

RELIGIOUS LIFE is evolving in a Context of a Paradigm Shift.

For me, Religious life has been a fulfilling, challenging, stretching, disillusioning, confusing, enlightening and personally transforming journey of the gradual discovery of the meaning of living to my full potential this *'one wild and precious life'* that I have been given. The phrase of a *'vocation to Religious Life'* when I joined the Josephites in the early 60's meant to me the *'giving of my whole self to God and to what matters to God'*. The gospel call of justice for all peoples seemed simple and clear and with youthful enthusiasm, joy and trust I ventured forth with many others to be a gospel witness and to make a difference. Maybe there was a hint of seeming arrogance in that attitude of which I was completely ignorant at the time!

Behold, Vatican 2 Council (1961 – 64) called for Renewal in the whole of the Catholic Church including the renewal of Religious Congregations! This initiated us into the beginning of a paradigm shift in how we understood our Christian story, church, mission and religious life in a wholly different way. The Church and therefore Religious Life was now seen to be IN the Modern World not apart from it. Again, with youthful confidence I, with many others, became involved in Renewal Groups, new Catechetical approaches, justice and peace groups, theology courses/degrees and social justice action.

It turned out to be a journey of over 55 years where the new horizons and renewal could be described as bringing both *'light and darkness'*. In a paradigm shift everything changes. Reaction to the changes in society, Church and Religious Congregations soon became evident. The ministry of sisters was more concentrated on the individual's passion and gifts as a response to the seen *'need'* than belonging together as a group of sisters in a school or other mission. Sisters and others experimented in ways to be an *'intentional community'* for mission. Others found their passion in justice ministry, pastoral ministry, spirituality ministry, administrative ministry, rural ministry and others. Sister-companions left to follow the gospel call in a different way, priests argued to have the option of marriage, young people explored other spiritualities or found the Church not relevant to their lives and most challenging of all the acknowledgement eventually came of Church cover-ups of Priest child abuse. I wavered, like many others, from certainty to uncertainty, trust to doubt and experienced the call of courage to stay in the *'shadow'* or darkness where transformation often takes place. As the Psalmist says *'To God the light and darkness are the same'*.

Most Religious Congregations in developed countries are today experiencing aging and diminishing numbers of members which points to an evolutionary journey where the reality shows that this 'form' of Religious life seems no longer to be the dominant way to follow this desire of wholehearted commitment. The emerging 'new wine may need new wine-skins'. It is interesting to note that Monastic Orders in the Medieval times moved from being in a dominant position to being a smaller group while other new apostolic groups of Religious Life emerged.

The 'good news' today is that women and men can follow that same wholehearted gospel commitment through many other forms and expressions that are emerging and inclusive. Like other Congregations, the Josephite Congregation is staying open to new ways of people expressing their gospel commitment through the spirit of the Josephite Charism and in close affinity or communion with the sisters. This affiliation or way of belonging together as Josephites involves Josephite Sisters and Affiliates being together in community, prayer, celebration, spirituality and possibly ministry. This is just one way – others may emerge.

Since August is the month of Vocational Awareness, I believe in this time of our evolutionary journey we need to continue to widen our vision and affirm new and other ways of living a 'religious' vocation. Maybe we can align ourselves with the quote of Dag Hammarskjold *"For all that has been 'Thanks' – To all that will be, 'Yes'"*.