“Embrace the Future with Hope”

Pope Francis

(Talk given by Helena O’Donoghue at the Abri Conference 9th Nov.2015)

CROSSING TRANSITION

Eight years ago I was here talking about the impact of change on Religious Life and on the use of our resources. So much water has gone under the bridge since, some expected and some not. We have seen unrelenting diminishment in our numbers and visibility, decline in our sense of relevance and influence in society, an ever-more pain-stricken world, expanding perceptions of the living God and the degradation of our earth home. Given all that and much more, I think I must have been in ‘junior infants’ in sensing what the future held. Thirty years ago I wrote a booklet entitled ‘Sisters in Transition’. Re-reading it now I think I must have been in ‘sixth class and ready to step into second-level renewed-religious life! Some delusion!! Transition is supposed to mean a temporary place of adjustment and a lead-in to a new stability, but we know transition is still with us and has taken on the quality of eternity – no end in sight. Moving through it is like trying to cross a bog-land. Peering into the future, in that context, may be a foolhardy exercise.

But perhaps because of all that turmoil, we have grown up a bit by now, and have a better grasp of the fact that life – today and tomorrow – is un-tether-able, constantly with us yet eluding us, changing and shifting, sometimes disturbingly. We know that our sincere well-thought-out plans often only come to partial fruition due to internal and external unknowns. In the last two decades, besides the diminishment, the interruption of public scrutiny has dimmed our aspirations many times. No longer shielded from piercing criticism, we have landed at a new adulthood, left school safety as it were, and hopefully arrived at a place of more authentic reliance on God’s movement within us. So we find ourselves, in spite of the pain or maybe because of it, by the power of the Spirit and our charisms, at new crossing points to re-focus for an alternative future! The poet Brendan Kenneally says that there is something about us humans that is always beginning.

“Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
that always seems about to give in
something that will not acknowledge conclusion
insists that we forever begin”.

Beginnings can take us by surprise. Into the midst of our current uncertainty, permeated with weariness and hurt, in a half paralysed Church, comes the extraordinary person, Pope Francis. And we only have him because he was preceded by another surprise - the prophetic resignation of Benedict XV1. What seemed a negative action by him turned out to be a positive and courageous one. Suddenly transition is cranked up again. The new Pope is a man of joy, a man of enormous hope, a man of such immense freedom and conviction that he firmly gives greater priority to the work of compassion than to the defence of doctrine. Is this a new crossing point? He is elderly, you might say much of his life’s work is behind him, but he willingly took up his new challenge with humble trust, believing in the Living Spirit within the Church. His encyclicals The Joy of the Gospel, Laudato Si, his letter on Consecrated life, the announcement of a Jubilee year of Mercy, his powerfully provocative love for the poor, are all astonishing wake-up calls to the Church and to all humanity. ‘Are
you ready’, he beams at young people? His words and actions take our breath away. We did not envisage him, we did not expect him to be part of our future, but he came and he embodies the ‘unstoppable power of the resurrection Spirit’, to use his own words in Cuba.

Francis spoke directly to us Religious last year, pleading with us to look on the past with gratitude, live the present with passion, and embrace the future with hope. It is easy enough to do the first for we owe a great debt of gratitude to those on whose shoulders we stand. We acknowledge that living the present with passion is more daunting. It is obvious that Francis lives the present with joyous passion in the midst of a Church in turmoil. He urges us not to let obsession with our own problems thwart the mission of mercy. However, it is his third urging that we ‘embrace the future with hope’ which is our focus this evening. Each of these words is loaded with fresh meaning, with capacity to move and transform us, with the promise of being makers of ‘alternate spaces’ for the Gospel.

**PEERING INTO THE FUTURE**

What features can we assume? The latter end of the life-cycle is affecting more of us all individually and institutionally. A great funnel, an hour glass of disappearing religious, is clearly visible in our midst and will continue to mark the coming years. The question will be – how can we do more with less? For instance, could we do more to contribute to the cure or prevention of Alzheimer’s?

Other familiar features will continue – a greater rise of a laity-enabled Church, an increasing instability of peoples and planet, and very different skills will be required for a more globalised and technological culture. We will still put our energies and resources behind these large human issues perhaps more cleverly, turning the hourglass over and with fewer grains, slower pace fill the hour with new mercy.
We can also assume ever more forensic inspection and public accountability, where the audit is the new almighty! In my more quirky moments I pray God to forgive accountants, revenue commissioners and charity regulators for their degree of nosiness into the cost of my breakfast! Charity accounting seems somewhat devoid of dignity and privacy! Audits are part of our future for sure. The question will be – how can we become more friendly with them?

Some other features of our future we can surmise - our failure and sin or that of others, will continue to bring harm to our society and to our common home. On the other hand, the commitment of many people of good will everywhere, including our own members, will continue to bring imaginative leadership to emerging needs. It often appears that the goodwill dimension gets crowded out by the stronger focus on omission, neglect and failure. It is not just a case of glass half full if you are optimistic, or half empty if you are prone to the negative; as a Christian the glass is always more full than empty.

It is a truism that we make our future by our choices. But it is also true that much of the time it is not within our control and so we live with uncertainty, fear and vulnerability. We float in a state of waiting and anticipation for the coming challenges not knowing what they will entail. We face temptations to avoid, run away, rely on the past, to not engage with tomorrow. We seek help in the business plan – do the survey, gather the data, set the goals, identify the targets, do the costing and the budgeting! All very necessary! Of course we have to be responsible. When we look back five or ten years we can ask - did all the strategies work out as we envisaged? If we reread our Chapter statements of two or three sessions back – articulations of the millennium goals– we see some thrived and some fell on the back burner. Unexpected issues intervened which tended to defer our good intentions, to undermine our confidence, to cause us to be puzzled about our seeming loss of direction. Our self-reliance came under severe attack by the questioning of society, the wrongdoing of some members and the hurt endured by those who were once in our care. We did not foresee that disturbing experience. Reparation will be a continuing feature of our future.

Sometimes we take the neutral position, sit on the fence of routine, be indifferent to the future, let the next generation (who?) worry about it, cease to be creative. And that is the nub
– to cease to be creative is to be dead in the water long before we are buried! To stand still and let the future happen is not worthy of the mystery of creation in which we participate with the Creator. If there is one necessary task for the future it will be to create a deeper interconnectedness everywhere – not just internet, trade or genome - but to grow a fresh kind of world communion, of fraternity and fecundity, proclaiming God-with-us. A phrase about the recent Synod was that ‘the future passes through the family’. That is true not just at the biological level, but at the societal, scientific and cosmic levels; the organic interconnectedness of family is an analogy for all good futures. Greater togetherness, fuller shared life with those who struggle and with our suffering environment, is a crucial crossing point. As Religious women and men, we profess an interconnected life, a communion of disciples of Jesus of Nazareth who lived and walked and ate without barrier with those burdened, sick and oppressed in his time. Taking a closer walk with tomorrow’s pain will involve a new departure in interconnectedness, a different sharing of our lives, ministries and resources with our contemporaries. It will be a morphing of the familiar patterns of regulated religious life into new ways of being deregulated Gospel families. This will mean leaky boundaries because of the challenges coming from the floes of migrants, of displaced and trafficked people, climate change, racism and unbridled consumerism - will not be served by separation. The walls between congregations and lay agencies doing the same work must become more like small hedges! Instead of making donations to such as Trocaire we might be part of it, partaking in one great ecumenical mercy effort. Making a different ‘kingdom’ we call it – one in which exclusion of all kinds is gradually erased and replaced by welcome, respect and love for all elements of creation, human and non-human. As we pray daily ‘Your Kingdom come’ we deliberately cross into that future, bringing the imagination and power of our charisms to bear on ourselves and on our circumstances to be the concrete promise of a new earth and a new heaven.

So the future that we are invited to approach and clasp is not one where the path will be clear and the events predetermined. It will not be about particular shapes and sizes but it will be about heart, big heart, impelled by the abounding kindness of our God. The heart will create ‘alternate spaces’ crossing from today into tomorrow, whatever our age, whatever our numbers or lack of them. The heart knows what the mind can’t conceive. The heart can invent the unimagined pathway, can break through the enclosures, can hold fear at bay, and knows the urgency of responding to those in need today and not next week, to paraphrase Venerable Catherine McAuley. ‘The heart can go the lengths of God’ (C. Fry). This will call for great detachment from our revered patterns and achievements, a letting go of our subtle separateness. Pope Francis is himself an amazing exponent of that as we see him disengage from the pomp and splendour of an archaic papal royalty. The sight of him as a missionary of mercy travelling in a little Fiat in between huge SUV’s in the USA was so arresting, so authentic. By being present to survivors at Lampedusa, or prisoners in Washington, or Travellers in mourning, his compassionate heart has transformed the list of Christian priorities. His leadership penetrates the weariness inside the Church and the prophesies of doom from outside. And such leadership comes in the later years of his life. What are we waiting for? If we let our charm-filled hearts come to the fore, even in this late hour, it is possible to believe that the Church and Religious Life do have a future, where mission is re-energised and extended beyond the confines of the Church to the world and the earth by creative Spirit-filled leadership like his.

PLEDGE OF HOPE
Having considered some possible features of our future, we are invited to approach it with **hope.** What does that mean? As St. Paul says – it is not hope if we can see ahead (Rm 8). Is it something like having night goggles on, the night-sight of faith, faith that knows that the past, present and future are imbued with the steadfast love of the living God in Jesus? We have known it in the past – our annals attest to it and the lives of our holy people confirm it. We know it in the present darkly, because we recognise it in the compassion and generosity of those living among us. That faith urges us to believe that the Emmanuel pledge permeates our unknown future already, which is laden with yet-to-be revelations of the merciful presence of the living God. No matter what the calamity or disaster, no matter what the grief and destruction around us, no matter the extent of our own diminishment, hope rises because the Incarnation is re-enacted in new ways every day. ‘The Mercies of the Lord are new every morning’. They are just different from yesterday. The cry of the poor, the cry of the earth, the cry of the homeless, the cry of abused women and children, the cry from war-torn peoples, the cry of the suicidal, and many others – will not be smothered and hope is fruitful in new actions of covenant mercy, compassion and healing.

As Christians, as religious, we cannot betray the hope of the poor. So our own hope has to be reinvigorated. What we are now and even fewer in the future, what resources we still have, even for viability, will be the place of our faltering hope. It will be enough. No more, but no less, than the five loaves and two fish. Hope reaches out with a conviction that it can do something, however small, which brings life to a world as yet incomplete and unredeemed. Hope graces us with the capacity to walk lightly and simply on the earth, it gives us a new heart to hold tenderly the misery of others – Misericordia - and it banishes the atheistic thoughts triggered by our sense of inadequacy in the face of such global suffering. We could say that hope truly holds the vowed shape of our consecrated life into the future. We need to reclaim the gift of hope, to evoke the latent gifts of our members, to exercise leadership, to deepen interconnections and to present again the prophetic voice that is religious life, a voice that steadfastly acclaims ‘His mercy endures forever’.

**THE GATE OF EMBRACE**

We are invited not just to look to future with hope but to **embrace** it! Out of our experience we might sincerely ask: do we Religious have a future to embrace? All the trends point to a thin and scattered pattern. Should we not accept the inevitable, and grin and bear it? That is an option but hardly something to ‘embrace’. An embrace denotes open arms, friendship, love, appreciation. It further denotes warmth, joy and trust. It conjures up depth of feeling, of concern and availability, and the attitudes of fear or indifference have no place within it. Where there are Religious, Pope Francis says, there is joy; men and women who are happy. This happiness is grounded in the privilege we have of being immersed in, caught in, the very place where the ache of God meets the ache of humanity and of all creation. That is an embrace of utter awe and promise. It is to draw near to the fire of MERCY itself before which we must take off the shoes of scepticism and despondency. That place of unfathomable yearning, of empathy, of divine and human intertwining, is the specific burning-bush location of religious life.

Valuing religious life implies that we believe in it, that we see it having consummate meaning in itself, and that we have a conviction that it is in the very DNA of the Church. Francis reminds us of the words of Paul VI in *Evangelica Testificatiao* (1971) **that:**
“Without this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the ‘salt’ of faith would lose its savour in a world undergoing secularisation”.

He is saying clearly that as long as the Church is the Body of Christ the pattern of his life will be visible. Have we allowed some of the cold, blunted, savourless dimension to creep in? So there is a challenge for each of us religious – perhaps it might be up to me to enable that pattern to be continued in the life of at least one other! The question is - have I promoted Religious life recently in any way – something I take on every day myself? Or it might be up to us collectively as a charismatic stream within the Church to enable the next generation in this internet age to have access to this way of faith life. Is there something calling us here? Would the use of our resources pass that test of faith in who we are? Such an approach would be evidence of embracing our future with hope.

“Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope”. In these words Francis has presented us with a new crossing point in the announcement of an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. He counts on us to ‘wake up the world’ so there is no time for us to sleep walk into tomorrow.

This is how we must embrace our future, a future the details of which are largely unknown. We must seek the crossing points of mercy and communion in the challenging time we live in. This is to embrace the difficult reality of Religious Life, it is to trust and act with persevering hope that we can help make a better world; it is to open the gate to inclusion, dignity and healing in all that we say and do, in all that we build and plant, in all that we leave behind, for that is how God embraces us.

Helena O’Donoghue RSM
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