

Challenges for Religious Life Today

It is perhaps simplistic to assert that consecrated life face challenges at this moment in history. There have always been problems of one sort or another and I suppose there always will be. Still, an aging population of religious women and men in an increasingly secularized society such as our own suggests that we are at a crossroads. I would like to suggest five challenges for religious life today.

Relationship to an Evolving Society

The first challenge is how to negotiate the relationship of religious communities to a rapidly evolving Canadian society. A serious fallacy would consist in seeing religious life independent of the broader questions faced by the Catholic Church and indeed by all religions in Canada.

The diminution of religious practice amongst Canadians of European descent has been offset to some extent by the increasing presence in our churches of Catholics from south-east Asia, Africa and Latin America. However the sons and daughters of new Canadians have not as yet found their way into our seminaries and religious houses. Like other Canadians, they are more likely to describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” or even “nones” as the sociologists term them; that is, persons lacking any formal religious affiliation.

In the absence of a sense of Catholic identity or an identifiable connection with a community of faith, it is simply impossible to imagine young people discerning a call to the consecrated life. Unusually, however, the desire of many young people for a spiritual connection remains very real.

Engaging with the Weight of One's History

A second challenge for active religious communities today concerns how they engage with what I would call the weight of their own history. Vatican II suggested that the renewal of religious life involved a return to the original inspiration of our religious families.

Many apostolic communities of women and men came into existence in the decades following the French revolution and flourished in Canada because of a clear need in the areas of health care and education. We were blessed with a government and society more than willing to have us engage in such roles. Today, with the state having assumed primary responsibility in these areas, what is an active apostolic community to do?

Lay Association and Continuity

An third challenge for religious communities concerns what we often call lay association. Both single and married Catholics have discerned a call to be associated spiritually with a religious institute. This is by no means a new phenomenon, but it has taken on greater importance in recent years. As the number of professed members continues to diminish, is it possible to conceive of a kind of spiritual continuity, where the charism and mission of a religious congregation is carried on in some way by such committed lay people?

New Communities

A fourth issue concerns new communities composed of both consecrated men and women and even married persons. Like secular institutes, in structure, dress and style of life, they draw much of their inspiration from more traditional religious congregations. In some respects, they are closer in inspiration to contemplative religious communities than active ones. Still, there are

important pastoral and canonical challenges to what is a new and evolving form of the Christian life.

Contemplative and Monastic Communities

A fifth and final area concerns contemplative and monastic communities in Canada. They are numerically fewer and their history is rather shorter. The first cloistered contemplative congregation of women, the Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood, was founded in 1861. The first monastery for men, still in existence, is the Trappists of Oka, which dates only from 1883. While they are fewer in number, monasticism still holds an attraction for a small number of new members, as well as a significant attraction for the unaffiliated “nones” in their search for an experience of the sacred.

Ongoing Evolution

Religious life has been adapting from its inception in the Egyptian desert in the days of Anthony and Athanasius. Pope John Paul noted that is hard to imagine what the Church would look like without consecrated persons. As we read the signs of the times, we have every reason to believe that religious life will continue to evolve here in Canada, under the influence of the Spirit.

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