

SISTERS EXPLORE NEW LIFE THROUGH TRANSFORMATION

Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception (SCIC) explored both personal and communal transformation during a gathering Aug. 16-18, 2022 at Ruth Ross Residence in Saint John, N.B.

Dr. Ted Dunn of Trinity, Florida was the presenter and animator. He is a licensed clinical psychologist who has worked for more than 30 years with religious communities and other faith-based organizations in and beyond North America.

He said religious life is not dying, but rather, transforming. However, “you cannot continue to live and function the way you have done in the past.” He explained that “change is not an indictment of the past.” Instead, “it is simply its natural evolution.”

The SCIC community was founded in Saint John in 1854. Today, like many religious communities in the Global North, the congregation is experiencing advancing age and diminishing membership. Through prayer and discernment, the Sisters have agreed this is a graced time to grieve, let go and embrace new possibilities.

Dr. Dunn encouraged participants to see this historical moment as “a time of fulfilment” rather than of completion. He distinguished between surface change and deeper transformation which can be “messy, emotional and intimate.” Outwardly, while the times seem chaotic, inwardly, a new world is stirring.

“What is the future you hope to create? Who are you longing to become?” he asked. Creatively, he conveyed his message with scripture, personal stories, PowerPoint presentations, poetry, recorded songs and videos.

Sisters were invited to share insights and feelings in the large group, as well as in small-group settings. They gathered in person from Saint John and Rothesay, N.B., while six SCIC from the Canadian west and north participated via Zoom video conferencing.

Dr. Dunn highlighted the need to make choices flowing from courage rather than fear. “It is pain that brings us to the crossroads, but it is love that pulls us through,” he said. Our hope now is to create conditions for God’s grace to intercede.

“We need to give meaning to life – not wait for someone to give it to us,” he noted. “What does it mean for you to flourish in this season of surrender?” he asked.

Seeing with new eyes

Last November, the three members of the SCIC leadership circle travelled to North Bay, Ont. to meet Dr. Dunn and experience his presentations among Sisters of St. Joseph (CSJ) of Sault Ste. Marie.

Sr. Bonnie MacLellan, general superior of the CSJ there, is facilitator of the current SCIC Chapter process. At Chapter, religious communities traditionally focus on priorities for their life and mission and elect leadership teams or circles.

In July 2018, Sr. MacLellan facilitated the SCIC Chapter at Villa Madonna Retreat House in Rothesay. Since then, she has been working online and in person with the SCIC leadership circle and Chapter design circle, preparing for the next congregational Chapter. Unable to travel this August, she joined the recent gathering via Zoom.

SCIC understand both Chapter and their commitment to transformation as processes rather than events. Over many months, they engage in personal and communal prayer, reflection and reading, as well as listening and conversation in small circles. Guided by Sr. MacLellan and Dr. Dunn, they are exploring connections between processes of transformation and their upcoming congregational Chapter.

Originally planned for July 2022, the next SCIC Chapter was delayed during lockdowns and setbacks arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The community agreed to postpone Chapter until 2023 with the theme, “Gathering the Wisdom, Blessing the Future.”

Sr. Mary Beth McCurdy, SCIC congregational leader, officially convoked the 24th SCIC Chapter during the gathering. Highlighting the joyful gospel encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, she invited the Sisters to “see with new eyes, hear with new ears (and) love with a new heart.”

In new ways, SCIC seek to remain faithful to their charism, or founding and evolving gift for life and mission. For 168 years, they have focused on those who

are experiencing poverty, illness, social exclusion and injustice. Their commitment to charity is also expressed in advocacy with others for social and ecological justice and peace.

Dr. Dunn offered the Sisters printed materials which he prepared for further prayer, reflection and conversation. He is set to return to Saint John Nov. 15-17, 2022 for the second SCIC gathering focusing on transformation.

~ Roma De Robertis, SCIC

Photo: Pat Poole, SCIC