

Joyfully Listening and Praising the Lord

A sentence from the Scripture motivates all my commitments: “No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) Laying down or giving one’s life has many meanings. The meaning evolves as experiences are acquired and challenges are met.

The experiences of being in service to sisters and of having the joy of working with the Canadian Union of Contemplative Women Religious are both rooted in the mission of my deepest inner being. In this article, important aspects of each of these experiences will be highlighted. They are as follows:

Following Jesus Christ—the Poor and the Servant

Laying down one’s life to make present the charism of Sainte Clare and Saint Francis in our time. Giving one’s life to maintain the unity of the community. Listening to every single individual and wanting to take all the appropriate decisions—as a community—to walk together as sisters, following in the steps of Jesus Christ the poor and the servant.

The years between 1995 and 2001 saw a period that promoted the role of the sisters in community decisions and developed their capacity to speak up, using monthly meetings of the Conventual Chapter to do so. Choices were opened up to us during this time of adaptation with a new sister serving in authority. The establishment of an association for monasteries in Quebec also fostered the community’s renewal. This time of adaptation presented quite a few challenges in terms of maintaining unity, solidarity in difference and respect for one another.

Adjusting to “God’s Today”

Nourished by the Word of God, fraternal love fosters meaningful decision making. The collaboration of sisters, aided by resource persons and mentoring, enabled us to adjust to “God’s Today” and to be creative. Accompanying, listening, serving, even foreseeing the future and promoting the mission of the monastery in the diocese have been at the heart of my service to the community.

Personally, I discovered more fully the human person with her strengths and her weaknesses. For certain nuns, it was hard to accommodate my way of being: a person with an overall vision, forward thinking and showing solidarity with others; a person who leaps into action with a dynamism and creativity that both stimulates—but also bothers—others.

Challenges of Humility and Truth

The merciful justice of the Lord remains a fulcrum in this ecclesial mission; a certainty that He alone adjusts life experience to his Love. Sometimes changes are carried out too quickly without sufficient account being taken of vulnerable people in need of more attention, more presence, more listening. Being forgiven is also part of the reality of any person who agrees to lead a community.

Challenges of humility and truth continue to be very present throughout the duration of a service, no matter what role is accepted. The following of Jesus Christ is brought up to date by the path followed by the sisters. Saint Clare constantly invites mercy, freely given: "Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation." The Lord calls upon us to live in faith and joy. Pope Francis speaks along those same lines and wishes for prophets who glow with the joy of the gospel.

To summarize, I would say that the biggest challenge is keeping the community of sisters faithful to its charism. To know how, as a community, to question and challenge ourselves:

- to remain a contemplative community on a mission, a prophetic sign of communion;
- to be a free and liberating community in service to values and not to structures;
- to evangelize as a pilgrim, open to relationship "while overcoming every temptation of autonomy, of protagonism, of self-sufficiency and isolation" (Giacomo Bini, OFM).

The contemplation of Jesus Christ, poor and crucified: What grace, what joy!!! It helps us to stay focused on the strengths of the resurrection. The choice is a form of life: living the Gospel in the manner of Saint Clare takes courage and determination in our secularized society.

Serving Contemplative Women Religious

This different experience presents objectives that are both similar to and distinct from the preceding one. It entails serving and facilitating the different Monastic and Contemplative Institutes who are members of the Canadian Union of Contemplative Women. Bonds of alliance and belonging are created by the major superiors meeting together at general assemblies or formation sessions.

The objectives of the Union and its role in Canada are multifaceted and leave room for creativity. The main role is to ensure linkages among the communities and to organize specific formation activities in the life of contemplative women religious.

This task shows the field of activities to focus on during a mandate. The president makes most of the decisions in communion with and transparency to the Council.

Since there is no interference in the internal life of the monasteries, the Council has a great deal of latitude to carry out its work of listening, representation and formation. Distance and language remain challenges, but the love and the joy of being together in meetings enable fruitful and constructive dialogue. The members' formation gives strong foundation to the Union.

Being Sign of a Presence

Today this service is witness to great transformation in the monasteries. The reduction in the number of sisters, the aging, the lack of vocation and the closing of monasteries are creating a period of adjustment. The mission of contemplative life in Canada remains a challenge to be a sign of identity and transparency of a Presence: *God-with-us*.

In the experiences highlighted in this article, that of service and leadership, beautiful moments of growth and resurrection have come true. Like Jesus Christ, at the heart of these experiences, is *laying down one's life* through love.

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