

# When a Mother House Becomes a Green House!

*Stéphanie Gravel*

*“Humanity is called to recognize  
the need for changes of lifestyle . . . and consumption,  
in order to combat this warming.”<sup>1</sup>*

That is how Pope Francis invited us to care for our common home, which is the earth. The Sisters of the Congregation de Notre-Dame (CND) took this request seriously and undertook a greening of their Mother House! Let's see, in concrete terms how this change is enabling a new life as well as the challenges that it represents.

Sister Fernande Cantin, CND, superior of the Mother House, shares her thoughts on this major shift:

Describe for us the project “Greening the Mother House”?

SISTER FERNANDE: At the outset, I would say that this project met the values of the CND and our preferential option for the poor which was the basic orientation chosen at our 2011 General Chapter and renewed with fervour at the 2016 General Chapter. These motivations, as well as the interventions of resource persons such as Norman Lévesque of the Green Churches Network, Normand Roy of Équiterre and Ghislain Lambert, head of maintenance, facilities and equipment at the Mother House, all helped the sisters of the community and the staff to enter into this project that has been on-going for two years.

The first step was to measure our environmental footprint. In order to do that, we asked for help from an expert in the field, Mr. Normand Roy of Équiterre. He toured the house, met with the sisters and carried out a survey to calculate the impact that the people living at the Mother House had on the environment. An action plan was then submitted to the congregation's authorities who selected thirteen actions for us to act upon.

Some concrete actions have been carried out over the last two years. We now buy fair trade coffee as well as organic vegetables and fruits. We have installed bike racks at the front and back of the building, a grease trap in the kitchen, a composting system, a green library, an irrigation system and electrical outlets with automatic shut-offs to reduce our electricity consumption. We also used our plants at the main entrance to reduce asphalted surfaces and thus improve air quality. Finally, the most important accomplishment is planned for 2017: we are planning to improve the heating and electrical system, which will significantly reduce our greenhouse gas production. There is even a sister responsible for butterfly pupae. In October, we released some endangered monarch butterflies to let them fly to Mexico!

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis (2016), Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 23, consulted October 21, 2016 : [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

Have these changes raised questions among the sisters?

SISTER FERNANDE: One has to admit, as with any change, that reactions are different from one person to another. It is still an unfinished process; one that is being welcomed and supported by the community and staff, provided that they receive clear information about the project on a regular basis. One of the resistances to the project stemmed from its novelty and the uncertainties that it produced. It required several changes within the Mother House.

How did you go about maintaining unity in the community?

SISTER FERNANDE: Mainly, in dialogue with each and every person, explaining the project and giving the information necessary to help the sisters understand what it entails. As the sisters received information, their fears diminished. They asked questions and received appropriate responses.

We brought in Norman Lévesque, Director of the Green Churches Network. He really had a very special way of guiding us. He isn't a bulldozer! He respected us in our process. His attitude helped us! He presented the elements of the project from a theological perspective. He did not oblige us to do anything. Instead, he first met with the lay staff for about 40 minutes. Then he met with the sisters for a more substantial meeting that lasted over an hour. It led to an interesting dialogue.

What encouraged us is that Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel, the Archdiocese of Montreal and Maison Bellarmin are members of the Green Churches Network. Also, we got a lot of momentum from the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. We have read and reread it, both in the local community and in all the community's groups. It provided a strong impetus for kicking off our project.

Are these changes enabling life and growth?

SISTER FERNANDE: For us, the "Greening the Mother House" project is one that truly connects to the Congregation's values: justice, sharing and our preferential option for the poor. For example, fair trade coffee is an opportunity for us to pay a fairer price for coffee and encourage local farmers. In the words of Pope Francis, "this is a moral commitment that is not optional." We have carried out the changes in the spirit of the CND and in that way, the Mother House can serve as inspiration for community groups from all continents. We don't consider ourselves as a model, but rather as an inspiration to others, because many look towards the Mother House to see what happens there.

Finally, the most important thing for us was to maintain unity among the sisters: we are all undergoing a process. The Pope's encyclical helped us to adopt these changes, which have become genuine places of growth for the whole community. Little by little, we entered into this ecological spirituality presented by Pope Francis and we are coming out of it as a more mature community.