

A Forgotten Commitment

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On December 1st, 2008, Gil Courtemanche published in the newspaper *Le Devoir* a bitter reply to the recent testimony given by Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Archbishop of Quebec, before the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. Expressing indignation that one could still wonder about the place of the Church and its "shivering old men's club" in today's lay society, he took up a Manichean argument---which he seemed to think close to Archbishop Ouellet's!---but which was beneath him as the attentive and less biased analyst he usually is. By attacking the entire institution, he condemned along with it all those dedicated persons who---on behalf of their faith in God, of course, and especially of their faith in human beings---tirelessly spend themselves to improve and brighten the lives of persons marginalized by our society. He forgot that while religious women were being soundly turned away from our Quebec schools and hospitals, people kept calling on their communities to help the destitute. He forgot that if we no longer hear them in this great debate about the place of religion in schools and in the public sphere, it is because they are too busy, working daily in the streets and in shelters, among the less fortunate of our society.

While questions are being asked about the relevance of the intervention of religious institutions and their members in our public forums, composed mainly of persons practicing no religion, my thoughts go to those 215 Catholic religious congregations in Canada who, for over 400 years, have based their commitment in society on that very faith which some find so taboo. Is the criticism hypocrisy, or simple ignorance? Many prefer to turn away rather than risk introducing one more element in the present binary, simplistic argument concerning the place of religion in our society. It is high time that facts about the crucial and unwavering role of the members of those religious congregations in our Quebec society be brought back to public awareness, if only to introduce some nuances in a debate that is too often acrimonious.

For years, religious communities have been giving a decisive impulse to social action in Quebec, investing themselves in sectors such as health and education, of course, but also with the elderly, with isolated families, itinerants and battered women. In solidarity with those unable to defend themselves, with those who are excluded and oppressed, they have chosen to dedicate their human, material, financial and spiritual resources to the dignity of women and men without recourse. In giving of their time and dynamism, and through their very self-giving and human competencies, they have acquired experience that transcends time and shows an impressive constancy. To all those they help, they offer the same gifts: attentive listening, time, empathy, and concrete assistance.

Examples of their contributions to society as a whole are many and varied, and yet their primary goal has been to support those in greatest need. Active among youth, many religious women offer their services to tutor children, helping with homework and preventing dropouts. In youth and daycare organizations, the sisters assist young people in crisis and foster their development through empowering activities, group sharing, or simple snacks and meals for those who have little else to eat. Many sisters settle in the inner city to be closer to street kids and provide them with indispensable, life-changing and much appreciated support. They receive women in difficulty by offering safe, reliable shelters and attentive listening. Nursing sisters and pharmacy workers donate time in health centers and hospitals; they serve as resource persons for young mothers, accompany the sick without relatives, and provide spiritual assistance to persons with AIDS or in palliative care. Others visit prisoners in correctional institutions and provide transportation for family members at visiting hours. They have set up solidarity programs to facilitate the arrival and integration of immigrants and refugees by helping them find homes, jobs and French lessons. Immersion experiences among various native communities are also arranged to promote exchanges and sharing. Religious communities are likewise very committed among the elderly and the handicapped, offering services such as “Meals on Wheels,” transportation and companionship; they even manage housing complexes for retirees, either able-bodied or handicapped, so as to ensure attentive presence to their needs and respect for their rights.

Active locally, many of those communities are part of international networks facilitating the organization of concerted action and large-scale projects, from international development to advocacy before governments. Their participation in the World March of Women was highly appreciated in Quebec and elsewhere, and contributed to the mobilization of some of the women most difficult to reach. In conjunction with other religious denominations, they have an undeniable influence in the choices made by society.

Since 2001, the priority of the International Union of Superiors General has been the struggle against the trafficking of women and children. Everywhere in the world, local communities, including those in Quebec, are coordinating their activities to help improve support to victims. Religious communities encourage many initiatives in that field, such as the International Bureau of Children’s Rights based in Montreal.

On a volunteer basis, using donated funds which they manage prudently and responsibly, these religious communities work constantly among the most vulnerable who, without their help, would fall between the cracks. The source of that devotedness is total self-giving. All those sisters who work so tirelessly have the right to our respect and gratitude. Community support and many efforts for social justice would be unthinkable without them by our side. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, a time of sharing and human solidarity, we need to thank the sisters for living out these ideals on a daily basis.