

Colloquium *The Consecrated Life in Contemporary Canada*
Faculty of Religious Studies McGill University, Montreal
Monday, May 11 2009

CONFERENCE

**New Emerging Religious Communities
in the Catholic Church of Quebec**

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Chaire J.-M. R. Tillard sur la vie religieuse
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Among the current signs of vitality of Catholic religious life in Canada and throughout the world is the emergence of new religious communities. This phenomenon caught my attention during the 1990's. More precisely, in 1996 I finished a master's degree in sociology at Laval University on the topic of the new emerging religious communities in the Catholic Church of Quebec, with a case study on Famille Myriam Beth'léhem, a new community founded in Quebec in 1978 . Since this study, while I have also been working on other topics, my interest in these communities has never subsided: research, writing articles, giving lectures and conferences, and finally, working on a dialog process between new and old communities within the framework of the Canadian Religious Conference. Furthermore, I am currently working on a doctoral thesis in theology, directed by Professor Gilles Routhier of Laval University. My topic focuses on new forms of consecrated life.

What I would like to present briefly can be summarized in three points. First, the general makeup of these communities. Second, some of their main characteristics. And third, some salient questions that we, as university researchers, need to address through an interdisciplinary approach. I would like to emphasize that my focus during this conference will be on the religious communities of Quebec, which, incidentally, is the province where most of them can be found.

1. GENERAL MAKEUP OF THESE COMMUNITIES

1.1 Typology

“What are you talking about? What is so new about these new communities?”; these are questions that I have often been asked. The newness of these communities can be understood on two levels.

1.1.1 Chronological newness: communities founded after the Second Vatican Council

On the first level, we are talking about communities, which¹ have mostly appeared after the Second Vatican Council, especially in the 1970's and in the 1980's. This newness is to be understood in a chronological sense.

1.1.2 Forms of life

The second level concerns the forms of life adopted by the new communities. These forms of life can be divided into two categories.

1.1.2.1 Canonical forms of consecrated life

First, we find new communities reproducing already existing and canonically approved religious institutes (can. 607-709). In these communities, men and women live in two distinct communities. All community members are celibate, profess the three vows, and some are ordained as deacons and priests. In these cases we find: The Congregation of St-John (St-Jérôme), the Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem (Montreal) and the Petits Frères de la Croix (Charlevoix).

1.1.2.2 New forms of consecrated life

In the second category, we find communities presenting new features. This innovation is found principally in two areas.

1.1.2.2.1 Mixed communities

First, these communities are mixed; they are composed of men *and* women belonging to the same community. We find this feature in Famille Myriam Beth'léhem (Baie-Comeau), Famille Marie-Jeunesse (Sherbrooke), and also in the Madonna House Apostolate (Combermere). In these cases, all members are celibate, they make private vows or promises similar to members of canonical religious institutes, and some of the men are ordained.

1.1.2.2 Intervocational communities

To this first feature, some communities add a second feature. Not only do we find men *and* women belonging to the same community, but we also find a plurality of vocations or states of life amongst the members of these communities: celibates consecrated to God through the three vows, ordained ministers (deacons, priests), and also married couples and families. In several communities, the married members outnumber the celibate members. I call these “intervocational communities².” The Chemin-Neuf Community (Montréal), Emmanuel Community (Quebec City), Community of the Beatitudes (Drummondville), are some of the largest communities of this type.

1.2 Statistics

Some statistics now. Even though a rigorous and in-depth sociological and demographic study still needs to be done, I estimate that more or less 20 new communities have emerged in Quebec since the Second Vatican Council. Among them, one fourth (1/4) reproduce the classical canonical form of consecrated life; the other three fourths (3/4) bear the features of a new form of consecrated life.

The majority of these communities were founded in the 1970’s, some in the 1980’s and only a few of them in the 1990’s. Famille Marie-Jeunesse (Sherbrooke) and Famille monastique du Coeur de Jésus (Chicoutimi) are the most recent foundations that originated in Quebec. However not all of them are of Quebecois origin. About half come from Quebec, while the other half come from France; the Emmanuel Community (Québec) and the Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem (Montreal) are among the latest communities from France.

With respect to the number of members of these communities, the statistics are not yet accurate. Some communities are international, and can comprise several thousand members living according to a variety of statutes of membership (Emmanuel Community, Chemin-Neuf Community). In Quebec, these international communities can consist of 20 to 30 members each. Some other communities, which were originally founded in Quebec, can consist of around 100 members (Famille Myriam Beth’léhem, Famille Marie-Jeunesse). Some of these communities are also creating foundations in other countries. Finally, certain communities have remained small, between 10 to 15 members (Franciscains de l’Emmanuel).

As for the rest of Canada, I haven’t yet seen any study on this topic. The most well known new community in English-speaking Canada is the Madonna House Apostolate (Combermere). The Companions of the Cross have also emerged in Ottawa, although they are an Apostolic Society and not a religious institute, nor a new form of consecrated life.

We all know that religious life is demographically more pregnant in the province of Quebec than in the rest of the country. The phenomenon of new religious communities follows the same tendency. Does it have something to do with the French tradition?

Among all the European countries, it is in France, that, to my knowledge, the largest number of new foundations can be found. According to the Episcopal conference of France³, the number of new foundations is estimated at 52. The majority of them (37) have their roots in the Charismatic Renewal. Meanwhile, in the United States, according to the latest study by CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate)⁴ from Georgetown University in 2006, there are more than 165 new foundations since 1965.

2. MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

Now, what are some of the main characteristics of these new communities ? Many things can be said. I have chosen to focus on five elements, which also happen to be points of attraction for incoming members.

2.1 A strong life of prayer

One thing is remarkable in the case of the vast majority of the new communities: the importance given to prayer. And this is not only an ideal, but a concrete practice: it is not unusual to find that prayer (personal and communal) occupies 2 to 3 hours a day.

This leads me to remark that several communities define themselves as monastic or at least as “semi contemplative”. In regard to the history of religious life, I am led to an hypothesis: compared to the model of the Apostolic Congregations founded during the 19th and at beginning of the 20th century, many of these new communities are closer to the existing monastic traditions or to the conventual traditions of the Middle Ages (Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites).

2.2 A visible religious life

Another feature: visibility. The visibility of religious life in the new communities plays out on two levels.

The first level is the most important: the personal witness of the members. Usually, members of new communities do not hesitate to speak quite openly and explicitly about their encounter with Christ; they witness to their spiritual journey, to their vocation, and to the joy that they find in that vocation.

The second level refers more to the world of signs: many communities choose to wear a religious habit, whether of a classic style or of a more updated one. In other cases, communities chose to wear simple clothes and a cross. In all these cases, we find a conscious choice to be visible and identified on the public scene. Younger generations, especially, seem to be sensible to the witness expressed through these different signs.

2.3 A mission centered on evangelization, faith education, and spiritual experience

Historically, religious life appeared in response to three types of poverty: material and physical poverty; intellectual poverty; and finally, spiritual poverty. Among these needs,

all of which are still present, the new communities are particularly attentive to the last type of poverty: the quest for meaning, the relation to God.

In the midst of our current post-christian society, there is a new need for an explicit proclamation of the Gospel, for faith education and for spiritual nourishment through an encounter with God. The majority of the new communities center their mission upon these needs. This does not mean that they ignore other fields of apostolic activities (education, health care, social service). They are involved in these activities as well, but they are less institutionally developed than the traditional Apostolic Congregations, who even themselves are unable to maintain the great institutions they once had.

2.4 Common apostolic projects

There is another feature of many new communities: even though the members of these communities may develop some individual apostolic activities according to their talents, many communities choose to work together (retreats, music, publishing, etc.). This decision often emerges from the high value placed upon a fraternal, intense and joyful community life. It must be said that these communities have real impact in terms of testimony and apostolic engagement in their milieux. It is also a factor that attracts new members to these communities.

2.5. A new form of consecrated life: a new step for ecclesial discernment?

The last characteristic that I have chosen to focus on has already been mentioned in my first point: the fact that a large number of the new communities include men *and* women living a diversity of vocations. With respect to this diversity of vocations, the Church is faced with the need to discern their compatibility within the existing structure of consecrated life. In 1998, the founder of the Chemin-Neuf Community, the French Jesuit Laurent Fabre, wrote: “Nous, nous n’avons pas encore vécu de véritable crise institutionnelle. Cela viendra certainement un jour : le point délicat sera sans doute entre les couples et les célibataires consacrés. C’est le point le plus original mais peut-être le plus fragile aussi⁵.” What Father Fabre predicted ten years ago is precisely what the new communities are going through today.

This discernment comes from two sides. On the side of the new communities, after 30 or 40 years of existence, they need to evaluate the practice of having men and women, couples, families, celibates, and ordained ministers live together over the long term. On the institutional side of the Church, the question addressed by Rome concerns which canonical status should be given to these communities that are currently recognized as an association for the faithful. The main question here is: are we in the presence of a new form of consecrated life⁶? According to canon 605 of the Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church, the Holy See could eventually recognise new forms of consecrated life. The question that is currently asked is whether or not married people can be included in the category of consecrated life.

3. EMERGING QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

I would like to end this short presentation by sharing with you some of the questions that, in my opinion, should be studied through an interdisciplinary perspective.

3.1 Sociological research

As I mentioned, there is still a lack of sociological and demographic information concerning the new communities in Quebec as well as in the other parts of the country. How many communities currently exist in Canada? How many people does this represent? Geographically, where are they found? We need to follow the lead that CARA has undertaken in the United-States. On my part, throughout the last ten years, I have accumulated a large amount of information on different new communities. This represents a starting point for a larger and more systematic sociological study.

3.2 Historical research

In conjunction with sociological research, a historical study should be undertaken for the whole of Canada. I must say that the historical origins of the new communities, taken as a whole, has not yet been done. I know of only one extended historical study on new communities, a book by Olivier Landron, *Les communautés nouvelles. Nouveaux visages du catholicisme français*, published in France in 2004.

3.3 Theological study

A third area for reflection concerns the canonical question of the status of the new communities in the institution of the Catholic Church. Behind these canonical questions lay theological issues. A very timely doctoral study on canon 605 was published in 2001 by the Australian sister Maria Casey, who studied canon law at Saint Paul University in Ottawa. This study provides a good starting point. However, various questions concerning the theology of consecrated life, the theology of the laity, and ecclesiology still need to be addressed in greater detail. This is precisely the subject that I am working on for my doctorate.

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¹ There are some exceptions, for example : Société du Christ Seigneur (1951), Madonna House Apostolate (1947), Foyers de Charité from Marthe Robin (1936).

² Olivier Landron, uses the term « communautés plurivocationnelles » (*Les communautés nouvelles. Nouveaux visages du catholicisme français*, Paris, Cerf, « Histoire », 2004, p. 6).

³ Conférence des évêques de France / « Groupe épiscopal pour le Renouveau Charismatique », *Répertoire des Communautés nouvelles*, Paris, 1997, pp. 1-8.

⁴ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), *Emerging Communities of Consecrated Life in the United States*, Washington DC, Georgetown University, 2006, p. 1.

⁵ Laurent Fabre, « Communautés anciennes et communautés nouvelles », *Vie consacrée*, n^{os} 1-2, 1998, p. 34).

⁶ On this question, from a canonical point of view, see Maria Casey, *Breaking from the Bud. New Forms of Consecrated Life*, Burwood (Australia), Sisters of St. Joseph NSW, 2001, 301 p.