



Engaging Aging

Aiglatson: A Key to Futures

By Sister Sherryl A. White, CSJ, Ph.D.

As news of the pandemic continues to fill our headlines, we're all trying to make sense of these past months. If they have shown us anything, it is that our lives can change on a dime in ways beyond imagination. But as the weeks roll by, people are starting to wonder what the return to a "new normal" will look like.

Assuming there ever was any normalcy to our lives in this fast-changing society, something in us seeks constancy and the ease of familiar routines. Motherhouses and monasteries are making decisions about staff returning to the workplace and members are being permitted to gather again for prayer and meals. These are all good things.

At the same time, guidelines for masking are changing practically by the day, travel plans remain a complex maze of safety questions, and now heads are turning to the fast-approaching flu season. Every conversation seems to be tinted with concerns of health and wellbeing. While necessary and significant, are these the only preoccupations we want to have guiding our lives? Surely, we are about more. Has "normal" ever been our objective? Does "normal" ever occur as a standard in our congregational documents?

"At this crucial moment in history, you have a renewed vocation... you are needed in order to help build, in fraternity and social friendship, the world of tomorrow. "

*Pope Francis
World Day for
Grandparents and
the Elderly*



Sister Sherryl White, is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, PA. As a social psychologist, she ministers to apostolic and contemplative communities, facilitating Chapters, quality of life assessments for senior populations, leadership development, and retreats. Sister has developed a practice and theory driven model of facilitation called "Contemplative Inquiry" that helps communities engage the questions of how they might best live into the future. Also Editor of NRRO's publication, *Engaging Aging*, Sister Sherryl brings her particular expertise on the psychological and spiritual qualities of life in light of the aging process and how these impact systems development. Her writings have appeared in *America Magazine*. Sister holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in psychology from Boston University and a M.Ed. in religious education from Boston College.

Aiglatson: A Key to Futures, continued

Imagine this: what would happen if we stopped talking about “normal,” new or otherwise, and instead made a conscious choice to turn our eyes toward new futures. That’s futures, plural form. What if we shifted our energies to engaging multiple alternatives that embrace preferences and possibilities? What if we were guided by aiglatson?

Have you figured it out yet? Aiglatson is “nostalgia” spelled backwards. Coined by Dr. Jim Dator, a political scientist and pioneer in the study of futuring, he defines aiglatson as “the yearning for things to come; reverencing the future; without being disrespectful of the past, preferring the dreams of the future; always desiring to try something new.” Instead of nostalgia, a yearning for the past, can we all step forward in courage and faith to not just drift into unknown futures but to facilitate them? Aiglatson!

On the Horizon

That jump to futures may not be as strange as you think if you’ve been watching the signs. Consider the following events and remember, when language starts to repeat itself across diverse venues, it’s a pretty good indicator that new thinking is beginning to coalesce. Translation: pay attention! Shifts are on the horizon in religious life.

1st Event

Recently, the Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI) published a new document, “Fidelity to the Journey: New Paths of Hope.” Sent to elected leaders of religious congregations and all bishops in the United States, it serves as a compilation of highlighted resources and insights gathered from RCRI’s conferences and workshops held from 2014 -

2020. Addressing the future of religious institutes, foci include the dynamics of transition and the critical need to plan in areas of governance, resources, care of members, property, ministries, and health care, to name a few. Translation: leaders are deepening their consciousness of changes in religious life and collaboration seems to be a path forward.

2nd Event

The National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) publishes an annual report containing a statistical analysis of the data from the religious institutes applying for Direct Care Assistance. In the NRRO report of 2020, drawing from the information given by 531 institutes, 40% have 25 or fewer members. Half of the women religious in the United States are over 80 years of age. 25% of the men religious are over 80. Many religious communities remain underfunded for retirement.

Cited in the RCRI publication mentioned before, Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM, executive director of NRRO, raises the learning that going forward, canonical governance models must be informed



Photo: Jim Judkiss

Right: Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM, Executive Director of the National Religious Retirement Office, Washington, D.C.

Aiglatson: A Key to Futures, continued

by these realities, including the rising need for health care among an aging membership and escalating costs of such services. Translation: the numbers speak to us of change that is real. Past models cannot sustain future needs.

3rd Event

In January 2021, the Pope declared the 4th Sunday of every July to mark the global celebration of World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly in conjunction with the feast of Saints Anne and Joachim. In his message for the first observance of the event, Pope Francis spoke powerfully about the continued responsibility of elders to participate in creating a future. He said, “It makes no difference how old you are, whether you still work or not... whether you are still independent or need assistance. Because there is no retirement age from the work of proclaiming the Gospel and handing down traditions... You just need to set out and undertake something new. At this crucial moment in history, you have a renewed vocation... You are needed in order to help build, in fraternity and social friendship, the world of tomorrow...” In fact, he goes on to say, elders, better than anyone else, can construct “three pillars” that will support the new future: pillars of “dreams, memory, and prayer.”

Acknowledging the challenge that is involved in working toward a future, especially now as the pandemic grips the world, Pope Francis goes on to assure us that God “will grant to all, even the frailest among us, the strength needed to embark on a new journey along the path of dreams, memory and prayer.” Translation: elders are vital in shaping futures, their own and



Above, from left: Staying involved in meeting the local needs of Beaver County, PA, where their Motherhouse is located, Sisters of St. Joseph Patti Young, Carmelita Augustine, Patricia Cummings, and Corinne Kirsch prepare sandwiches for delivery to the Phoenix Drop-In Center, Rochester, PA. (Photo used with permission of Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, PA)

that of those who will live beyond them. No excuses are acceptable for taking a pass on full participation in life when the Holy Spirit has access to our hearts.

Implicating Questions

So, three significant voices, RCRI, NRRO, and Pope Francis, are explicitly addressing future. What are we to make of the similarities? Is it coincidence? Isn't “future” always on a planning agenda somewhere? What can we do about statistics? Don't the numbers always seem rather bleak? Isn't the Church always posing the model of being a pilgrim people on the journey toward life beyond present realities? Why be concerned about the future?

Perhaps, it would be easier to coast along in the present, take off our systems glasses, and let the future blur in the distance. After all, in the wisdom of Yogi Berra, the baseball player and coach famous for his malapropisms, “The future ain't what it used to be!”

Aiglatson: A Key to Futures, continued

Futuring Agenda

Ready or not, an intentionality about our future in religious life seems to be an emerging call. Rather than content ourselves with sliding into the probable future, there is a clear invitation to take up the work of imagining our preferred futures and facilitating our possible futures. Importantly, this work must be done by everyone in the religious institute, from the youngest to the most senior member, but how that participation takes shape can vary.

Over the years, there seems to have been a shift toward valuing the deliberative voice over the consultative voice in community discernments. We don't just want to talk and advise, we want to vote. When we had the ability to endure lengthy meetings and spend the time it took to understand complex documents, that may have been appropriate. But now, it may be time to consider that our personal capacities are shifting and to realize that the value of our participation does not rest solely in voting. The member whose mission it is to pray for the congregation is just as vital a

Below: Sisters of Charity of New York at their 2019 Assembly with the theme, "Charity Rising: Now more than Ever!" (Photo used with permission of Sisters of Charity, New York)



Photo: Elena Miranda

participant in discernment as the one who casts a vote. The members who share in discussions as they are able make a significant difference that guides any movement in choices before a community.

And here's the wonderful feature of futuring that supports differing means of participation. Futuring's strength lies in a multiplicity of approaches rather than a single way forward. It takes time and creativity, but when we develop alternatives for gathering the voice of members, we will find that the collective wisdom and common good will increase in power exponentially.

For example, we have become more skilled, and hopefully better equipped, in using technology to communicate during the isolation periods of the pandemic. So, going forward, members don't necessarily have to rely only on elected leaders convening large scale gatherings to discuss topics concerning our lives together. Imagine thinking both/and instead of either/or. Member-generated agendas and small gatherings could serve as enhancements to the common project by empowering imagination, inclusivity, diversity, and a wider surfacing of voices. Beyond problem solving, the simple experience of speaking with each other again will deepen the relationships that are so essential as we grow smaller. Fresh alternatives can become newfound spaces for the Spirit to find the way forward in our midst.

What's Involved

As pertains to futuring, to imagine what does not already exist is very difficult. How easy it is to get caught in the minutiae of the present. Dr. Jim Dator uses the image of people gathered on a beach with their back to the ocean, caught up in discussing the particulars of the picnic without noticing the tsunami about to wash ashore. He

Aiglatson: A Key to Futures, continued



Above: Motherhouse Minister of Community Life for the Sisters of St. Joseph, Baden, PA, Sister Colleen Crossen (center) meets with Sister Fran Hurley (left) and Sister Frances Rooney (right). They are early adopters of iPads being given to all sisters in the community to facilitate communication and access to technology to enhance wellness.

urges us to get rid of our “crackpot realism” about the present and the limited future we tend to consider. Alternatives cannot surface from thinking that is positivistic and reductionistic. Instead, he suggests, we must constantly scan the horizon and learn to surf a multitude of alternative futures!

The pillar of dreams that Pope Francis referred to seems to be the perfect balance to a process of fact-based, analytical problem solving. Granted, there are no shortages of challenges before us at this point in history. But imagine the shift in energy if dreams are not only welcomed but encouraged in order to advance unknown futures. As the American philosopher Robert Brumbaugh has noted, “There are no future facts, but there are no past possibilities.” What is calling us forward? If we don’t ask the questions, can we choose the answers that will define us?

Dispositions for Futuring

Futuring requires dispositions of freedom, risk, curiosity, creativity and hope. It asks that we

act counter to our natural responses of protection and caution, moving instead from positions of courage, faith, openness, and welcome. Questions become invitations rather than threats. To engage our existing realities and continue to move ahead will require placing less value on being right and more value on humility, on being able to fail, laugh at ourselves, and get up to try again. And again. And again. And we do it all in the face of uncertainty, lacking any assurance that we will like what will come, relying only on the assurance from Jesus, as cited by Pope Francis in his message to elders, “I am with you always” (Mt. 28:20). Is our confidence in that promise strong enough for us to really dream? And importantly, will we act on those dreams? What futures are before us?

Paths Forward

There is a story told by Dawna Markova in her book, “I Will Not Die an Unlived Life: Reclaiming Purpose and Passion.” She tells a very brief tale about her grandmother, a Russian Jew, who spoke of two ways forward on the spiral journey of life: mastery and risk. I have to admit, I embellish the story greatly when I tell it, for I love the richness of storytelling, but for brevity’s sake, the grandmother basically explains that taking only the step of risk will leave you hopping from one thing to another, never able to settle peacefully into the roots of your life. To take only the step of mastery will leave you mired in complacency, your expertise soon becoming commonplace. But, she tells Dawna, there is yet a third movement in life. It is when you make not a step, but a leap of faith, when neither foot is firmly planted and you’re not sure where you will land or even if you will be upright. There, in that brief moment of the unknown, there is space for God to enter in.

Aiglatson: A Key to Futures, continued

The question becomes, what steps are before us as religious? If truth be told, I think there are generations of us finding mastery less of an option with each day. The capacities we had for active ministries are dimming for many of us. Fewer people look to us for answers in board rooms anymore. And as for risk, we don't have to look far to find it surrounding us daily. From the cough that threatens pneumonia to the fear of cognitive demise with each forgotten name or slips in memory that we joke about as senior moments; from the loneliness of grief as we lose our friends and companions to the middle of the night hauntings that leave us wondering if we even make a difference anymore, risk is becoming an intimate companion.

But remember that alternate step, the leap of faith? What might that look like for us now? Imagine this. Imagine if it is not the faith of intellect, but it is a faith comprised of hope. And it is hope, not colored with bright eyed, rosy confidence, but it is hope that has been chipped and carved and cobbled together in the bone-

Below, from left: Sisters Anthony Costlow and Sue Clay, Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, PA, enjoy visiting and discussing their shared love of art. While both



have retired from active ministry, they remain committed to the mission and find creative ways to stay engaged. Sr. Anthony is active in the ministry of prayer and Sr. Sue is a story bowl maker. She has just finished 150 bowls as gifts for the congregation's Faith, Field and Feast event.

crushing realities of change and loss that are ours. Together, we can still leap!

Dangerous Memories

Do you remember the work of Johann Metz that we studied in the seventies? Go back and pick up his book, "Followers of Christ," and see if that doesn't move your soul. Do you remember his talk of holding on to what he termed "dangerous memories"? Those memories of the people we served were not to be suppressed or subdued or made nice. We had a responsibility to take those memories and bring them to rattle "the comfortable." Do you remember his telling us that we should refuse to let others close our eyes because we were the ones who were with the poor? "Do not go blind," he said, "to the sufferings of those who you work so hard to serve in your ministries. Bring their memory with you."

That was then, but what about now? Imagine if now we are no longer called only to give voice to memories of other people's sufferings. What if now, we, ourselves, have become the dangerous memories? What if now, in our uncertainties, fears and powerlessness against weakness and illness, against societal disregard that confronts us as elders, we have finally become one with those who are poor? What if now, our weakness is our greatest strength? As religious, we have become the dangerous memory that can still rattle the cages of the comfortable, the secure, even of the young who have before them horizons of power, influence, strength, and energy. Might that be a future to embrace? Might the decisions about governance, commissaries, and coming to fulfillment be signs not only of endings but of continued courageous witness to life, hope, and faith beyond what we can see?

Aiglatson: A Key to Futures, continued

Leaders in Futuring

Ironically, it is the elders who hold the positions of greatest availability and influence for futuring. Their freedom from self-preoccupation harkens back to a life of empowering others, not self, in their long histories of ministry and service. Their living of the evangelical counsels included challenges and hardships that manifested in the realms of both body and spirit. How many stories have been told of being paid with eggs, of not having means of transportation apart from the car of the pastor, of covering every weekend and night shift, of habits and shoes worn thin? How many heartbreaks were suffered as they saw dear friends leave their congregations to follow other calls during those years following the Second Vatican Council? How many changes have they lived through not only in religious life but in the larger world? They are no strangers to risk or mastery.

These are the senior members who must be called to tell their stories, bringing forth that important pillar of memory that Pope Francis referred to as being supportive of future. In the telling, they can remind themselves and teach the generations who follow that security is not a guarantee. Consecration is a call that is not bound by age or capacity, but instead, demands a perpetual radical response.

Moving Ahead

A future of consecrated life is ours, together. We need not feign humility, it is ours in our weakness. We do not need to challenge our poverty, for there is rarely a day that goes by without the need to ask for help. Our obedience

is faithfulness to realities far beyond our imaginings and rarely of our choosing. Consecrated celibacy is deepened in the bondedness of relationships we cherish with each other as we grow smaller in numbers.

Futures can still belong to us. The choice is ours; nostalgia or aiglatson, what has been or what can be. To quote Pope Francis as he ended his video message on the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, "*Avanti e coraggio!*" Forward and courage!



New York Sisters of Charity attending 2019 Assembly. *Above:* Sister Florence Speth; *Left:* Sisters Andrea Dixon and Jean Flannelly; *Below:* Sisters Mary Kay Finneran and Margaret Dennehy with SCNY Associate Margaret Comasky listening. Photos: Elena Miranda.



U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
National Religious Retirement Office
3211 4th Street N.E.
Washington, DC 20017-1194

NON-PROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE
PAID
USCCB

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



National Religious Retirement Office

Sponsor of the Retirement Fund for Religious

3211 4th Street, NE
Washington, DC 20017-1194

Phone: (202) 541-3215

Fax: (202) 541-3053

Email: retirement@usccb.org

Websites:

www.usccb.org/nrro

www.retiredreligious.org

The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

Staff

Executive Director

Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM
sstill@usccb.org

Education and Outreach Manager

Sister Georgette Lehmuth, OSF
glehmath@usccb.org

Grants Specialist

Monica Glover
mglover@usccb.org

Program Associate

Karen Canas
kcanas@usccb.org

Affiliated Independent Consultants

Sister Anna Marie Tag, RSM
NRROConsult-AMTag@usccb.org

Ms. Dayna Larson-Hurst
NRROConsult-DLHurst@usccb.org