

***‘Go and make the preparations:’ (Luke 22:10)
The Call to Religious in Ireland today.***

Liz Murphy, R.S.M., continues to report on her research with 14 major superiors in Ireland. She explores the implications of their all replying ‘Definitely’, to the question: ‘Is the work of the Brothers / Sisters now complete?’ She suggests some maps for the way forward.

This article continues from my article, ‘Is Religious Life in Ireland Moving towards Closure? (Doctrine & Life, January 2021). Like that article, it reports findings of research I conducted in 2014 with 14 congregational and provincial/regional leaders, using a questionnaire based on one created in The Netherlands by Konferentie Nederlandse Religieuzen (KLR). To these additional findings of the survey this article adds maps for the future that call for attention and action, based on a process of discernment.

In reply to the question: ‘Is the work of the Brothers/Sisters now complete?’ the answers were unanimous:

Definitely

All the signs are there that it is. Not only is it coming to an end but it is finished – as we have known it;

Institutional ministries like education in schools and health care – yes definitely;

The religious are finished but the work is not;

Yes, the normal life we entered into is over. I am convinced of this;

We are not gone completely but we are looking at the Exit door very carefully;

Completion is on our agenda – we are moving in that direction;

Yes, we are planning demise because the writing is clearly on the wall;

The facts are friendly and God is in the facts. Do I die with diminishment or live with it?

Yes as we have known it – that part is. What we contribute and offer now is our presence, and how we are, and how we live the years we have left. Anything else would be a miracle;

In the light of its original intention a lot of it is nearing completion, in terms of social services to the country on one level. On the other hand if we go back to the founding intention it is nowhere near completion. Along the way it became institutionalised, lost its way, became irrelevant.

I don’t think the work will ever be done... But have we the resources? Have we the personnel? Have we people to articulate publicly? I don’t think so.



Looking forward 15-20 years ... the number of communities will be reduced, the last places remaining will be those associated with our founder – just a few centres with a heritage link.

End Phase

Other questions posed in my research included looking at the agendas of current chapters and assemblies, legacy issues dealing with libraries, cemeteries, and collaboration with others. In response to the final question: ‘How would you like to see the end of this phase for your Province/Region?’ the replies included:

End on a positive note not negatively. Leave a legacy that is positive for all concerned, despite our human failures. We have done a good thing and we want that to continue ... with the right structures and with appreciation for what has been done;

End well. A deep peace in people that we have done our task; that we will have completed what we were called to do in terms of our charism; that we are passing this on, leaving it in God’s hands to those who are following after us, without any expectation of how it will be carried out. Maybe we are not meant to see it ... just make sure we are passing things on responsibly;

What is the need in us to perpetuate ourselves? I don’t have huge dreams for religious at this time. I would like to see those there happy, passing on whatever is there – finances and assets - trust those we hand them on to;

As we move into a new configuration we plan to celebrate all that has been, to ritualise this ... have time to grieve but also to hope for a new future together;

We are in the last quarter of the life according to Cada. (i) things come to a natural conclusion; (ii) young people have more opportunities and can spread their thoughts and wings more than we could; (iii) mindfulness is all over the place ... people are still searching; (iv) the abuse issue diminished trust between people and religious and morale has suffered; (v) the influence of the media has been very strong.

Is God letting us die? Is it just the end of the natural cycle?

If we got a terminal illness it would be a case of asking how do I do this well? Be realistic. How do we manage it now? Be true to ourselves and what we were founded for. Just because we are coming to the end of a life cycle does not mean that our life has not been worthwhile;

We religious are no longer visible. Young people don’t know what a nun is. Maybe that is our problem because we haven’t been putting ourselves out there.

Lifelong commitment is difficult today in our society;

We never stopped and asked ourselves the hard questions.

I would hope to see something new but it wont come about in my lifetime. There were always chaotic times, times of turmoil. They were not documented as well as they are today. Values have changed so that a structure such as ours that asked for permanent commitment – which is not a value any more – life lacked flexibility, canon law is still having its influence on the way anything new is coming about.

I would like to see us talking about this much more. I believe we need to change the structures and let some things go to give us freedom. Life is meeting the structures now. We cannot be just caring for ourselves. In the past we didn't care for ourselves and now we are paying the price for it.

I would see us going in the direction of talking about the notion of completion and choices around it over the next couple of years.

These findings are echoed in two poems by Pádraig J. Daly (2019, 2020), himself a religious:

We began in bright certainty;
Your will was our master plan
Lying open before us.

Sunlight blessed us,
Fields of birds sang for us.
Rainfall was your kindness tangible.

But our dream was flawed;
And we hold it now,
Not in ecstasy but in dogged loyalty.

Waving our tattered flags after the war
helping the wounded across the desert.

(The Last Dreamers, 2019)

She is trying hard to believe in God.
The old certainties are gone.
She is eighty and weary.
Battered by the unbelief around her.

She slides along the bookshelves,
Hoping to find a fresh prophet,
Persuading her that her life is purposeful,
That she is cherished.

(Old Nun in a Bookshop, A Small Psalter, 2020)

Ways Forward

The Gospel of Luke in Chapter (22:7-12) describes how, in preparing for Passover, Jesus gave clear directions. The disciples are to: **Go, Listen, Follow** (the man), **Tell** (the owner of the house) and “make the preparations there.” Carroll Stuhlmueller in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* links this passage with Luke with 19:28-34. When Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem, the same imperative style of language was used. These directions are ideal for guiding any journey forward, and for action.

The reality, as recorded in the answers to the questions posed, is clearly in harmony with the first stage of discernment – A Time to See - as outlined by Pope Francis in the recently published *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (2020). We must now, as Pope Francis advises: “be the creators of your future” (p.4) as we listen to the voice of God:

“Come, let us talk this over. If you are ready to listen, we will have a great future” (Isaiah 1:18-20). We are not to be tempted by narcissism, discouragement or pessimism - “three ways that block you, paralyze you, and cause you to focus on those things that stop you from moving ahead” (p.16). As we engage in the “discernment of spirits” we are called to look at the forces for and the forces against possibilities about the journey forward.

Knowing the reality but also, being struck by what we see (p. 51), we then enter into the second stage of discernment. Certain criteria must be in place including patience, prayer, dialogue with others and the assurance that Jesus is with us and for us (p. 21). Any process of discernment must bear in mind the memory of what has gone before: “for there to be true history there must be memory, which demands that we acknowledge the paths already trod, even if they are shameful.” He cautions that now is not a time for “putting a bit of varnish on the future, touching up the paintwork here and there, but all to make sure that nothing changes” (p 44). Instead, it is a time to acknowledge the verbs used by Jesus to “make preparations” so that we can

reorganise the way we live together in order better to choose what matters. We can work together to achieve it. We can learn what takes us forward, and what sets us back. We can choose. (p. 47)

Maps for the Journey

The third stage of discernment is commitment to action (A Time to Act). I am now outlining what might help the journey forward. Some of this is already known through the work of the late Frank Morrissey (2013), Amy Hereford (2011) and my own study and exploration (Murphy 2014). The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) offers useful canonical directions. In my outline I am very conscious that readers of this article will fall into one of at least four categories:

- (i) those who deny the reality and who, like the proverbial ostrich, prefer to keep their heads in the sand;
- (ii) others will continue to believe that there is safety in numbers by continuing to amalgamate with other Provinces/Regions (e.g. creating a European Province) or by merging with another congregation, thus postponing inevitable longer term decisions and multiplying the problems;
- (iii) A third option is to allow death to take over by not doing anything at all due to lethargy or by misperception that some extraordinary miracle will happen;
- (iv) a fourth option is to move towards ‘completion’ using the precious time that is still available to continue to live life to the full (Jn 10:10), knowing that the art of dying (*ars moriendi*) follows naturally the art of living (*ars vivendi*) and the art of loving (*ars amandi*) as we have learned from the hospice movement. Doing this ensures that a last will and testament will be in place and we will be able to say like Jesus at the end: “It is accomplished.” (Jn 19:30).

Life Cycle Development

The lifecycles of an individual, that of congregations and also that of any organisation are identical. In the normal course of life an individual goes through various stages of growth and development from birth, through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, concluding with the termination of life in death. For some the journey is short, others live to ripe old age. People face death in different ways but despite advances in medical hospice research, death is generally approached with fear and trepidation. Grief and sadness follow the loss of the departed. However, for some the approach to death and the transition to whatever follows can also be peaceful, as people accept the inevitability of mortality and pass to eternity with serenity, believing with Tagore (1916) that “death belongs to life as birth does” (No 268). Having a belief in an afterlife seems to make the transition less painful for all, even though as Dr Michael Kearney (1996) says, “what maps we have of the underworld are at best rudimentary.” (p. 144).

The journey of religious over the past decades follows patterns of continuity rather than dealing with completion or decline. The following titles bear this out. Gerard Arbuckle (1986,1990) wrote about **re-founding**, O’Murchu (1995) wrote about **re-framing**, Chittister (1995) used the image of **re-igniting** the fire in the ashes, Fiand (2001) had a book on **re-focusing**, Leddy (1990) used the word **re-weaving** where “the fabric of religious life (was) wearing a little thin” in “one of those in-between moments in history when the past lies in shreds and the future remains unformed” (p. 81). It is now time to engage - preferably in collaboration together – to dream how the next decade will unfold for apostolic religious in Ireland.

Most Congregations and Provinces are registered Charities and many are Companies Limited by Guarantee (CLGs). The management of these takes considerable time, thought and expertise due to being legally governed and requiring annual attention. Constitutions outline how a company legally moves to closure should it be necessary.

Organizations go through phases of initiation, growth, development and expansion. New aspects emerge and are nurtured as life cycles unfold, and there are various acquisitions and mergers at national and international levels. Few organizations focus on decline, demise, termination or extinction. In the course of my research I discovered this, and even with the support of an excellent librarian at the University of Ulster we both

came to the same conclusion as Ebaugh (1993) that “researchers agree that the most understudied aspect of growth and decline in organizations is organizational death.” Ebaugh continues:

Organisational leaders and managers avoid the subject of decline whenever possible. Terms like decline, retrenchment, cutbacks and stagnations are replaced by euphemisms like resizing, redesign, and reorganization (p. 4).

All of this proves that there is much research to be undertaken to explore future scenarios that will be a testament to the past, the present and the future. The process known as Future Scenario Planning is strongly recommended.

Towards Completion

The challenges facing any congregation moving into a final phase are many. In relation to the ‘completion’ process they include strict attention to all of the following (Metz 1977 and Morrisey 2013)

- Arranging for the care of members of all ages including the provision of finances immediate and longer term
- Transfer or closure of the works – legacy planning
- Settling affairs: disposal of property and management of finances, legally and canonically
- Employees’ contracts and settlements
- Creating a Book of Life: an honest retrospective
- Archives: their safeguarding and availability
- Preservation or disposal of significant art treasures, historical and liturgical objects
- Burial grounds and their care into the future
- Timing - not doing this during crisis

In her article *Practical Guidelines for Ageing Institutes* (2015) Amy Hereford outlines what happens as an institute ages and what Canon Law requires in moving to closure. While some of this work may be guided by professionals or ‘experts’ I believe this is primarily work to be completed by religious themselves, in keeping with the maxim of the United Nations “nothing about us without us.” Interestingly, Pope Francis advocates that women provide leadership in the area of action since “women in general are much better administrators than men”... and “they understand processes better, how to take projects forward” (p. 67).

In conclusion, let us join Pope Francis as he prays the prayer of St John Newman

“Lead kindly light,” and borrow the light that was so beautifully spoken by Amanda Gorman (2021) at the recent inauguration of President Biden:

“For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it.
If only we we’re brave enough to be it.” (The Hill we Climb)

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