

The Future of Religious Life

I am delighted to be here during the 400 hundredth anniversary of the foundation of Quebec. You are celebrating all that rich history, with the immense contribution that the Canadians have made to the Church throughout the world. In so many places that I have been, I have discovered churches founded by missionaries from Brittany and Canada. I do not know if I will still be welcome when I tell you that I had an ancestor who was part of your history. There is a famous painting of the death of General Wolf, after the capture of Quebec by the British, and the man holding the British flag is my ancestor!

“Called to be Signs of Hope”

During this meeting you will also be thinking of the future. This is not an easy time for religious life in most continents. In the last year I have given lectures to conferences of religious in Asia, Latin America, Africa, North America and Europe, and nearly everywhere the same question is put: Does religious life have a future? This is true of Canada as well. Many congregations face the possibility of extinction. But the very name Quebec must give us courage. It comes from the Algonquin word meaning narrow passage or strait. It originally referred to the narrowing of the river at Cape Diamond.

At this moment we are passing through a narrow straight, between the open expanses of the river above and the sea below. I believe that our vocation as religious is more important than ever before. We are called to be signs of hope for humanity. We religious may be passing through a moment in which we have doubts about our own future, but the whole of humanity is facing a severe crisis of hope. I do not mean that everyone is necessarily unhappy, though there is an epidemic of suicides among the young. I mean that our contemporaries do not have a story to tell of the future that offers hope.

When I was young in the late sixties, we were confident that humanity was moving towards a wonderful future, in which war and poverty would be finished. Everything seemed possible. We believed in progress. The Beatles were enchanting the world. Even English cooking was improving! Now, at the beginning of this new millennium, we are faced with the ecological crisis, the spread of religious fundamentalism, terrorism, the epidemic of Aids, a growing gap between the rich and the poor. Many states in Africa are on the brink of collapse. What stories do the young have to give them hope? There is the story of an approaching ecological disaster, and the story of the war on terrorism. Neither of them promise a future for the young. In so many countries, such as Canada, Spain and Italy, there is a disastrous drop in the birth rate. People fear to bring children into a world without a future.

In this situation, religious life is called to be a sign of hope. For us religious, this is not by having babies, you will be glad to know! Our odd life with its vows is a sign of hope for humanity. We are this because we have a vocation. This vocation calls us into community and sends us out on mission. Our vocation is wonderful not because we are wonderful but because it is a sign of our marvellous hope for the whole of humanity. So I will look at three

ways in which religious life is a sign of hope: first of all because of our profession; secondly by our life in community, and then briefly by our mission.

Responding to God's Call

Let us begin with the concept of vocation. I was drawn to the Dominicans because I loved the mission of the Order and I enjoyed the brethren. But ultimately that was not enough. I became a Dominican because I believed that this was my vocation. I was called by God to walk in this Dominican way.

But that is an expression of a deeper truth, which is that every human being is called by God. God calls us into existence and he calls us to find our happiness in him. So, to be a religious is to embody a fundamental and hopeful conviction about humanity. We are on our way to God. We may have no idea of the future of humanity, of what disasters and violence lie ahead, of whether we shall be blown up by bombs or drowned by the rising sea or fried by global warming, but God is calling all of creation to himself.

"Here I Am"

Everything exists because God calls it into existence. God says let there be light, and it sprang into being. There is a lovely passage in the prophet Baruch: 'The stars shone in their watches and were glad; he called them and they said, "Here we are!" They shone with gladness for him who made them.' (Baruch 3.34). The existence of a star is not just a bald scientific fact. Stars joyful say Yes to the God. The existence of everything is a Yes to God.

What is odd about human beings is that we do not just say 'Yes' by existing. We **say** Yes to God with our words. God speaks a word to us, and we reply with our words. It is for this that we were created, to answer God's word with our words. This human vocation is summed up in a beautiful Hebrew word, Hineni. It means, 'Here I am.' When God calls from the burning bush, Moses replies, 'Hineni', 'Here I am'. When God calls Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, then Abraham replies Hineni, Here I am. When Isaiah hears a voice saying, 'Whom shall I send?', he replies, 'Here I am. Send me.' But when God calls Adam in the garden, he does not say 'here I am', but he hides in the bushes.

We express that truth of that human vocation when we make profession as religious. We place ourselves in the hands of our brothers or sisters, and we say our definitive Yes. Here I am. This is more than the acceptance of obedience to a rule. It is more than the commitment to a way of life. It is an explicit sign of what it means to be a human being.

Calling Each Other

We do not just say **Yes** at profession. We go on being called by our brothers and sisters for the whole of our lives, when we are called to have a role in the community, to be bursar or novice mistress or prioress. We call each other. Our obedience is mutual. And this is more than the efficient organisation of the mission of the Order. It expresses our on-going assent to God, 'Hineni.', Here I am!

We should call each other to courage and freedom, to do things that we would not have dared to do. Our brothers and sisters should call us beyond fear, when we feel paralyzed and stuck.

One day I was walking with some of the brethren in Scotland. We came to a cliff where the path disappeared. You had to place your feet in a slit and work your way along. It was all rather frightening, suspended above the waves of the sea and the rocks. When we got to the end, we realized that one brother, Gareth, was not there. We had not realized that he suffered from vertigo. So one of us had to go to find him, paralysed with fear. We had to say 'Gareth, put your hand here. You can move over a meter. Now stretch the other foot.' Until finally he made his way to safety. All of this journey we call each other, and that is the voice of God, calling each of us to freedom and courage, not knowing what is around the corner. It is risky. We have to learn to trust the voice that calls.

I am reminded of the man who was driving along the top of a cliff wondering whether God existed or not. In fact he was so distracted that he drove over the cliff and fell out of the car. As he was falling he clung to the branch of a tree. Suddenly the question of faith became urgent and so he shouted out, 'Is there anyone there?' Finally a voice replied, 'Yes, I am here. Trust me. Let go of the branch and fall, and I will catch you.' So he thought for a while and then he cried out again, 'Is there anyone else there?'

"Living the Uncertainty with Joy"

The central Christian sign of hope is the Last Supper. Jesus placed himself in the hands of these fragile disciples. God dared to be vulnerable and to give himself to people who would betray him, deny him and run away. In religious life, we take the same risk. We place ourselves in the hands of fragile brothers and sisters, and we do not know what they will do with us. We even place ourselves in the hands of people not yet born, who will one day be our brothers and sisters. My Prior in Oxford was born five years after I joined the Order! Even today, after more than forty years as a Dominican, I do not know what they will ask of me.

We are called to live this uncertainty with joy. The seed of my vocation as a religious was probably the unexpected joy of a Benedictine great uncle of mine. He had been mutilated in the First World War. He has lost an eye and most of his fingers, but he was filled with happiness, provided that my mother remembered to give him his nightcap of whisky before bed! And I guessed, even as a child, that the origin of this joy was God. The Abbot Primate of the Benedictines, Notker Wolf, invited some Japanese Buddhist and Shintuist monks to come and stay for two weeks in the monastery of St Ottilien, Bavaria. When they were asked what struck them they replied, 'The joy.' 'Why are Catholic monks such joyful people?'

This joy is a sign of hope for those who see no future ahead of them. For the unemployed, for students who fail their exams, for couples whose marriage is going through a difficult time, for those faced with war, then our joy faced with uncertainty should be a sign of hope that every human life is on the way to God, whatever difficulties there may be on the way.

So to be a religious is **not** to know the story of our lives. Most people have careers, and these may structure their stories. They move up the ladder of promotion. The soldier becomes a sergeant, the captain dreams of becoming a general, the school teacher a head teacher. But we do not have careers. Whatever role one may hold in the Order, one can

never be more than one of the brethren or sisters. In a way, it does not matter what one does. When people ask me what I do now, then I can reply that I am doing what we all do, which is to be a brother.

Of course sometimes we may feel that our brethren do not recognise who we are, and that we are called to do things that are a waste of time. Maybe our talents are not recognised. Then of course, we must speak. We are not passive doormats. We cannot accept an infantile obedience that treats us as if we were just pawns to be disposed of on the superior's chessboard, filling gaps. So there must be dialogue and mutual attentiveness. But it is part of our religious vocation, as a sign of hope, that even if we are mistreated and unappreciated, we still have the joy of those whose lives are on their way to God. When his Carmelite brethren imprisoned St John of the Cross, he still managed to sing.

I recently received a letter from a friend of mine, an Anglican religious. He has an illness which is slowly leading to his complete paralysis. This great teacher is losing his ability to talk. And he quoted to me the words of that great man, Dag Hammarskjöld, 'For all that has been...Thank you. For all that will be...Yes.' That is the witness of religious life.

Being Witnesses to Hope

It is true that religious life is, in many places, living through a time of crisis, for example in Canada. And many individual religious live through crisis too. We may worry about the future of our Province or monastery. We may feel that our own lives are rapidly going nowhere. But we can only be a sign of hope for a generation that is living through a crisis if we are able to confront our crises with joy and serenity. It can be part of our vocation as religious to confront crises in our vocation as moments of grace and new life.

In every Eucharist we remember the crisis of Maundy Thursday night. Jesus could have run away from that crisis, but he did not. He embraced it and made it fruitful. So, if we encounter a moment when we can see no way ahead, and when we may feel tempted to pack and go, then this is precisely the moment when our religious lives may be about to ripen and mature. Like Jesus at the Last Supper, this is the moment to embrace what is happening, and trust that it will bear fruit. That is part of how our vocation witnesses to hope.

These crises may even include facing of the death of our own communities. For many monasteries in Western Europe, there is no apparent future. Do we dare face even that with joy? When I was Provincial, I went to visit a monastery which was nearing the end of its life, called Carisbroke. There were just four nuns left, three of them old. One of the nuns said to me, 'Timothy, but God cannot let Carisbroke die, can he?' And the previous Provincial, who was standing beside me, said, 'He let his Son die, didn't he?' How can we be witnesses to death and Resurrection if we fear to face the death of our own community?

Giving our life until death

A couple of years ago there was a Congress in Rome about religious life, and many people questioned whether commitment until death was still a necessary part of religious life. I am all in favour of opening our communities to all sorts of friends, associates and collaborators but I would still argue that at the centre of religious life, there must be the courageous gesture of giving our lives until death, *usque ad mortem*. It is an extravagant gesture that

speaks of our hope that every human life in its totality, up to and including death, is a path towards the God who calls.

Once an elderly friar, facing death, told me that he was about to fulfil a great ambition, to die a Dominican. At the time I did not think that this was much of an ambition, but it is one that I have come to treasure. He made a gift of his life and, despite difficulties on the way, he did not take it back. He was a sign of hope for the young.

I have been told a thousand times that the young cannot be expected to make that definitive commitment, until death. It is true that the young live in a world of short term commitments, whether at work or in the home. The average American has eleven different jobs in a working life. Marriages often do not endure. And so it is asserted that we cannot expect the young to make permanent profession. I remember one young French friar who, on the eve, of his solemn profession was asked if he was giving himself totally, and without reserve and forever to the Order. And he is reported to have replied: "I give myself completely and without reserve now. But who knows who I shall be in ten years time?"

But it is precisely because we live in a culture of short-term commitments that profession until death is a beautiful sign of hope. It speaks of the long term story in which every human being is summoned to God. It is an extravagant gesture, but we must ask the young to make brave and crazy gestures, and believe that they can, with God's grace, live them out. Recently four young men made solemn profession for my English Province. They are all bright, energetic and with University degrees. Every one of them could have flourished in the world, have had happily married lives and earned lots of money. Some young women said, 'What a waste! They could have been happily married... perhaps to me.' I am not sure that anyone said that when I made profession, unfortunately! For them to give themselves to the Order until death speaks of our hope for every human being.

Called into Community

So to have a vocation is to say something about what it means to be human. But we are not just called. We are called into community and sent on mission. Each of these movements, into community and out in mission, expresses a truth about our hope for the Kingdom.

First of all, the vocation to community: This is a sign that God calls all of humanity into the Kingdom, in which all divisions and violence will be over. The human vocation is for that peace when, as Isaiah says, the nations 'shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' (2.4). Jesus is the one in whom the wall of enmity has been broken down. Our communities should be a sign of the Risen Lord who said the apostles, 'Peace be with you.'

When I ask young people why they wish to become Dominicans, then it is often because they want community. In our fractured world, many people live alone. We are moving from rural communities to big cities like Vancouver and Montreal. Last year, for the first time in human history, more than half of all human beings now live in cities. People know their neighbours. We are invisible in the streets. Families have become smaller. Many people have no brothers or sisters. God said to Adam that it is not good for us to live alone, but the modern world is filled with lonely people longing for community.

But because our society is so filled with people who are alone, then community life can be difficult. We are not used to sharing our lives with many other people. I grew up in a large family, with six children, my parents and grandmother, and other people too. I learned that my mother loved me even when she seemed to forget my name! When I joined the novitiate, then it was not much of a change from home. But even I sometimes find it hard to live in community. So it is the desire for community that attracts many to religious life and the difficulty of community that means that some do not stay.

"Community Life, a sign of the Kingdom"

But it is both the joy *and* the pain of community life that speaks of the Kingdom. I have already spoken of the joy which is an intrinsic part of our vocation. But it is also part of our witness to the Kingdom that we live with people who are unlike us, who have different theologies, different politics, who like different food and speak different languages. Life with them may be sometimes wonderful but also hard. With them we may be tempted to beat our pruning sticks into swords rather than the other way around. But our common life is a sign of the Kingdom precisely because of our differences. A community of like-minded people is not a sign of the Kingdom. It is just a sign of itself.

I lived in France for a year as a Dominican student. It was wonderful and terrible. One day I was sitting with four very clever French Dominicans, who seem to take no notice of anything that I said. Finally I stopped the conversation and said, 'Now I know why Descartes was French. Because in France, if you do not prove your own existence, then there is no reason to believe that you exist!' Yet it was living with these French Dominicans, whom I came to love, that I discovered how we are only signs of the Kingdom if we endure and enjoy difference.

The most powerful sign of this that I have ever seen has been with my brother Yvon, on visits to Rwanda and Burundi during the difficult years. Yvon knows vastly more than I how difficult that was. It is hard to sit at table and in the church with people whose brothers have murdered your brothers and sisters. But that pain is also an expression of hope.

The temptation of our society is to search for community only with the like-minded, people who share our views, our prejudices and our blood. Conservatives associate with conservatives, and progressives with progressives. Old people are sent to old people's homes, teenagers spend their time with teenagers, and so on. Mrs Thatcher used to ask of people, 'Is he one of us?' We should refuse that temptation. Instead of being homogenous, like a block of vanilla ice cream, we should be like good casserole, in which it is the difference tastes that gives the savour.

"Reaching out in Friendship beyond the Divisions"

In many countries the Church is profoundly polarized between so-called conservatives and progressives. There is a real enmity and anger within our Church at those on 'the other side.' Our prophetic role is to reach out in friendship beyond the divisions. The opposition of left and right, traditionalist and progressive, derive from the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment and are alien to Catholicism. We are all necessarily both conservative, looking back to the gospels and tradition, and progressive, looking forward to the Kingdom. It is true that some of us have a more 'conservative' or 'progressive' temperament, but for us there can be no

fundamental and ultimate opposition between tradition and transformation. And so in our communities we must refuse to let ourselves be divided into camps.

One of the challenges is that of reaching across generations. In my community in Oxford, we encompass at least four generations. There is one old brother who was formed in the classic tradition of before the Council. There are four or five of my generation, who lived in the exhilarating and tumultuous years after the Council. There is a larger group of people who come from what is sometimes called the 'John Paul II generation', who reacted against some of what they thought of as the wild liberalism of my generation. And now there is 'Generation Y', in their mid and late twenties, which is different again.

A community will only thrive if it dares to welcome the young, to challenge them and to be challenged by them, knowing that they will never be like us. Many congregations are dying because they do not accept that the young must be different from us. When I was a young friar, we had a wonderful old Dominican called Gervase: A great scholar, he often argued against the crazy ideas of the young and resisted our innovations, but when it came to the vote, he always voted in favour of the young, because without the young there is no future.

Our ability to endure difference, and come to enjoy it, is also part of our witness to the Church. The Second Vatican Council put stress on the local Church, gathered around the Bishop. This is wonderful and beautiful. But the hierarchical Church also needs us religious, with our different charisms and vocations. It needs contemplatives who resist the busyness of our world, and religious who work with the poor and excluded, or have an intellectual apostolate. We need the beautiful diversity of religious spiritualities, Franciscan, Jesuit, Dominican, Carmelite and so on.

The temptation of the hierarchical Church is towards sameness. Unity tends to become the imposition of uniformity. But, we have seen, a community of the same is not a good sign of the Kingdom. So religious communities help the Church to point to the Kingdom by our eccentricity. This has been so ever since the desert fathers and mothers began their strange way of life more than one thousand six hundred years ago. We are like the jesters at the Royal Courts in the past, who had the liberty to speak openly and even to tease the King! Without this freedom, the Church dies.

Sent on Mission

We are not just called into community, we are also sent on mission. This also speaks of the Kingdom and of our hope for humanity. Jesus was sent to us by the Father. At the end of each Mass we too are sent. It is a sign of God's love that forgets no one and will gather all of humanity into the Kingdom.

I was deeply touched by a conversation with a brother, called Pedro, in the Amazon. He was a well-educated man who could have done all sorts of things. Instead he accepted to be assigned to minister to this remote area of jungle. Most of his time was spent in walking and in his canoe, visiting small communities of indigenous people whom the world has never known. In a sense Pedro, in giving his lives to these people, was disappearing, sharing their invisibility. But he rejoiced in it because it was his vocation. It was a sign that these people, who may not have been noticed by us, had not been forgotten by God. In your care for the excluded, you are a sign of God's unfailing memory of every human person.

Daring to Send Each Other Out

It is significant that Pedro did not just choose to go. He was sent. It is being sent that makes it a sign of God's care rather than just a career option. Do we dare to send and be sent ourselves? Many religious congregations have lost the nerve. At a meeting in the United States, one sister told me that she had been a religious for twenty years but that no one had ever asked her to do anything. She can choose whatever mission she wishes. She says, like Isaiah, *'here I am, send me'*, but no one does.

Why are some congregations afraid to send anyone? There are many reasons for this. Some pre-Conciliar superiors were so tyrannical and arbitrary that they so wounded religious, that today the leadership hesitates to send anyone. After the abuse of the vow of obedience, we do not fear to send. Another is the collapse of shared missions in many congregations, which no longer run hospitals and schools, and so have looked to the parishes for ministry and become absorbed into the structures of the local church. So there is no mission on which to send people.

But I believe that if religious life is to flourish, we rediscover the nerve to send each other, otherwise we shall fail to be a sign of God's memory. I would never have joined the Dominicans if I had been told that I could just do what I wanted. And young people will not come today unless they know that we will ask them to do crazy things, which may appear to be beyond their abilities.

Jesus was sent to be the embodiment of the Father's face. He recognised people. The encounter with Jesus is always meeting someone who first recognises us. He recognises Nathaniel and so Nathaniel can recognise him. He recognises Zacchaeus up the fig tree. He recognises Mary Magdalene in the garden, who can then recognise him. 'Mary'; 'Rabboni.' Once in Lima I came across a photo of a street kid. And under it said, 'Saben que existo, pero no me ven', 'they know that I exist but they do not see me.' People know that he exists as a problem, as a threat, but they do not see him! Religious are sent to the most forgotten places, to be a sign of the God who forgets no one and who recognises their faces.

"Let Us Be Confident"

To conclude: In this time when humanity is suffering from a crisis of hope, then religious life may be one small sign of the Kingdom. We are sign first of all by virtue of our vocation. We make visible the vocation of all humanity, called to the Kingdom. We are sign of the Kingdom by being called into community, and daring to live with those who are unlike us. Prophetically we refuse the security of making our home with the like-minded. And we are a sign in being called out of community, sent on mission, as a sign of God's boundless and unforgetting love. It is worth being such a sign. The Church and humanity need that sign more than ever. So let us be confident. We are not finished!

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