

(2022) Sixty or seventy years ago we were blessed with many novices and young religious in formation. Our future seemed assured, and larger, more up-to-date residences were being built for our communities. Many of these buildings have turned out to be white elephants, and we have sold them. The good old days are gone. We live in a different time.

As coordinator of the Inter-Novitiate programme of Montreal I am acquainted with this reality from a unique vantage point. There are about 140 religious communities in Montreal. We organize a programme each year, but for how many novices? This year five. How many of them were born in Canada? One. Most are novices from other provinces of their congregation who normally come here for their formation. And the Canadian government is putting more and more bureaucratic complexity in their way. So we need Zoom to gather together all our novices. And each year we ask ourselves “can we afford to continue? for how long?”

The drop in number of novices and young religious is abrupt, but the rate of departures and of deaths has increased rapidly, thus the question of whether our religious communities have a future touches each one of us intimately. Fortunately the Canadian Religious Conference has over the years kept good statistics on Canadian religious communities¹, and they will confirm and clarify what we already surmise. (The numbers of novices and people in formation is in brackets).

	1975	2004	2020
Priests and Brothers	11,053 (747)	4,061 (63)	1,561
Sisters	44,127 (426)	18,410 (68)	7,732
Total	55,180 (1173)	22,471 (131)	9,293 (39) ²
Ratio formation/total membership	2.1%	0.6%	0.5%

The diminishing ratio tells the story. If a religious community has only 2% of its members in various stages of formation, its future is bleak. And note the diminished percentage in 2020.

¹Remember that these statistics are not 100% accurate. The rate of response and the number of communities can vary from year to year. But they give us an accurate overall picture within an acceptable margin.

²The 2020 statistics are not available in the same form. They give a total number from 2016 to 2020 of 195 postulants and novices, without a breakdown of male and female. We have calculated the postulants and novices as best we could for 2020.

Other data show the same trends for Europe and the US. Between 1970 and 2020 the numbers of religious women in the United States has shrunk by 75%.³ The statistics of the universal Church show comparable decline in the same period for Western Europe and North America, roughly double that of the universal Church.⁴

In 1975 half of religious in Canada were about 74 or over. In 2014 half of religious were 80 or over. In 2020 about half of the religious are 85 or over. In recent years some dying communities have moved to retirement residences. About 25% of religious live in infirmaries or in assisted living.⁵ At the present time the average age of death is 90.

Currently a number of communities made up of older members do not receive new novices, and no longer plan to do so. Why? They have no potential novice directors, and the age gap will be an obstacle to incorporation of younger religious, who are very often the only one in their class. In addition most communities, especially those caught in the “révolution tranquille”, were hit hard by departures both of promising subjects and of members in full activity. In the early 80’s many already formulated a grim prognosis, and the cynical comment I sometimes overheard was “The last one to go: turn out the lights and collect the remaining endowment.” Today the last one would not likely have enough strength to turn out the lights, and the remaining endowment would have melted.

By itself, this quantitative analysis by itself leads to discouragement. But to remain there is to fall into one of the major traps of our flawed civilization, which is that of putting quantity on a pedestal. We need to move our focus from the quantity of our members to the quality of our commitment, to seek a religious perspective on what is happening to us, to engage in a reflection that leads us to deeper wisdom and to a path forward. The last word is not diminishing numbers and death but God’s providence.

Christ promised that the Church would last until the end of time, but certainly not human beings, who all die, and not religious communities, some of which have died. “Of the 105 orders that were founded before 1600, only 25 remained by 1972, of the religious orders founded before 1800, 64 percent are now extinct, and of the more than 300,000 monks, friars, and members of men’s apostolic orders in Europe in 1773, fewer than 70,000 remained by 1825 .” (LV p. 4). The

³Cf. Sr. Joan Chittister, osb, “What are we seeking? Old orders or new? Or not at all?”, *National Catholic Reporter*, March 31, 2022.

⁴ Lingier, Anton, and Wim Vandewiele. 2021. “The Decline of Religious Life in the Twentieth Century”, *Religions* 12: 388., p.4., henceforth LV. This recent article out of the Catholic University of Leuven is written from the context of Belgium and the Netherlands, but the issues it deals go far beyond, including Europe and North America. Another valuable source of reflection for me is recent articles of Sr. Joan Chittister, an American benedictine sister, in the *National Catholic Reporter*.

⁵This figure comes from an article of Fr. Yvon Pomerleau o.p., in *CRC Bulletin*, Volume 11, No. 2 – Spring 2014. One can presume that the percentage has notably increased since then.

average life span of an individual is now over 80, and considerably longer than that for the many communities which have died.

Nonetheless religious life itself continues. If some communities disappear, others take their place. The fewer than 70,000 men religious that remained in 1825 became in the Vatican statistics over 228,000 in 1970: the mid to late 19th century was a time of renewal with many new apostolic communities. And a good number of communities today have celebrated their 400th, 800th, and 900th anniversaries, and their hope is for a bottoming out of the decline followed by rebuilding. My own community was suppressed in 1773, restored 41 years later, and expanded to 36,000 beyond its pre-suppression maximum of over 22,000 (now we are down to 14,500). But, for human beings and for communities alike, death is not the final word. The final word is resurrection, in which their contribution to imaging the glory of God is enshrined forever.

Why do some communities fade away and others remain? God's ways are mysterious, as are the purposes he has for us, which often go way beyond the purposes we formulate in our mission statements. The primordial mission is not that which communities give themselves but the one they receive from the Lord. The Lord might want to revivify the mission of a dying community and give it a new way forward, and he might thank another one for having achieved what he asked of it, releasing its members to a well-deserved rest. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

But communities, like individuals, normally seek to continue to live and to serve. So what can we on our part do to continue our service? The initial formulation of our mission is crucial. Translating the charism of a founder into the mission of a community is a delicate task. Some communities had a mission that was too precisely crafted, and were not able or willing to make changes when that mission was clearly no longer relevant or useful. They were hanging on to a status quo, and they ceased to exist. Others had a more broadly based mission, and adjustments within that mission were easier for them to make. Still others had visionary leadership and they were able to go back to their original charism, as Vatican II invited all communities to do, and develop new and creative ways of being faithful to it.

A useful example comes from my own community. Having terminated their formation in Paris, Ignatius and his friends thought that their mission was to go to the Holy Land and work there. Travel to Jerusalem was not possible for them at the time, so they followed a second option, to go to Rome to put themselves at the service of the Roman pontiff. Subsequently they chose to bind themselves together as a religious community, and to present a mission statement to the Pope which led to his approbation in 1540. This approved mission was already very wide ranging, and their experience of the world in which they served the Lord led to a papally approved broadening of their mission in 1550. It gave them the flexibility to start up a number of ministries, including that of education which was crucial in the period of Counter-Reformation. In the aftermath of Vatican II, under the leadership of Pedro Arrupe, this mission was reviewed and renewed, with a renewed accent on social justice, and that process continues. Like so many communities, we are declining in numbers, but more focused in how we serve, and we forge ahead as best we can.

Clarity about mission is crucial, but especially so in Quebec, where most of the social services, health care, education were looked after by clergy and religious communities after the French abandoned New France. In the mid twentieth century there was a wholesale transfer of these functions to the secular government, a period of ‘révolution tranquille’, in which many lay people, people in the process of alienation from the Church, took charge. Religious communities had to let go, scale down, find new ways of being faithful to the charism of their founders, face the challenge of being seen by many as vestigial and useless appendages, and seek their novices among younger people less acquainted about the faith and who take longer to come to their human maturity in a world which has lost its footing. There have been wonderful moments of grace and most communities continue to serve with serenity, but in what way and for how long?

Many religious communities have reached out beyond their place of foundation and initial ministry to evangelize and serve in other parts of the world. Major decline in the founding provinces of such communities is partly overcome by this outreach. Often younger members from mission territories come for formation in these more established provinces. This often leads to a pattern of cross-assignment of personnel and a felt global sense which can be a real source of joy, energy and vibrancy in spite of real diminishment. We must realize, however, that decline of religious communities is becoming more common throughout the world as the prevailing secular culture spreads further.

Does the age of a community have anything to do with its survival? Many older communities have come through many tribulations over the centuries, for example the Benedictines and the Dominicans. They have developed a clear spirituality, a flexible apostolic thrust and an attractive way of life. Their leaders can call on centuries of accumulated experience.

In recent decades more recently founded communities have received young people, enthusiastic but like their peers often lacking in maturity, ready to respond to the needs of today and attracted by a reprise of more traditional patterns of religious life. In many cases this is a wonderful sign of hope; in others leaders have unfortunately been inexperienced and even in a few cases abusive, thrusting their members into action without a clear sense – which older communities usually have – of the required prior formation and clarity of mission.

Ultimately the issue is not the chronological age of the community: every community needs to access both the wisdom that has come down through centuries, and the energy of youthful members ready to strike out in new directions. French has a phrase describing the challenge: “grouille ou rouille”: the option is not to stand pat but to keep moving, not haphazardly but with forethought and discernment. Indeed communal discernment is a key ingredient for communities to determine where the Lord wants them to go next. Many communities are discovering this.

This is true not only of religious communities but of the Church as a whole. It is seeking deep transformation in the ways and means of evangelization and community building in a world which presents unprecedented challenges, and, under Pope Francis, engaging in the new path of synodality, grounded in Vatican II and now being developed. Religious life is beginning to engage in this same path. The discernment and reassessment which followed Vatican II is being taken up again, and its outcome yet unknown to us.

Discernment yes, but also formation. Balance is essential: to offer our young members the treasure of the best traditional values and wisdom forged over centuries of Church and community, but also to teach them how to shift gears, to hear the promptings of the Spirit, to encourage them to explore, innovate, discern, reach out to a world that needs the Gospel more intimately and profoundly than ever before. Our current decline is radical; this is a signal that our rethinking of religious life also needs to be radical. It is needed as never before. Can some communities profit from mergers? How do we work with the laity now invited to take on their proper role in the life of the Church? The pattern of sharing our charisms with lay associates is very helpful and needs to be developed further. Yet other patterns can emerge. We are on the cusp of a multiplier effect. Let us not get in the way.

Will our best be good enough? Stepping out into an unknown future is risky, but we do not do so alone. We are collaborators with God. We count on an Energy way beyond our own in facing the challenges of our world. Our prayer leads us to action, and our action drives us back to a prayer in which we give thanks and ask for even more Energy from God. Prayer and contemplation are essential to all religious life, but for some communities it is a principal occupation. These communities have a simpler and steadier mission. They are the hidden strength that allows us all to move forward.

Even if there are precious few of us left, let us remember that at one time our forebears – a handful of pioneers – were also few, scant in resources and seeking how to serve. Where were they to go, what were they to do? Putting their gifts, their desires, their freedom at the disposal of the Lord, they were able in relatively short periods of time to create ministries that the Church keenly needed. They attracted many young men and women to join them. What is to stop us from becoming pioneers again?