



## Accompaniment of an Ecclesial Assistant

Since my ordination nearing three years ago I have continually pondered upon my new identity as a priest. Have I been acting too priestly in the clerical sense? Have I accepted my responsibility and identity as a priest fully enough? Such a tension of questions will continue to be a particular examen for me I suspect, a healthy tension - I pray - that I am really quite grateful for.

Related to this examination of my identity and role as a priest is how I am being called to serve as an Ecclesial Assistant within CLC Canada - both in the National capacity, and a Regional capacity in Atlantic Canada. It is a reflection that has been aroused in particular in light of the announcement of a newly appointed World Ecclesial Assistant (Vice-EA is the formal designation. Father General is formally considered the World EA), Fr. Herminio Rico, sj, from Portugal, who will replace Fr. Luke Rodrigues, sj. Fr. Rico's appointment with the World CLC/CVX community rests on his *'possession of a depth of experience in accompanying and working with the laity.'* For many members of CLC, and myself at times - particularly in the beginning of my appointment in 2014, the role of the EA within CLC may be a role of mystery. *'What does the EA do for us? Say Mass at our gatherings? Direct us in the Spiritual Exercises? Teach us our Ignatian spiritual heritage? Tell us what to do as the Jesuit priest in our midst?'* These are some of the questions that I have asked myself and pondered over these months that I have been with CLC Canada as Ecclesial Assistant. One of these questions was answered by myself fairly quickly and clearly. The EA does not tell CLC members what to do. The EA does not have that power, nor that authority. In essence, the Ecclesial Assistant *helps, through collaborative accompaniment*, the CLC community grow as Christians - in harmony with the Church - through its Ignatian charism.

In 1990, the head of the Society of Jesus at the time, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, reminded Jesuits that lay societies that were promoted by the Society of Jesus since the days of St. Ignatius *"should enjoy the greatest autonomy of management..."* In another address to the Society of Jesus, Kolvenbach shared this very helpful insight for EA's like myself to consider when exercising our ministry: *"Though today it does not 'belong' to the Society of Jesus, the CLC is linked with it in many ways. For the Society it is an opportunity, a challenge, an organic pattern for formation and apostolate, not depending entirely upon any one person or situation. When working in the CLC with this spirit, we Jesuits will not only be helping the CLC, but will be carrying out a kind of apostolate that is very much in harmony with the best of our tradition."* These thoughts have been helpful for me in striving to grow in a healthy relationship with CLC. Though called to clerical responsibilities as a priest, I am being challenged to value and accompany autonomous lay vocations within our Church... I am being called to see our relationship with one another - Jesuit and lay - as *an opportunity* to help build a common Ignatian identity amongst ourselves and within our communities rooted in our recently formulated vision statement.

*"Rooted in the Trinity, and formed in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, Christian Life Community Canada is called, as a body of lay apostolic leaders, to read the signs of the times and prayerfully discern prophetic action to set hearts on fire with Christ's transformative love and compassion. Through the grace of God, in solidarity with World CLC priorities, CLC collaborates with the Society of Jesus, the universal church and all people of good will, to work for justice on behalf of the environment, the marginalized, the oppressed, and for people living in poverty."*

Such a relationship between Jesuits and lay collaborators that the Society of Jesus has supported and encouraged has not always been easy in our history together. It is striking how a Jesuit superior can be so honest in this awareness, in the further words of Kolvenbach: *“Until quite recently some people looked with suspicion and even annoyance at the participation of lay people in the particular charism of a religious institute. They looked upon it as a threat to the intimacy of religious life, a violation of something which belonged to them exclusively. And from the lay point of view, this was considered as an unjustified attack on the fundamental vocation of lay people, a betrayal of their position in the world.”* It cannot be said that such attitudes within the Society have completely disappeared to this day. There are some who deeply value the community of religious life and who are often conflicted in our growing collaborative relations with lay people. But hopefully these are just growing pains that some are still struggling with. What is reassuring is that a collaborative culture between Jesuit and lay people is growing and taking place more fully and assuredly within the Society of Jesus, and within the Church. Over the last few years in the English and French Canadian Provinces more and more Province meetings have taken place that have included both Jesuits and lay persons. This could be seen notably at our recent Province Congress that included lay people for the very first time. Annually our Province retreats have been open to lay persons for many years as well.

In this development of collaboration between the Society of Jesus and CLC, in particular, it is quite an exciting experience to be an Ecclesial Assistant at this time. There is an experience of creative endeavour in developing new relationships between the ordained and the lay faithful that have never existed so fully before in the Church since the very earliest days of its history. Jose Reyes, former President of World CLC/CVX and strong proponent of the lay vocation in the Church, has captured this spirit well when he wrote: *“Although nobody now accepts the figure of the ‘Father Director’ as the one most adapted to our times, we should admit that we have not yet created an alternative figure with such a clear profile as we had formerly. We are going through a period of exploration, of renewal of mind, of apprenticeship through trial and error which sometimes produces conflict.”* Though Jose Reyes expressed this thought in the early 1990’s, I feel we are still exploring, and still experiencing similar conflicts between the ordained and non-ordained amongst us today. We are still in need of awareness and growth of a truly collaborative model of relation between autonomous lay communities and religious institutes.

As one recently given the designation of ‘Father’ and ‘Ecclesial Assistant,’ what is the profile? What is the alternative to ‘Father Director’? It is an ongoing exploration for all of us into the future... likely with more tensions ahead through the endeavour. It is, after all, a new and growing characteristic of the our Church... a kind of spiritual journey that is unique for our time through the fruits and graces of our current history and time as a growing Church.