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“HOW IS IT GOING?”
RELIGIOUS LIFE IN CANADA TODAY

Conference by Br. Rick van Lier, OP¹

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I am delighted to be with you, and to share with you some observations, intuitions and questions about the evolution of religious life in Canada today.

Last year I was in the Netherlands, and I took this opportunity to meet the president of the Dutch Religious Conference. The purpose of this meeting was, for my part, to learn how religious life is doing currently in this corner of Europe. I began our meeting with a rather simple question: “*How is it going?*” How is religious life doing in the Netherlands? This question opened up a horizon of varied perspectives.

When they invited me to talk to you, the CRC administrative council were, in a way, asking me the same question: “*How is it going?*” How is religious life doing in Canada currently? It is this question that I will try to answer. Naturally, I will try to be brief.

A reporter questioned me recently on the changes happening to religious life in Canada. He was surprised to hear me take an opposite view to the one that the media presents today around religious life: that of increased aging and decreased membership. Does this mean the end of religious life? I do not think so. On the contrary, I have observed a paradoxical vitality within religious life today.

I would like to illustrate this vitality to you by using three approaches. And since I cannot explain the totality of reality, I will simply give you two indications of vitality which highlight that which religious life will possibly be in the coming years. These indicators are, on one hand, the recent arrival of new generations of men and women religious; and on the other hand the creation and presence of new religious communities.

1. Called at All Ages

Admittedly in fewer numbers than in the past, the Lord still continues to call people to religious life. In a recent study on the evolution of religious life in the United States², a group of researchers tried to sketch the profile of new candidates to religious life. This study reveals, in particular, that the average age of young people who enter religious life today is around 30³. The same is undoubtedly true for Canada. This said, I also note that young people in their 20s are knocking at the doors of our communities, just as older people, in their 40s, sometimes even in their 50s. A number of them were married, and are today men and women religious who are also grandparents. This is a somewhat new occurrence. In any case, these profiles are overturning certain traditional patterns where “vocation = youth”. At the same time, the generational imbalance raises questions and brings about challenges to integration and formation in our communities. But after all, and these are my observations, it is the Lord who calls, and He seems to be calling people of all ages!

I would like to draw your attention on the situation of young people entering religious life today. And when I speak of “young” people, I’m referring to the eighteen (18) to thirty-five (35) age bracket. I would like to describe certain features of their experience, and the challenges that they offer when entering our communities.

I entered the Dominican Order in 1995. I was then 23 years old. Recently I spoke at an assembly of the brothers of my Province and told them how much I appreciated, over the last fifteen years, the fact that I was never treated as a minor, as someone defined by perpetual youth, the “service” youngster that one shows off proudly but never is entrusted with any real responsibilities. I thank my brothers for this. I know however that this is not the case in all communities. There are religious of 40, 50 years of age that we keep on calling the “young sisters”, the “young brothers”. As far as I am concerned this is a visual distortion caused by the demographic and generational imbalance in our present-day communities. These persons would have had by now specific parental and professional responsibilities in the “real” world. It is therefore not normal that they be considered as being the “young” one in our communities. This is a point around which we need to be vigilant and to which I wish to draw your attention.

A second characteristic of the life of our communities is our intergenerational dynamic. And I see it as a strength⁴. You know as well as I do that we live in a society that tends to compartmentalize generations: young people on one side, elderly on the other, with occasional contact. However, we are a “blotch” in this portrait: we refuse to compartmentalize the generations. On the contrary, we form innovative and almost unique social groups: men and women between 20 and 90 years of age who share a common life and a collective project. This however presents challenges, and among them, that of the imbalance of age distribution in our communities.

Our history can explain the inversion of the population pyramid we are experiencing. Brother Yvon Pomerleau, o.p., in his introduction to the last issue of the *CRC Bulletin*, wrote: “A typical Canadian community consists of more than 80% older and often elderly sisters, some 15% of middle-aged sisters and less than 5% of young sisters⁵”. Age is not however a deterrent factor in the attraction of new vocations. On the contrary, young people are challenged and even encouraged by the testimony of brothers and sisters who went through the inevitable crises of life, and nevertheless remained faithful to their commitment, and above all who are happy today! These testimonies of fidelity are lacking in today’s society.

The suffering of young people lies rather in the generational isolation they are living in, and in the impression that they may have of being heirs to a demographic and institutional heritage too heavy for their shoulders. Solutions? I am simply giving an account of some current practices: young people from various communities weave bonds between each other through religious youth networks; communities choose to open new formation houses where the assignment policy takes the demographic balance into account; general and provincial councils are making bold decisions which will make it possible for the new generations to travel lighter, unburdened of the weight of some of our institutions that have become heavy.

2. Called in Different Ways

I was talking recently with some Dominican brothers who were more than 60 years old. They were almost all born in a social context where the Church institutions and gospel values were part and parcel of daily life. Many of them had studied in what was then called “classical colleges” and had even been boarders there. They had experienced a regular form of daily living, divided between study, common prayer, relaxation time, etc. These religious brothers shared among themselves a common cultural horizon. And within that horizon, religious life was something socially known – and even recognized, appreciated, validated. When these men entered religious life, religious life as a whole was in step with the surrounding world.

Things are completely different today. Religious life is unknown and even disregarded by most young Canadian men and women. Sure, there are some dusty photo albums showing off sisters in their old habits. You can find these in museums. And of course, the media adds their share of noisy publicity that doesn't show us at our best. In fact, there are many young people today who have never met any “live” sisters or brothers, in person. Either because these religious have forsaken their presence in social meeting-places. Or again, even if some of them are present, they have decided to hide their identity, either in what they say or in what they symbolize, be it through a cross, a form of religious habit, or clearly identified institutions.

However, paradoxically, young people feel called to religious life. I say paradoxically, because in a number of cases at the moment, neither the social environment nor the family circle promote or support such a vocation. These young people are embarking on a countercultural path and option. Moreover, I observe that a number of new converts are also entering religious life. Some belong to the generation whose parents chose not to transmit their religious heritage, deciding that their children would choose their religion themselves. Today these children are choosing Catholicism, and what's more, religious life! Often to their parents' dismay. A few years ago, when I was Coordinator of the Network of Young Religious of Quebec, I was sat with eight religious in their 20s or 30s. I was the only one whose parents had supported the decision to enter religious life. For the others, the parents were opposed – sometimes strongly.

This new state of affairs, which obviously is not relevant for all newcomers, has implications for our religious life. Let me underscore certain aspects of this. First, the generational isolation which I just mentioned is accompanied this time by cultural isolation. As a result, young religious need a strong and visible sense of group belonging and identity. Secondly, personal mentoring of candidates takes on crucial importance, and this, as much at the spiritual and catechetical as at the psychological level. Let me add to this that our vocations work must also be open to the mentoring of parents. Thirdly, and this is in some cases related to the conversion phenomenon, there is a yearning for evangelical intransigence that sometimes evolves into a form of religious absolutism. Many sociologists⁶, as well as those in charge of

formation, observe that the new generations are sometimes characterized by what some would describe as “conservatism”, “traditionalism” or more “classical” tendencies.

On this subject, let me say three things. First, we must be wary of labelling. Listening to the life stories of the people involved very often moderates our judgment. It is not true that because young people like to wear a religious habit, are receptive to the Pope’s message, practice Eucharistic adoration or say the rosary, that they are taking a step backward. Obviously, I am excluding the traditionalist groups which are openly retrograde and anachronistic. The communities that currently attract new vocations usually combine a healthy mixture of the old and the new. Second, I underscore that there is an invitation to dialogue between generations. Young people are trying to fit into a deeper tradition that remembers. They need roots. The contemporary “presentism”, which claims that we would have been self-generated, without prior affiliation, leads us to an impasse. What is missing, are fellow “pontiffs”, who are able to build bridges between the past and the present and “weave the new cord at the end of the old one”, to use an African expression. Lastly, there is the challenge of generativity⁷. As within a family, it would be wrong to believe that our successors will be sons and daughters who are identical to us. A share of the heritage is passed on. Other elements will be considered outdated. Then new elements are integrated, whether new, or old elements given new meaning.

3. Called to the Mission

I would like to conclude with a comment on the mission of men and women religious. More specifically, I would like to draw your attention on certain points that characterize the new religious communities. I’m talking here about those communities founded in the post-Vatican II period. There are more than twenty of them in Canada at this time, and most of these are to be found in the Province of Quebec⁸. I have been examining these communities sociologically for more than fifteen years now and here are two features that show up quite clearly.

First of all there is great care given to prayer, in all its multiple forms. Un-timed prayer. As my belated confrère Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, o.p., used to say, one does not enter religious life to “do” things, but “because” of Christ Jesus, loved above all. Our religious project is Christ-centered. I’ve noticed in these new communities that the form adopted by a certain number of them is semi-contemplative; others are clearly contemplative or even monastic. This orientation fits in with a possibly increasing interest by our contemporaries for spirituality, and for that which is at the heart of Christian life: a living encounter with the Risen Christ.

Secondly, a part of the mission of these new communities is coloured and justified by the call for new evangelization⁹ of the explicit proclamation of Christ and the Gospel in a society that seems to have lost the memory of it. In the same vein, these communities embark upon faith education, in particular through theological teaching in various forms (sharing groups, teaching, sessions, curricula, university courses, etc.). But social commitment? What do they make of it? You are certainly asking yourselves this question as well. These communities are concerned about it, but with less institutional investment than what religious communities were able to achieve in the past. In addition, at the heart of social commitment, there is always a concern for evangelization.

If I were to give an account of this spirit in new communities in the form of questions, they would be as follows: How do our social commitments contribute to proclaiming the Gospel and the knowledge of the

God of Jesus Christ? What difference do we make, as religious, according to our charism, in some apostolic areas where work can sometimes just as easily be done by purely secular organizations? As wrote Franciscan Brother Laurent Boisvert – and this applies both to old and new communities: “*The primary mission of a religious institute, even in active life, is not the work it can accomplish. The services it gives, in answer to current needs, constitute its second mission, at the same time a way of expressing the face of Jesus Christ, perceived and lived by the founder, welcomed and incarnated by the members of the Congregation and their associates. It is in this sense that Mother Teresa of Calcutta said (I am quoting from memory): We are not social workers; we are co-workers in the Love of God*¹⁰”.

Conclusion

I spoke about a paradoxical vitality of religious life today. I run contrary to a defeatist vision of the future of religious life in this country. Currently, sociologists and historians anticipate renewed interest in institutional religions in the next few years¹¹. Time will tell. This will undoubtedly affect religious life. In addition, at the historical level, we must remember that religious life was born in a context of crisis, and that it first started as a protest counter-cultural movement. From this point of view, the current context can paradoxically represent an opportunity for religious life. We embody an evangelical alternative which calls each and every one of us to an ever-growing evangelical radicalism that is, above all, joyful and contagious!

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- ¹ Rick van Lier, OP, is a professor at the Dominican Pastoral Institute in Montreal. He teaches in the fields of the history of the Church, the sociology of religion and the theology of consecrated life. A member of the Theological Commission of the Canadian Religious Conference, he is also a doctoral student in Theology at Laval University. His thesis relates to new forms of consecrated life (new communities).
- ² Mary E. Bendyna and Mary L. Gautier, *Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference*, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Georgetown University, Washington DC, August 2009, 121 p. + Appendix: <http://members.nrvc.net/member/download?id=283>
- ³ Mary E. Bendyna and Mary L. Gautier, *Recent Vocations...*, p. 8.
- ⁴ Cf. Rick van Lier, “Community, a ‘prophetic challenge’”, *CRC Bulletin*, Canadian Religious Conference, Volume 6, No. 1, Winter 2009, p. 6-7.
- ⁵ Yvon Pomerleau, “Intercultural and intergenerational”, *CRC Bulletin*, vol. 7, No. 2, Spring/summer 2010, p. 3, or http://www.crc-canada.org/bd/fichierNouveaute/603_2.pdf [accessed May 19, 2010].
- ⁶ The study of Mary E. Bendyna and Mary L. Gautier, *Recent Vocations...*, quoted earlier, shows this clearly. In addition, the following documents may be useful: Céline Béraud, “*Prêtres de la génération Jean-Paul II: recomposition de l’idéal sacerdotal et accomplissement de soi*”, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* [online], No. 133, January-March 2006, p. 45-66, <http://assr.revues.org/index3345.html> [accessed April 2, 2010]; Henri Bourgeois, “*Le néo-classicisme catholique*”, *Études*, No. 3942, February 2001, p. 221-232; Remi Chéno, “*Les étudiants et l’adoration eucharistique : deux remarques*”, *La vie spirituelle*, No. 726, t. 162, March 1998, p. 55-58; David M. Whalen, “The Emergence of the Contemporary Traditionalists”, *Review for Religious*, November-December 2002, p. 585-593. And finally, from the perspective of how the Vatican II Council is received by the young generations: Gilles Routhier, “*Le concile Vatican II livré aux interprétations de générations successives*”, *Science et Esprit*, vol. 61, No. 2-3, 2009, p. 237-255.

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- ⁷ “Since E. Erikson, generativity has been regarded as the main development task of old age. Generativity denotes both the transmission of experience to the young generations and a productive commitment towards the young generations. Generativity in particular consists in being concerned with future generations, but also integrating what is new into what is old, and conversely” (“Générativité”, *SOCIALInfo. Dictionnaire suisse de politique sociale*, <http://www.socialinfo.ch/cgi-bin/dicoposso/show.cfm?id=379> [accessed May 19, 2010].
- ⁸ See among others the texts I wrote for the Canadian Religious Conference: Rick van Lier, “Traditional Communities, New Communities: Strengths, Challenges and Areas of Convergence”, *CRC Bulletin*, vol. 6, No. 3, Fall 2009, p. 4-7.; Rick van Lier, “Traditional Communities, New Communities: Strengths, Challenges and Areas of Convergence”, complete version of the presentation given in Drummondville, Québec, on May 9, 2009, Canadian Religious Conference’s website: http://www.crc-canada.org/bd/fichierNouveaute/569_2.pdf, November 17, 2009, 12 p.
- ⁹ Cf. Rick van Lier, « Religious life and the challenges of the “New Evangelization” », *CRC Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Winter 2010, p. 16-17.
- ¹⁰ Laurent Boisvert, *Le charisme. Un visage évangélique à incarner et à manifester*, Montréal, Bellarmin, 2004, p. 26.
- ¹¹ See in particular the study by Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Churches. How Canada's Churches Can Contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance*, Ottawa/Kelowna (British Columbia), Novalis/Wood Lake Books, 2004, 206 p. In line with the theory of the cycles of religious life, it is interesting to cite the following remarks: “I expect a massive revival of religious life very soon, including in the West. It is a phenomenon that has occurred every 200 years since the IVth Century and which should certainly start again soon” (Timothy Radcliffe, “Quelle forme pour l’Église de demain?”, *La documentation catholique*, No. 2432, October 18, 2009, p. 936); “[...] we are at the end of one cycle of religious life and the beginning of a new one” (Patricia Wittberg, “Religious Apostolates, Past and Future: Lessons from the Present Refounding Cycle”, National Association for Treasurers of Religious Institutes, 2007 Conference, Miami, FL, www.natri.org/programs/2007%20Handouts/Patricia%20Wittberg%20Keynote.pdf, p. 11); “Those who announce the death of religion, there are still many of them, thus seem to me to develop a vision that is somewhat limited. In history, everything works in cycles. Some eras are more religious than others. Personally, for all the reasons I stated, I think that we are again at the beginning of a cycle which will be more religious” (Stéphane Baillargeon, “L’Église des femmes”, an interview with Lucia Ferretti, *Le Devoir*, Saturday April 3 and Sunday April 4, 2010, p. A 6).