemplation, connecting across the many countries in which our congregations and institutes are privileged to live, to walk, and to minister. Through this practice of global contemplation, we are learning the new language, shaping the new theologies and spiritualities, and forming the new ministries that respond to God’s call to us into our new future. Now we truly are able to rejoice in God’s imagination!
- ✓ ***the wonder and the grace of inclusion*** – we were so self-sufficient in years past that we never knew the joy of inclusion, of sharing our charism-blessed journey with each other and with lay colleagues. Today we have no choice but do so, but how enriched our lives have become as we learn from each other’s congregations, other faith traditions, other lived experiences, other cultures, other ways of dancing and singing. We have even begun to believe Job who reminds us to “ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the Earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you” (Job 12:7-8).
- ✓ ***radical hospitality*** – in early 2016, LCWR published *Avanti!*, a collection of reflections written by 30 LCWR members about responding to God who comes to us from the future and invites us to come forward. My reflection in that journal speaks to the weaving of charism and prophecy through radical hospitality:

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:35). God, coming from the future, whispers to us that uncertain times and places cry out for radical inclusion. This God dares us to look closely at those whom we invite to our tables and at our relationships with guests who are strangers or strange, not looking like us, not sharing our values. This God dares us to listen with “the ears of our hearts” to the cries of a hungry child, an abused woman, a trafficked teenager, a tormented mentally ill man, a dying person, a lonely elder, a displaced family, fractured land, poisoned water, a wounded Earth. Inclusive welcoming will lead us to risk, cause us to challenge a social order which keeps people poor, and make us realize that we are not masters but guests of Earth. Our one certainty is rooted in this God’s promise, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all . . . your young ones shall see visions, and your old ones shall dream dreams” (Joel 2:28/Acts 2:17).

Perhaps the most humbling teaching of charism and prophetism is that these gifts were generously given to us by our loving God to be deepened in community and to be given in the service of others and Earth. Neither our older age nor our fewer numbers are reasons to refuse these gifts. Our new circumstances simply dare us to find new ways, in community and in ministry, to share our unique charism and to focus our prophetic voice. We trust that the God who gives us the gifts will also give us the strength, the wisdom, the energy, and the confidence to do so. All else we leave to God!

A poem by Mary Wickham RSM, entitled "Influence," is a source of consolation, hope, and trust as we respond to the God who invites us into our future, God's future:

If you are a stone
thrown by the sure
Hand of Kindness
into a pool,
you may not know
the full extent
nor ever glimpse
your widest ripples
as they circle and spread
and find themselves
lapping the feet
of one or two or three
unknown to you
on a far shore.
You may not know
the circles you make
and the waters you grace
but make them you will
and grace you have been
by the hand of the One
who gave you to the water.