

The following article was a plenary session given at the Union of International Superiors General in May 2007. Sr. Katrina Brill, SJSH, is Superior General of the Sisters of Saint Joseph for the Sacred Heart from New Zealand.

The theme of the UISG gathering, "Challenged to Weave a New Spirituality which Generates Hope and Life For All," evolved from a consultation with all the Superiors General who are members of the Union. The topics to be discussed show the five threads that need to be woven into a new fabric, a spirituality for our time: Women, the Laity, the Religions of the World, the Displaced, and the Earth and its Sacredness.

These important issues are challenges for our world today. What contributions can Religious Women make in response to these challenges, while bearing witness to the values of Jesus Christ?

WEAVING A NEW SPIRITUALITY OF LIFE AND HOPE FOR ALL: THE LAITY STRAND

See, I am doing a new deed. Isaiah 43:19

Context and Approach

This topic of the laity being part of "the new spirituality of life and hope for all" will be situated in the context of Australia/New Zealand. My examples and insights will come from my belonging to an Australian Order founded by Blessed Mary MacKillop and Rev Julian Tenison-Woods, the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart commonly known as "Josephites".

I will present this "laity strand" in terms of the challenges and opportunities it brings to our Congregations at this time to enhance the reign of God and God's mission through the sharing of the charisms of each of our Orders. The charisms are recognised in and by "the laity" so that the ecclesial community is alive with the fullness of God's Spirit.

My focus is that of an Apostolic Congregation which is already involved in 'partnerships' with various lay groups that share in the Josephite charism.

Underlying Assumptions/Beliefs

The assumptions/beliefs that underpin this presentation can be summed up in the following three quotes:

A central conviction of the group on Partnership with the Laity at the 2004 Congress was

that new relationships of genuine mutuality and autonomy between religious Congregations and the laity are invigorating for consecrated life, the Church and the world [1]

A Religious Life or Congregation that is sufficient unto itself is no longer appropriate for these times.

In reality, it lives "enclosed" in its proper charism, in its own tradition, in its works, in its apostolic movements, its own associations of laity, its vocational pastoral activity, in its internal research (Chapters, assemblies, community meetings).

We believe that such religious life is no longer possible, not only because of the drop in numbers experienced by many congregations, but also because it would no longer be faithful to its foundational dynamism that is part of its being: to live in the world, decentred from itself [2]

In our Josephite Chapter in 2001 we recognised that at this point in our history there is evidence of a movement of the Spirit calling us to new ways of imaging and living the Charism of our Congregation.

There is a new energy as people respond to the charism in a variety of ways. The urgent needs of our time impel us as a Congregation to travel with those whom God is calling in new ways to recognise the charism in themselves. We are called to be bold (courageous, take risks) in honouring and nurturing the charism alive in the hearts of many lay people. [3]

A Challenging Journey...

For Leadership

As a Congregational Leader I believe strongly that our Congregations have a 'window of opportunity' at this time in history:

- to be changed gradually by the lay movement,
- to be given a chance to have our Congregational charisms blossom in a new way,
- to have our particular spiritualities shared, lived and developed by lay groups and
- to have new communities and ministries challenged to be inclusive, diverse and honouring of difference.

All of this is for the sake of the new frontiers of God's mission and for the Reign of God in the fractured world of our time.

There is an opportunity also through the charisms of each of our Congregations to strengthen and support the 'laity strand' so that it is woven into the new spirituality of life and hope for all

As Congregations I believe we need to continue, simultaneously,

- to release the belief that we have to be sufficient unto ourselves and
- to walk compellingly with those whom God is calling in new ways to recognise the charism in themselves.

If our Congregations really have this belief then it will be reflected in our energies and our structures.

- One small step Josephites have taken "structurally" is that Laity (those who share our charism) is the "portfolio" of one of the General Councillors who is responsible for keeping the Josephites in an ongoing interaction and dialogue with the laity through processes, events, and formation together.
- The leadership of the Sisters of St Joseph initiated a four year collaborative process across the Congregation to look at the "Congregational Shadow" of our Josephite culture. This is an ongoing transformation journey to assist the Congregation to articulate our gifts and to recognise the patterns of fear, arrogance, conformity, ignorance, lack of truthfulness that are blocking us from changing and moving as a Congregation towards a new future.

CHALLENGES FACING LEADERS

What energy and commitment can Leadership give to promoting the interaction of the Congregation with the laity? How is this commitment reflected in our Congregational structures, and the initiating or supporting of significant events, initiatives, processes?

What processes can Leaders set in place to bring about "shifts" in the mentality of the members of the Congregation towards the lay expressions of our Congregational charism?

For Membership

Some years ago Sandra Schneiders [4] suggested that congregations were being

called to undertake the ministry of promoting the emergence of the laity into that full adult spirituality and ministry to which the Council called them but which the institutional church is often enough unequipped and/or unwilling to promote.

Over the last thirty years our Congregation, like many others, has formed a Josephite Association (3,000+) and entered into 'partnerships' with other lay groups around the mission. We have engaged in formation in the charism for parish leaders, for staffs, Boards, students, Institutes and Colleges where

our Sisters minister. We have offered hospitality and prayer in our communities. Through our associations, affiliations, Boards and other “partnerships” we are providing for lay people with a similar spirit to have as Marachel [5] says, a:

- particular story to enter
- language to speak
- group to which to belong
- way to pray
- work/ministry to undertake
- face of God to see.

Theological beliefs around the call to holiness and assumptions around ‘belonging’ are gradually changing within the Congregation and within laity. For example, our theology in both Sisters and laity has moved from believing that Religious Life is the ‘state of perfection’ to realising that there is a whole range of opportunities in which to pursue Christian holiness. In trying to present this pictorially, I suggest whereas in the past the Sisters of St Joseph were seen at the centre with all lay people seen in the ‘helping-role’ (Figure 1), we have now moved to a view where it is the Josephite Charism that is at the centre (Figure 2).



Figure1



Figure 2

We are gradually recognising that this Josephite charism is in lay people too and that it may be expressed through lay groups in a variety of ways. All of us are viewing the gospel through the lens of the charism which inspires and supports us to live this call to discipleship.

CHALLENGES FACING MEMBERS AND LEADERS

What processes could we continue to create (separately and together with lay groups) to deepen

- our ongoing theological-spiritual understandings**
- our particular spirituality**
- the different expressions of the charism**
- the changing reality of our world and mission**

so that we all are assisted in seeing that God is doing something profound through the laity and that together we will respond more effectively to the needs of our world?

Further Challenges Emerging

Leaders of Religious Congregations know that we need to continually foster our charism beyond our own structures as mentioned above. Sometimes however I feel that the way forward is not very clear. I feel anxious that too many groups are aspiring to be “Josephite”, that we need to have more formal structures of belonging to safeguard and channel this new energy as people respond to the charism in a variety of ways.

At other times I am challenged to think quite differently. An Australian theologian, Rev David Ranson [6] in his session with our Congregation says that in this pluralistic and global 21st century we are on the

threshold of a new expression of the charism-atic life. That Religious Life will retreat in the form it is and new forms of the “charism-atic irruption” will come to the fore in a way that will be dominant for the next few centuries.

The rise of the new ecclesial movements possibly intimate features of the new way that the “charism-atic impulse” is breaking into the world at this time. Whilst these new movements are not without their problems and difficulties there are two features of them worth considering: Many of the new movements are

- **inclusive of many states of life – single, married, clerical, religious**
- **one does not have to leave what one is doing to live the particular charism.**

A robust charism is strong when it has the ability to be flexible and include and adapt itself to many lifestyles fired by the passion for God and the passion for humanity.

Towards Supporting Autonomy and Mutuality

These insights have encouraged the Josephites to walk with groups that reflect these features It is calling us as a Congregation to truly allow genuine lay autonomy in expressing their lives and mission through the lens of the Josephite charism and spirituality.

Two examples can be given:

- Josephite Community Aid is a young adult volunteer group founded in Sydney by a Federation Josephite Sister which is now run and organised by an Incorporated Committee of mature lay adults who have bought property, purchased vans and appointed a lay co-ordinator to run this volunteer ministry to refugees and people with mental disability living in boarding houses in parts of Sydney. The Sisters have no ownership of this ministry but remain in a supportive role.
- Josephite Associate Network Incorporated is a group of Josephite Associates in the state of Queensland. It is a civil entity separate from the Congregation but with a Memorandum of Understanding. This group has been established recently and they aim to do good works under the Josephite charism working co-operatively with the Congregation in some ministries while remaining financially and civilly independent.

This variety of different lay groups emerging as autonomous expressions of the Josephite charism keeps challenging the Sisters in the Congregation to realise the contribution of the lay people to enhancing God’s mission through the inspiration of Blessed Mary MacKillop and the charism of the Josephites. Not only is this new energy in laity something we need to support but it is also integral to our clarifying who we are as Religious (our identity). We need the other, the interaction with difference, the different expressions of our charism in order to know who we are as Religious in this Movement and in the way we express the charism.

New Imaging: Josephite Movement

The idea of a “Josephite Movement” is one of the new images we are exploring. A Movement focuses on the shared charism and spirit. It allows for different levels of belonging, for a variety of independent ways beyond the Religious Institute, its associations and affiliations. A Movement can hold all these groups in relationship around the shared charism. It may even be possible for a Josephite lay group to include members of other faiths and religions who experience the charism as similar to their own spirit.

FURTHER CHALLENGES

What processes could Congregations set in place to move themselves towards promoting genuine lay autonomy around expressions of their Charism?

There is no doubt that this journey continues to be fraught with issues and challenges that have to be worked through separately and together as Religious and Lay groups. However, I believe that God's mission today will be truly enhanced if religious congregations give considerable energy and focus to recognising this 'sign of the times' breaking through within our midst. It reminds me of the sand within the oyster gradually forming a pearl within its environment. Indeed, 'see, God is doing a new deed' in our midst.

Endnotes

- [1] Congress 2004, Passion for Christ and Passion for Humanity, Group Notes
- [2] Molezun, Sr Maria Pilar Wirtz and Perez, Sr Maria Jose Torries, What Religious Life for this "Other Possible World"? UISG No 132, 2006
- [3] Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart Australia Chapter Document, Forward in Hope, 2001
- [4] Schneiders S, Finding the treasure – Locating Catholic Religious life in a new ecclesial and cultural context, New York/Mahwah, Paulist Press 2000, pp 95-96
- [5] Marachel, C, Toward an effective partnership between religious and laity in fulfilment of charism and responsibility for mission, Charism and Spirituality Proceedings of the 56th Conference of the Unione Superiore Generali, Rome, 2000
- [6] Ranson, David Religious Life: Where to from here and for whom? An Address to the Leadership of the Religious Sisters of St. Joseph, Sydney, Australia, May 2005