

“Discerning Hope Amid the Challenges”

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The Canadian Religious Conference (CRC) held its biennial General Assembly from May 26 to 29, 2016. Over 300 participants gathered together to explore the theme: *Amid the Challenges Discerning Hope*. Major superiors as well as members of the General and Provincial Councils came together not just to name the challenges but also to explore the deeper meaning of hope.

Foundation of Hope

I took over as Executive Director of the CRC as the Year of Consecrated Life, proclaimed by Pope Francis, was in full swing. The Pope had identified three major themes: *to look to the past with gratitude; to live the present with passion; to embrace the future with hope*.

The third theme is the most important, but also the least explored. Gratitude is an important thing, but what can we honestly say about the future and more importantly, how do we embrace it with hope? In his letter convening the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis wrote:

“We all know the difficulties which the various forms of consecrated life are currently experiencing: decreasing vocations and aging members, particularly in the Western world; economic problems stemming from the global financial crisis; issues of internationalization and globalization; the threats posed by relativism and a sense of isolation and social irrelevance... But it is precisely amid these uncertainties, which we share with so many of our contemporaries, that we are called to practice the virtue of hope, the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history, who continues to tell us: ‘Be not afraid...for I am with you’ (Jer 1:8).”

“This hope is not based on statistics or accomplishments, but on the One in whom we have put our trust (cf. 2 Tim 1:12), the One for whom ‘nothing is impossible’ (Lk 1:37). This is the hope which does not disappoint; it is the hope which enables consecrated life to keep writing its great history well into the future. It is to that future that we must always look, conscious that the Holy Spirit spurs us on so that he can still do great things with us.”

We are all of us more or less followers of the “heresy of good works,” for we believe that in practice, everything depends on ourselves, including our collective or communal future. But our faith teaches us quite the opposite. How do we believe in the meaning of the word “hope” that is seen as so precarious for many? I think that is the question.

The crises are obvious; but where are the signs of hope? I propose three of them to you.

Consecrated Life, a Necessity

The **first sign of hope** is the discovery of the essential character of consecrated life within the Church. In his 1996 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (VC), Pope John Paul II stressed not only the value but also the need of religious life in the Church: “The idea of a Church made up only of sacred ministers and lay people does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament” (VC 29).

He affirms a positive through a negative, that is to say the necessity of consecrated life within the Church that would otherwise be made up of only sacred ministers and lay people. But why does he take this approach? Is it not enough to have a Church made up strictly of laity and

clergy? Although the Church lives in the present, its vision should be focused on the future. The papal magisterium has constantly emphasised this prophetic and eschatological dimension of consecrated life. The Church needs this testimony as a reminder of our own belief in the kingdom of God already realized in Jesus Christ, which awaits its final conclusion with the end of history when everything will be subject to the authority of Christ and God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

Emergence of New Communities

The second sign of hope is in the new structures of consecrated life that emerge. The Church is alive, and like all living things, it evolves according to its divine origins, from the continued presence of the Holy Spirit, and the historical and human circumstances that it faces.

During the General Assembly, we followed a process of discernment to identify the priorities for the coming years. Among the top five priorities, the fourth was listed as follows: “to continue discernment regarding new communities and different forms of consecrated life and their belonging to the CRC; to maintain contact with them.”

In Quebec, as elsewhere, new communities, such as Famille Marie-Jeunesse and Famille Myriam Beth'léhem, have both genders as a constituent element. In the Code of Canon Law, these mixed communities cannot be recognized as “religious” in the true sense of the word. Even though they are composed of consecrated people, they are instead considered as Associations of the Faithful recognized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, a body that was changed quite recently by the Holy Father in congregation of pontifical right. It is quite normal for canon law to be somewhat behind the times when dealing with movements of the Spirit. This is a new form of consecrated life, with many points in common with the religious life that we all know.

It is also interesting that these two communities from Quebec identify themselves as contemplative rather than active, even though they are not cloistered. We'll have to see if, in the coming decades, new mixed communities will play a greater role and be more visible in the Church.

“Staying on the Periphery”

The third sign of hope is in the exploration of the polysemic periphery in an intercultural context. Polysemous is a neologism; it means that the word periphery has many meanings for us as Christians and consecrated persons. Pope Francis is inviting us to go toward the periphery. Prior to the Conclave that elected him Pope, he gave a revealing speech to the cardinals:

“We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-absorbed: when this happens, the Church itself becomes sick. . . . Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is intoxicated with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the former.” (Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio before the General Congregation of the College of Cardinals, *Sede vacante*, March 2013)

A few months later, he continued his reflection in a speech to the General Assembly of the Union of Major Superiors:

“I am convinced of one thing: the great changes of history have been achieved when reality was seen not from the centre, but from the periphery. It is a hermeneutical question: reality is understood only if viewed from the periphery, not if our gaze comes from a centre that is equidistant from everything. To really understand reality, we have to move from the quiet and tranquil central position and move towards the peripheral zone. Keeping oneself on the outskirts helps one to better see and understand, to make a more accurate analysis of reality, avoiding centralism and ideological approaches.”

A Beautiful Risk

For me, the fact that the contemplative communities are on the periphery, whether geographical or spiritual, gives them an ability to criticize modern society and its presuppositions that are far from evangelical.

Why hope in the future by putting our trust in the contemplative form of consecrated life? First, as Saint Teresa of Ávila said, it would be hard to imagine the Church without their presence. Second, like any living reality, it evolves, it changes. Like the seed in the Gospel, it dies to bear fruit. And third, by its nature, religious life finds its true meaning on the peripheries, on the outskirts, in an environment full of challenges and even dangers. It is a beautiful risk.

I conclude with the words of Pope Francis: “So do not yield to the temptation to see things in terms of numbers and efficiency, and even less to trust in your own strength. In scanning the horizons of your lives and the present moment, be watchful and alert.”