

WHEN THERE IS NO VISION THE PEOPLE PERISH!
(Prov 29:18)

LEADERSHIP IN MISSION

Introduction

I travel a great deal, more or less eight months a year. I know airports inside out and have endured most of the vicissitudes of international travel, including hours spent at security checks and immigration! As well as the routine ups and downs of air travel, there are often inspiring moments!

Not so long ago I was returning to Rome from Asia. The 12 hour journey began in Singapore in the middle of the night. I was fortunate to have that very rare opportunity of being upgraded to business class. In spite of the joy and luxury of being able to stretch my legs, I was unable to sleep, so contented myself with pondering the visit and encounters I had just enjoyed and catching up on the latest movies – (planes are literally the only place where I get to watch movies now!) I had a window seat with a clear panorama of the galaxy of stars and the warm glow of the rounded silvery-gold moon. We were flying above the Middle East when I became conscious of an almost imperceptible shift in the mood of the sky. I glanced behind me and to the left side of the plane and saw that it was still the deepest of night, but as I looked towards the east I witnessed the pitch black that cushioned the stars, slowly soften to shades of deep indigo, purple velvet, mauve, pinks and eventually, various delicate blues. Far below, I could see pinpricks of light twinkling in the crystal-clear silhouettes of tiny mountain villages. There was a pause, then I glimpsed an almost imperceptible tiny spark. I blinked, and at once fire rippled and leaped across the horizon and the sun's globe burst in strident red and dazzling orange announcing the birth of a new day. Brilliant and breath-taking colours of crimson, gold and yellow filled the sky. Over North Africa, clouds tumbled and cascaded into mountains and valleys, and mild turbulence shook us as we approached our descent into Rome. It was a indeed a sumptuous dawn that awakened the world that day and beckoned me once again to hope! I recognized the insight of Arundhati Roy, author of *The God of Small Things* when she wrote: *Not only is another world possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day I can hear her breathing!*

The images I have just described capture something of my experience in leadership over the past eleven years! When I took up my mandate I was very naïve and inexperienced. After eleven years, I am now pretty “unshockable”! While the role of leadership has stretched and challenged me beyond all imaginings, it has been an incredible journey and has certainly offered me extraordinary privileges and blessings.

To return to the image of that magnificent flight, leadership involves checking the instruments, verifying the maps and setting the flight path. As leaders we constantly scan the horizon to explore a global perspective, in order to better understand the particular, the point of arrival. Inevitably there are mild shudders and tremors that provoke uncertainty and increase levels of anxiety. Sometimes there are moments

of wild turbulence that generate fear, both within and from without, that lead us into uncharted territory, and we can only move forward in faith.

Leaders are continuously journeying into newness, into the dawning of the new day, that takes place within each of us as God beckons us to hope every morning! One of our tasks is to inspire others to the “outrageous pursuit of hope!” At his inaugural Mass in St Peter’s Square on 19 March, Pope Francis spoke about optimism: “*Today amid so much darkness we need to see the light of hope and to be men and women who bring hope to others,*” he said. *‘To protect creation, to protect every man and every woman, to look upon them with tenderness and love, is to open up a horizon of hope.’*”

With just one year to go of my second and final mandate, I can say that I now experience the role and responsibilities of leadership in an international missionary congregation in my bones, in my skin! Thankfully, in religious life at least, the ministry of leadership is not a life sentence! I am also aware that it won’t be so easy to step back in 12 month’s time! I am trying to prepare myself for that moment!

RNDM CONGREGATION

The prophet Jeremiah bids us:

*Stand at the crossroads and look
Ask for the ancient paths
Which was the good way? Walk in it!
And you will find rest for yourselves.*

I think it is really important to be rooted in our tradition – the ancient paths, not in a slavish way, but to draw strength, wisdom and courage for our paths today! In order to understand the context from which I am speaking I will take a few moments to describe the charism of my Congregation and our reality today. The RNDM Sisters (Our Lady of the Missions) were founded in France in 1861. Euphrasie Barbier had a missionary heart and wished to send her Sisters “to the ends of the earth!” so the first mission of the Congregation was to Napier, New Zealand in 1865.

Our Foundress, was gifted with a profound insight into the Mission of the Trinity. She explained in the first Constitutions, that the title of the Congregation honoured the Divine Missions, “*the object of Mary’s most ardent desire*”¹! Euphrasie was very clear that mission is not about our foundations or ministries. She insisted, “*We do not mean our own poor missions, but solely the Mission of the Incarnate Word, sent by God to redeem the human race, and the Divine Mission of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and Son to bring about the sanctification of Christ’s Church!*”² Regrettably, when the Constitutions were submitted for definitive approbation, the Relator of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in Rome in 1890 questioned the expression “Divine Mission”, and in spite of her very articulate clarification, Euphrasie was forced to remove all traces of the charism and spirituality from the Constitutions. The suppression of this text deeply affected the life and mission of the

¹ Preliminary Chapter of Constitutions, 1869. Cf. Ollivier, M. Benedicte, *Missionary Beyond Boundaries*, p. 202-203 Istituto Salesiano Pio XI, Rome, 2007

² Ollivier, M. Benedicte, *Straight is My Path*

Congregation over many decades. The rediscovery of these texts following Vatican II's challenge to religious to return to our sources, has broadened and deepened our understanding of mission. Today our Sister ponder and treasure Euphrasie's insight which shapes more clearly our contemplative approach to mission beyond boundaries. The Divine Mission can never be fully contained or expressed in words or images. The Mission of the Trinity is expansive and unrestrained, and expresses for us the universality of mission.

Today, RNDMs are about 1,000 women present in 25 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America, and the Pacific. While we haven't welcomed any new vocations in Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand for a number of years, annually we have a small group of young women joining us in Africa and Latin America, and very significant numbers in Asia. At present we are blessed with 50 novices and 140 Sisters in Temporary Profession. 35% of our membership is under 40.

I took up leadership at a critical time as we live the transition of energy and focus in mission, formation and leadership, from "West" to "East". Managing that transition in ways that are life-giving for all has been part of my task in leadership. The reflections I offer here are the benefit of hindsight, steep learning curves, initiatives that have worked well, and mistakes that have been made! I believe there are three key functions of leadership in mission. I'll take some time to explore each of these roles and include some of the challenges of leadership in mission:

1. **Prophecy and visioning:** The role of leadership to be attentive to the Spirit; to hold extraordinary diversity lightly, to embrace differences of age, culture, ministries, countries, languages and experience; to engage the imagination of the members, in order to shape a common vision for mission; and to initiate and facilitate possibilities for a future full of hope!
2. The **pastoral care** of our members, our partners in mission, and of those with whom we are engaged in mission: The role of leadership to have confidence in the young; to encourage and motivate the seasoned; to listen compassionately to the tired, the sick and the disillusioned; to draw inspiration and strength from their wisdom of the elderly and support them in their frailty and their final journey towards the loving embrace of their God!
3. **Administration and the stewardship of resources:** The critical role leadership plays in strategic planning, ensuring the on-going training of personnel in key positions; and in an increasingly complex global financial reality, engaging the expertise of lay advisors, and striving for transparency and best practice in all our undertakings.

The Role of Leadership in Prophecy and Visioning

The book of Proverbs reminds us that "*When there is no vision, the people perish!*" We are very familiar with the role of the prophet in the Scriptures critiquing society and calling the people to fidelity to their covenant with God, to restoring right relationships, and insisting on compassion and justice for the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan. Traditionally, prophets have a particular role in society to

promote conversion and change through their actions and messages. In very recent years Sandra Schneiders has written on Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form, suggesting that at the very heart of ministerial religious life, is its participation in the prophetic vocation and mission of Jesus. It is the task of the leadership in religious communities to challenge members to live in fidelity to that prophetic role. As many founders of religious congregations experienced, this prophetic role inevitably invites conflict with the institutional Church. Even today, American Women Religious continue to live this painful reality.

One of the principal tasks of leaders in mission is to be attentive to the prophetic voices - within the members, among the people with whom we journey in mission, and within society. Leadership must encourage “good dreaming”. An aboriginal proverb declares that “those who lose dreaming are lost!” Joan Chittester insists that the kinds of dreams we have determine the quality of our lives. She argues that the problem is not that we don’t dream, the problem is that we seldom dream high enough!³

The vision is drawn from the “dream”. Any group needs a very clear vision and statement of purpose. Leaders are the “custodians” of the vision – not in the sense of controlling it, but enabling the vision to unfold and to flourish! Leaders ensure that the mission focus of the members is consistent with the vision. The vision is never static, but always evolving in fidelity to the founding dream, and through lived experience in mission. Leaders constantly engage members in on-going reflection on the vision and evaluate the mission in relation to the vision.

Euphrasie Barbier knew that good dreaming and visioning depended on the openness to the inspiration of the Spirit! She wrote to the Sisters on several occasions urging them to “*Be ever attentive to the “Whisperings of Grace!”* What a beautiful image for a contemplative approach to mission! In the clutter, clamour and busyness of each day, it is so easy to miss a whisper and an opportunity! Leaders must be attentive, listening and observing what the people need, and a good knowledge and awareness of the skills, experience, and potential of the members of the institute or organization, in order to be able to articulate a clear vision of mission and to define the pathways to achieve that vision. Maryknoll Father, John Sinvalon echoes Euphrasie’s understanding that an essential ingredient of the missionary vocation is this practiced awareness of living in the presence of God: He writes: *This element of the call to be a missionary is primarily a call to be aware always of the presence of God in our being, in our midst, in our universe, and in ‘what God is revealing’. This awareness ... comes when we affirm that God is with us,, and then with patience and discipline, listen to a God who whispers!”*⁴ This attentiveness to the *God who whispers*, helps us to discern global and local mission trends. On-going reflection, discernment and visioning enable the energy and potential of the members to be continually released and refreshed for mission.

An essential aspect of leadership is being able to spot potential, and to encourage creativity and initiative in members, otherwise, we will perish! When I took up leadership in 2002 we had a significantly large group of young women in Temporary

³ Chittester, Joan. *The Fine Art of Living*, Benetvision, Erie, 2009 p.58

⁴ Sinvalon, John C. MM. *God’s Mission and Postmodern Culture. The Gift of Uncertainty* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2012). p76

Vows, most were in Asia, and some in Africa and Latin America. In facilitating the transition of energy and focus from West to East, we had to plan carefully for the future. This involved leaders and formators at Province level discerning with each young woman a clear plan for her spiritual, theological and professional studies, as well as helping her to achieve fluency in English. Some we encouraged to specialize at post graduate level – for example, in spirituality, biblical studies, theology, human development, psychology, law (civil and canon law), interreligious dialogue, peace studies, community development, educational management, business studies, etc.

Our older Sisters in Western Provinces have played a critical role in mentoring and accompanying younger Sisters in their language acquisition and academic studies. For several years now our Sisters in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, Ireland and France, have welcomed young RNDMs from India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Vietnam, Peru, Kenya and Senegal, for long term studies. There have been significant cultural shifts for everyone, but this has provided mutual enrichment and support, and a strong sense of participation in the global missionary life of the Congregation. Today, we are very fortunate to have a strong cadre of well-trained, articulate, innovative young women, who are well prepared to take up mission in their own countries and beyond.

In the past five years we have been able to join a collaborative inter-congregational venture establishing education, health and agriculture infrastructure and training programmes in South Sudan; our Burmese Sisters have joined the Marist Fathers working with Burmese migrants (many of them illegal), in Thailand; we've established new foundations in Laos, Kazakhstan and Taiwan with young RNDM women who exhibit the same courage, passion and zeal as our pioneering women did in New Zealand 150 years ago. In long-established provinces we have new initiatives in remote and often dangerous parts of India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Vietnam, Philippines, Kenya and Senegal!

In fidelity to our earliest ministries among indigenous peoples, and migrants, mission among these communities continues to be our priorities today. St Joseph's Maori Girls' College was founded in 1867 in Napier and continues to flourish as one of New Zealand's top educational institutions for Maori youth. Today we have schools, hostels and tertiary institutions in tribal communities in many parts of the world.

I feel a great sense of pride in the fact that in 1876, 15 years before *Rerum Novarum*, Euphrasie Barbier responded to the desperate situation of young migrant factory workers in the North of France, offering a basic education to child labourers, establishing a creche for working mother's whose small children would otherwise be on the streets, a youth club for older girls, and catechism and sacramental preparation for itinerant entertainers (circus children, street entertainers). Today we are developing new ministries among migrants – with internal migrants who come from rural areas into the mega cities of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and foreign migrant workers in countries like Australia, New Zealand, England, France and Taiwan.

Two years ago I took an early morning flight from Chittagong to Dhaka in Bangladesh. In spite of the pre-dawn hour, the vehicle was just crawling along! I thought there must have been a hartal/strike, something which is very common in

Bangladesh, and which can often be very dangerous! There were hundreds of thousands of young people on the streets, a great throng moving forward in one direction. When I asked what was going on I learned this was a daily occurrence – workers were making their way to the factories in the export-processing zone! Until very recently, young Bangladeshi women lived very protected lives within the family, and only rarely went out to work. Today, young migrant workers, many of them from remote tribal communities, are dislocated from their families, only return for two or three days break a year. They have no job security, safety measures are often minimal, they are exposed to verbal and sexual abuse, they work long hours for a mere pittance, and usually live in appalling conditions (and in the past few days we have seen a tragedy unfold just outside of Dhaka with a garment factory fire and more than 800 people engulfed by flames! – this is by no means the first time!) If they have children they have no place to care for them and are obliged to send them back to the countryside to be cared for by grandparents or other relatives. This migration of young people is having major sociological impacts on Bangladesh society and culture! And the same situation is echoed in Vietnam, India, and many other parts of Asia!

Work among migrants in Australia and New Zealand has been taken up by different religious Congregations and parish communities for many years, assisting people with language learning, guiding them through complex immigration procedures, ensuring their rights are respected and protected, and accompanying them in the often painful process of integrating more easily into their adopted country.

The trafficking of women and children, an abhorrent abuse of our time, has created new forms of slavery, affecting women from parts of Asia, and Eastern Europe as well! Those who are most susceptible are women and girls from impoverished and low income households in rural areas and urban slums, especially women labourers or scavengers, and in other low status work and services. Ethnic minorities, indigenous people, hill tribes, refugees, and illegal migrants are also at risk, as are people who are illiterate or have limited education. Young girls running away from home, or girls from families that expect their daughters to financially contribute to their support are vulnerable. These are people who lack awareness of their legal rights, their exploited situation, and have no channel for seeking redress.⁵ RNDM Sisters in India, Myanmar, Taiwan and England involved in ministries among trafficked women.

Collaborative Ministries

⁵ <http://www4.worldbank.org/afr/ssatp/Resources/HTML/Gender-RG/Source%20%20documents/Issue%20and%20Strategy%20Papers/trafficking/ISTRFK2%20UNIFEMtrafficking%20fact%20sheet.pdf> UNIFEM GENDER FACT SHEET No. 2
Trafficking in Women and Children

For many years religious Congregations have been forging new partnerships, with lay associates and advisors, with schools, with other religious Congregations.

In the South Sudan, I see a new model of mission: more than 200 religious congregations support collaborative ministries in six centres in South Sudan, training teachers, health workers, pastoral ministers and agriculturalists. Religious and clergy live together in international and inter-congregational communities. (RNDMs have six Sisters in three communities.) After 40 years war, the entire infrastructure of the country was destroyed! The majority of people had to flee to refugee camps in neighbouring African countries, or to seek asylum in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

The first time I visited in 2007 I cried when I saw school buildings with no doors or windows, children, eager to learn, sitting on bricks or under trees, and writing in the dust on the floors. Churches had no roofs. The faces of the people were grim and somewhat mistrustful! An agricultural people, pastoralists, after two generations they had lost the skills of farming and growing crops. Several of the locations where SSS personnel are living are dangerous with Lord's Resistance Army making incursions across the border, and the Nuba mountains is still a volatile area. These missionary men and women from many nations are courageous and committed. This groundbreaking initiative on the part of the UISG and USG, at the request of the Bishops of South Sudan, is an enormous contribution towards reconstruction of a new country and society. It is also imaging new approaches to mission among religious and lay volunteers.

Mission is not just about what we do in mission, but also about offering possibilities for others to share in our mission. Many religious Congregations have developed programmes for young people in their gap year, and for skilled volunteers to participate in collaborative mission ventures, such as the Marist Mission in Thailand where Marist Fathers work alongside lay associates and volunteers from the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Italy and other parts of Europe, plus two young Burmese RNDMs, working with Burmese migrant workers (the majority of them illegal!) They have developed an excellent education programmes for children and youth, as well as health, pastoral and other social services.

In formal education, Catholic schools can be described as one of the key "missionary arms of the Church". In Australia and New Zealand, Catholic schools foster a strong social conscience and missionary outreach in their students, and offer scholarships for children from poorer families. Many schools develop strong connections and relationships with educational institutions in other parts of the world. Student and teacher exchanges have been common for many years, but increasingly, schools here are partnering schools in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific. Our own schools in Australia and New Zealand have adopted RNDM missions in India, Vietnam and the Philippines. Students, teachers, ancillary staff and parents, raise funds, and organize visits each year to teach English, paint classrooms, construct

sports fields, assist with homework, share resources, etc. These exchanges widen the horizons of all involved, and are experiences of mission that young people will never forget!

Leadership and the Pastoral Care of Members

An essential role of leadership is the pastoral care of members and partners in mission. Leaders are not only responsible for ensuring the physical, mental and spiritual care of the sick and elderly members, but also to honour the “mellow fruitfulness” of their seniors, sharing with them the story of mission today, inviting their opinions, and above all, requesting their prayer! When I am facing some particular difficulties, I know exactly where I can go for support and prayer! It is something I experience very tangibly! Drawing on the skills, experience, and mature wisdom of those in their middle years, and celebrating the dynamism, energy, creativity and imagination of the young is so vital for the life and future of any organization. A leader needs to be able to recognize the potential of each member, and to affirm, encourage and instil in her a belief in her own inner beauty and giftedness. Opportunities for renewal and professional up-grading, enable members to feel valued, confident and professional in their ministry! Consulting, engaging and delegating others is critical in helping a group to own a particularly project or to effect change.

Whenever I visit Provinces and Regions of the Congregation I always try to meet the Sisters personally. I always feel humbled and profoundly enriched by the personal story of each Sister, her fidelity, her passion for the poor, and her vision for mission. I feel it is an extraordinary privilege to touch the “sacred ground” of people’s stories, many who have suffered over the years in ways that I cannot begin to imagine, yet their cheerfulness, profound faith, and strong zeal for mission inspire me, energize me and give me enormous hope for the future!

Wherever we are engaged in mission today, locally or internationally, the context is multicultural. We cannot insist that there is only one correct way to live that mission! Certainly there are challenges and misunderstandings, but there is extraordinary richness and beauty in living the Pentecost vision, where each member hears and speaks the word in her own tongue! One of the tasks of the leader then is to create a comfortable environment where each member of the community, or of the staff, respects the other, and is encouraged to share the richness of her language, culture, and tradition. In our communities the ideal we strive for is to nurture relationships that are life-giving and based on a spirit of trust, cultural sensitivity, mutual respect, appreciation and encouragement.

In an international missionary congregation, where intercultural and international communities are the norm, questions and challenges of inculturation versus internationality inevitably arise and must be explored and revisited regularly. I think this is a question that many missionary institutes are grappling with now. Some of

our members feel that real efforts at inculturation are often sacrificed to embrace the diversity of cultures within the group, eg. in food, expressions of hospitality, liturgy and prayer styles, forms of relaxation, sense of humour, medium of communication, even dress. In the interests of smooth interpersonal relationships and mutual understanding, a lot of energy does of necessity go into reflecting and sharing on cultural difference. Strong communal values and respect for the elder or the person in authority in the East, can clash with the sometimes fierce individualism and self-reliance of the West. This can create confusion, misunderstanding and conflict. For the young person who returns to her home province, reintegration into her own culture can be quite distressing. Where reflection and dialogue is fostered in community, it takes enormous courage to be able name painful experiences of intolerance, prejudice, and even identify the racism that lurks within each of us, and which can be triggered unexpectedly. However, when such honest and rich exchanges are possible, they can lead to a greater sense of “interdependence” and inner directedness in the young person!

There are times as leaders when we need to challenge others and call them to responsible membership. This is probably one of the most demanding tasks of a leader, because calling someone to accountability is always delicate and so easily can be resented. It can only be done in a spirit of listening, dialogue, respect and humility, and in inviting the other to propose ways in which she could perhaps contribute in a more healthy way to the life of the group. I have Euphrasie Barbier's words ringing in my ears, *“It is better to be too kind, than not kind enough!”* And I know there are times when I fall short and the legacy is hurt and pain rather than understanding!

I think one of the greatest gifts I have experienced as a leader, has been the process of rewriting our Constitutions! When the decision was passed at our General Chapter in 2008 I was dreading the thought! How on earth could we go about it? How could we involve such diverse membership in such a sacred task? We consulted different Religious Congregations and Canon Lawyers. Some advised strongly not to pursue it because they felt we ran the risk of the new Constitutions not being accepted by CICALSAL, (the Sacred Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life). However, since the mandate was given, we had to proceed! We are now at the end of the four-year process and the draft of the new Constitutions will be presented to our General Chapter next year. The whole Congregation has engaged in a theological reflection of Scripture, our RNDM charism and our contemplative missionary identity, contemporary writings on religious life and missiology. We have drawn on the heritage and treasures of the past and looked towards the future. It has been a “moment” of renewal and re-energizing for all our members. At the beginning many were excited, some expressed doubts, others were angry and hurt when they feared that their favourite articles of the Constitutions were going to be lost! Now as I visit different countries young, mid-lifers and elderly alike, express their deep appreciation for the

opportunity, individually and in groups, to explore the core of our identity as RNDM Missionary Women. What has been extraordinary is the unanimity of thought and expression coming from such amazingly diverse experience! It has truly been a moment of grace, a maturing of respect for the other and a blossoming of community relationships, as well as a renewed passion for mission. The Sisters feel they “own” the new Constitutions because they can recognize the imprint of their own contribution in the text!

Leadership and the Administration and Stewardship of Resources

Astuteness in financial and administrative matters is not everyone’s gift, and it certainly wasn’t mine when I came into leadership. I’ve learned a little along the way, but I am still baffled by the language of “spread sheets”, “double entries”, bonds, equities and cash flow, I try to look intelligent at finance meetings and not let my eyes glaze over! Euphrasie Barbier’s vision of “*One heart, one mind, one purse*” was a unifying influence in the Congregation from the beginning, and a brilliant strategy for sharing the rich heritage, personnel and finance of the Congregation across borders, that we continue to implement today. But, it is far from being a simple matter!

In the past we “managed” our finances ourselves. Our bursars were heroic in stewarding our resources without much training. In my Congregation, apart from the Principals of our large schools, not too many of us are really skilled in administration. For the most part, we lack the necessary expertise to cope with the complex financial challenges of our day! A number of Religious Congregations were significantly affected by the financial crisis of 2008-2009, and we’ve had to depend on the generosity of benefactors and funding agencies to support our ministries. Thus, we’ve learnt how to write project proposals, and ensure that good clear photos are taken, and the evaluation is written up and sent on time to benefactors. We’ve improved our websites. We’ve tried to adopt “best practice” in our administrative procedures. We’ve had to cajole members into filling out personnel forms and returning them on time with a current photo (always challenging!). We’ve learnt about strategic planning, and the necessity of developing realistic five year mission plans (its one thing to have these tools, it is another to actually get everyone to follow it!) We’ve had to be financially accountable, and not just rely on divine providence! We’ve upgraded our technology, not only at the Generalate, but in every remote rural mission!

In order to address current financial challenges, we hired a consultancy firm to undertake a financial and administrative review of the entire Congregation. We were very impressed with the sensitivity of the consultants to our very complex and diverse reality, and were challenged positively by their report. One of their key recommendations was to appoint a CEO to the General Administration. We had 200

applicants for the position and agonised over the implications of the appointment! Our Foundress had good advice for such tough decisions. She wrote: *You will be obliged to study many persons and many things: do not form your opinions hastily, examine both sides of the coin, and even all three sides if there are three. Beware of anything hasty, hasty or urgent. Pray, examine, find out everything necessary.*” One of our advisors encouraged us to bring to this new challenge “the same courageous, creative, pioneering spirit that our Sisters have lived throughout our 150 years’ history!” The reality is that we are now undergoing a “Copernican” revolution, especially at the Generalate! After only two months in the position, our CEO is already asking tough questions that we haven’t dared to ask our members in a long time! We are learning to professionalize, not to become a business, but to draw on the skills and experience of the business world, in order to be more effective in carrying out our mission.

Preparation for Leadership

I believe very strongly in the importance of preparation for leadership at all levels. In the past, religious communities had local superiors/animators. This role, along with those who held responsibilities in ministries, such as schools, clinics, or hospitals, provided a “training ground” for future roles as Province Leader or councillor. Today, our communities tend to be much smaller than in the past, and responsibilities are shared among community members, so this level of preparation for leadership doesn’t exist anymore.

There are certain skills for leadership that can be acquired and some have natural gifts that can be developed. The on-going formation of leaders at Province and Region level is vital for ensuring a common vision and the implementation of mission plans. It is not easy to be in leadership today, certainly in religious Congregations. Sisters are hesitant or even reluctant to accept the ministry of leadership. There are many factors related to this. For some there is a sense of loss and unwillingness to give up a ministry that is meaningful and life-giving, particularly when it is not so easy to return to the workforce after an absence of three, six or even twelve years! For others being invited to leadership, there is a fear both of the unknown as well as the “known” – particularly when they see what leadership entails today, the difficulties and complexities that are likely to be encountered, the responsibility of taking decisions that will affect other peoples’ lives. Sometimes cultural issues come into play. It may not be appropriate in some cultures for a sister to be seen “affirming herself” for leadership. For some Sisters, age can be a factor – feeling either “too young” and inexperienced, or too old and “past it”, believing that others need to take their turn!

In recent years there are excellent leadership courses available. Some of our Sisters who receive scholarships are obliged to participate in leadership training programmes as a compulsory addition to their academic studies. Tangaza College in Kenya and Duquesnes University (with its campus in the Philippines) have recognized the great need to develop skills in leadership and offer excellent programmes in all the aspects of leadership I have raised.

Conclusion

Over the past month, I've also been pondering the events taking place in Rome over the past few weeks, the courage of a leader, Pope Benedict, to recognize his frailty and limitations, and to take the extraordinary step of resigning to make way for something new. I recognize the aspirations of the people for our future Church, I wonder at some of the amazing gestures and symbolism that has surrounded the early days of the papacy of Pope Francis, and share some lingering concerns in this new springtime of the Church. We can never expect to find all the essential qualities of leadership in one individual, which is why a team approach is crucial for any healthy organization, with each member taking responsibility for particular functions of leadership. It is encouraging to see that Pope Francis has appointed a team of advisors from each continent. It is disappointing however, that no women are among them!

Leaders are expected to be superhuman perfect people! An impossible dream! Leaders must be dreamers, visionaries, diplomats, counsellors, strategists, teachers, confessors, healers and managers! They have to multi-task and keep a thousand and one things before their mind. They need good memories to remember names, faces, places of mission, and be able to forget personal hurts conflicts and betrayals sometimes! They must be sensitive and compassionate, have broad shoulders to accept criticism, cope with confrontation, and be willing to try and resolve conflicts. They need a sense of humour and be able to laugh at themselves! They must take courageous and unpopular decisions, and be ready to stand by them. There will be times when they have to let go an idea they hold dearly, or they may be obliged to compromise for the sake of a greater good! They will know moments of overwhelming joy and a sense of accomplishment. But they will also experience corresponding moments of great loss, loneliness and desolation. Friends may not always stand alongside them. They will become discouraged and disillusioned. They will please some of the people some of the time, but definitely not all of the people all of the time. They need gifts of inner strength and resilience, humility and simplicity, the readiness to admit, "I was wrong!", and to say, "I'm sorry! Leaders must be grounded in the reality of the present, and have an eye to the future! Leaders need time to rest, to lick wounds in order to be able to ponder and wonder again, so that they are able to the vision for mission alive and focussed!

I have a favourite quote from ETTY HILLESUM that for the past 11 years I have written above my computer. It keeps me motivated: *There are moments when I feel like giving up or giving in, but I soon rally again, and do my duty as I see it to keep the spark of life inside me ablaze!*"

After eleven years in leadership, I believe that without a vision we perish, I believe profoundly in the Whisperings of God's Grace and in the serendipitous presence, power and passion of the Spirit beckoning us into the future!

Maureen McBride RNDM

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