The Process of Renewal
of the Missionary Oblate Sisters,
1963—1989

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Introduction

In 1904, Monseigneur Adelard Langevin, Archbishop of St. Boniface, founded the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate, a bilingual (French and English) teaching congregation. The founding of the Missionary Oblate Sisters was a means for Archbishop Langevin, in the midst of political isolation, to counterbalance the Anglicization of the public schools in the aftermath of the crisis known as the Manitoba School Question. After 1897, Rome had effectively prevented the Quebec hierarchy from exerting political influence on behalf of Manitoba Catholics. Documents related to the creation of the Missionary Oblate Sisters show a tension between Langevin’s religious concern, the specific needs of his Catholic constituency, and his fear of Anglicization, on the one hand, and his culturally dual, French-English view of Canada, on the other hand. The sisters, through their teaching in private and public schools in Manitoba and in other parts of Canada, and through their parish work, would play a role in elaborating the identity of what Marcel Martel calls the French-Canadian nation (Quebec and communities outside Quebec). The Oblate Sisters worked in the residential schools for Aboriginal chil-
Changing Habits

dren as auxiliaries to the Oblate Fathers. In fact, the congregation’s 1931 constitutions shifted the sisters’ mission and subordinated their role as educators to the Oblate Fathers. The congregation was born out of the need to provide Catholic services relevant to the mission and goals of the Church at the time.

I examined the foundational years of the history of the Oblate Sisters in Missionary Oblate Sisters: Vision and Mission. In this essay, I am concerned with developments in the congregation between 1963 and 1989. This period includes a phase of decadence and crisis followed by efforts at reintegration and re-envisioning. The re-envisioning phase was framed by the internal contradictions emerging in the congregation and by the limits set by the Church itself after the great movement toward change that followed the Second Vatican Council. The overall process was, of course, influenced by the conciliar document Perfectae Caritatis and other documents on religious life that came out after the Council, such as Evangelica Testificatio (issued by Paul VI). It was also contextualized by the loss of the congregation’s original instrumental mission to French Canadians and Aboriginal people. One element remained always strong: the sisters’ sense of being women consecrated to God.

This essay centres on the unique leadership of three general superiors who stewarded different phases of the process of crisis and renewal in the congregation: Sister Jeanne Boucher (1963–1973), Sister Lea Boutin (1973–1981) and Sister Alice Trudeau (1981–1989). I relied heavily on the testimony of Sister Dora Tétrault, who has played a leading visionary role in the congregation. She wrote many of the documents reinterpreting the charism and vows of the Missionary Oblate Sisters, all of which the congregation discussed at various congresses and general chapters.

This essay also pays particular attention to the theological sources to which the sisters were exposed and to the inspiring leaders and thinkers such as Yves Congar and Jean Vanier with whom they came into contact. The preoccupation with self-development, healing and inner freedom, which was prominent during the entire period, led to close work with teams from Personality and Human Relations, the program founded by Father André Rochais, who in turn was inspired by psychologist Carl Rogers. My intention here is to deal with internal processes, and with the complexities involved in renewal and in the reformulation of the sisters ministry within the overall project of liberating the self.

The general framework applied in this essay to analyzing the congregation’s process of renewal is a modified version of the path for transforma-
tion conceptualized by Cada, Fitz, Foley, Giardino and Lichtenberg, who specified periods and tasks in relation to the “revitalization effort.”

**Breakdown and conflict (1963–1973)**

and first steps toward exploration

During the 1950s and early 1960s, changes to religious life seemed inevitable and were apparent in the output of the meetings of the Canadian Religious Conference (an organization of all the religious congregations in Canada). However, the superior of the Missionary Oblate Sisters, Mother Jean-de-la-Croix (1951–1963), did not go along with the efforts of other congregations to respond to the signs of a new era. She did not share information about changes with her congregation. During this decade, motivated by Sister Louis de France, who was in charge of studies, the sisters had started to go to school to obtain degrees and were exposed to contemporary authors in education, psychology and theology. Further, the Sister Formation Movement had reached Canada. In the 1950s, the Missionary Oblate Sisters, along with sisters from other congregations in St. Boniface, attended courses on scripture and theology delivered by Sulpician professors at the St. Boniface Major Seminary. As a result, the sisters became conversant with the works of Karl Rahner and Yves Congar, theologians who resituated the Church in the modern world, integrated modern human experience with Christian dogma and revisited ecumenism. Access to these liberal ideas generated a long list of questions among the sisters and also revealed latent tensions in the congregation.

The first manifestation of problems affecting the hierarchical structure that had been cultivated by Mother Jean-de-la-Croix quickly became apparent with the election of Jeanne Boucher as general superior in 1963. The denial of change had generated uneasiness in the congregation. The impact of Vatican II (that started deliberations in the autumn of 1962 and ended in the autumn of 1965) and the developments motivated by the Council and the associated Vatican documents, including nine decrees, among them *Perfectae Caritatis*, set the frame of reference. Furthermore, two pillars of the mission of the Missionary Oblate Sisters – being a French-English teaching congregation building a French-Canadian identity and an auxiliary to the Oblate Fathers in the residential schools – had started to crumble. In fact, the understanding of Quebec as the “basic polity” of French Canada in the 1960s and the movement away from building a
common identity for all French Canadians created a new political scenario with which the congregation had to contend. Meanwhile, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the entire ideological configuration sustaining the residential schools collapsed. The mission of the congregation, whose foundation had emerged from an instrumental motivation, lost the important thrust of its original purpose.

During the Vatican II Council, in particular after the second session in the autumn of 1963, the sisters attended informational meetings on church renewal, the nature of the Church and the need to start a dialogue with the contemporary world. The ideas of liberal theologians fully reached all sisters through the developments associated with the Council. In the early 1960s, the sisters had discovered Teilhard de Chardin. Some even took courses on his ideas in places such as Marymount College, affiliated to Loyola University in Los Angeles. The sisters were attracted by his notion that God's creation worked through cosmic evolution, his understanding of the Cosmic Christ as the element in virtue in which all things are related to each other, his idea that human life could be justified on the basis of achievement of future perfection, his new insights into Scripture (that they were not to be taken literally, e.g. Genesis), his view of the development of human consciousness as leading to greater individuality, and his notion of a potential unified common consciousness of humanity. Sister Dora Tétreault, one of the transformative leaders, read the *Phenomenon of Man* and the *Divine Milieu* and found these books, in her words, “so enlightening” and different from what she had previously read and “so true.” For Sister Dora, the science teacher, de Chardin’s ideas reconciled science and faith. She started to believe that there was no contradiction between the two. She was inspired by de Chardin’s two sources of knowledge: the evidence in the world as linked to scientific knowledge and what constitutes revelation. Future general superior Sister Lea Boutin was taught de Chardin by Father Hanley, SJ, and she read all she could find written by de Chardin. The sisters tried to situate themselves in the new constellation of ideas and in the new political milieu, in an effort to understand their role and also to deal with the increasing lack of clarity of their role.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, sisters doing undergraduate work were exposed to lectures on personalism and its creator Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950). Some sisters recall Father Germain Lesage giving lectures on the topic at the University of Ottawa. Personalism was interpreted as a “new concept of the person and as person engaged with the world,” said Sister Dora. A personalist civilization would enable
every individual to live as a person – that is, to display initiative, assume responsibility, and develop a spiritual life. Mounier rejected individualism and saw humans taking a very active role in history. This entailed building a new social order, a new world view that moved beyond collectivism and individualism to embrace personalism and communitarism in social relations. This was very revealing to the sisters who were becoming familiar with personalism. Sister Dora interpreted it “as awareness of the self, that we could have freedom and rights and exist in our own right in the community.” She construed this innate potential that people have as persons as a democratic concept. Among some members of the congregation, the idea that the sisters could not grow spiritually unless they became morally and intellectually autonomous persons started to take root and was seen in a positive light. Sisters tried to integrate these new notions into their daily examination of consciousness.

This practice converged with Rahner's and Congar's ideas and led to an understanding among the sisters that the Bible needed to be interpreted in the light of not only anthropological and biblical research but also of the configuration of religious life and dogma. Early in the 1960s, the sisters' religious life did not match that in the world around them. It was the beginning of a journey of self-discovery for the sisters, although they were trapped in an authoritarian setting until 1963 and lacked a way of articulating a new approach. It would take some time for the sisters to begin to reintegrate and revitalize the community beyond the initial perceived chaos.

During Sister Jeanne Boucher's tenure as general superior (1963–1973), a time that was recalled by the sisters as therapeutic, the congregation went through a rapid and uneasy process of changing obsolete customs and traditions that affected daily life and encouraged immaturity and inequality. Many of the structures of common life built upon observance of rules were discarded, among them taking recreation in common and the daily timetable. Sisters took back their secular names, modified the habit and then gradually began to wear secular clothes. The congregation also changed the regulations regarding the requirements for the "trousseau" (number and kind of clothing items each sister could have as traditionally listed in the "coutumier") and objects for personal use, the use of the telephone, correspondence (until then, the superior read all personal letters), travel (sisters could not go out alone), visits, holidays and swimming. The congregation went through defections, and loss of identity and mission. The sisters had suffered under the previous authoritarian leadership; they
had been treated as children, in Sister Lea Boutin's view. Rituals such as public penances and "la coulpe" or chapter of faults (confessing external violations of the rules in front of the community) were soon abolished, while assertion of the self and reference to rights became prominent. Holiness could not be measured by fidelity to the rule any longer, as Sister Lea said. In practice, the sisters began to question their vows even before the chapter of aggiornamento (renewal) took place in 1968–1969, during which the congregation would, as requested by Rome, update its constitutions along the lines set out in Perfectae Caritatis. In particular, the sisters began to question their vow of obedience with reference to assigned tasks. Sisters were consulted regarding their duties during Sister Jeanne's tenure, although the consultation process did not always lead to the desired assignment. Sister Lea made clear that the vows were invented for the patriarchal system: "Poverty, to control women materially, chastity, to control their bodies, and obedience, to control their minds. And it was a 'fantastic' system!"

In 1967, a number of sisters were eager for greater grassroots participation in the affairs of the congregation. The preparation for the general chapter of aggiornamento offered sisters an opportunity to voice views and desires regarding every aspect of their lives. In Sister Lea's view the preparations for those meetings were the turning point. There were questionnaires and "loads of questions" that the sisters could discuss in community in local groups. Sister Lea went on to say, "It was like we evacuated a lot of stuff. This was the first time ever something like that happened. It felt good." A committee, not only members of the general council, gathered views and information.

From 1970 to 1981, the congregation was regulated by ad experim

cum constitutions, entitled Witnesses (Témoins), outlined at the general chapter of aggiornamento in 1968–1969. In 1981, the general chapter finally approved new constitutions after years of experimenting and discussion. They received approbation from the Roman Congregation for Consecrated Life in 1983. The ad experim

cum constitutions introduced tentative new values, guidelines for life and a more flexible understanding of the vows. The sisters started to reinterpret the vow of poverty in relation to their commitment to the poor, evangelical poverty and the refusal of privileges. Chastity would make possible availability to others without discrimination, bringing love, responding to their needs. Obedience was still seen as a vow conducive to organic unity. Overall, Witnesses was a
conservative document somewhat out of tune with the lived experiences of the sisters in an environment of crisis and search.

The process of aggiornamento aimed at complying with the documents produced by the Vatican Council, including Perfectae Caritatis and Gaudium et Spes with their emphasis on personal responsibility and freedom. Gaudium et Spes underlined the importance of each religious developing his or her gifts to the fullest, which was in contrast with being assigned tasks in light of the collective mission and the perceived needs of the congregation. Within this context and the historical framework regarding the residential schools and serving French Canadians outside Quebec, individual sisters started to move away from school teaching. The Missionary Oblate Sisters, first involved in an individualist search along with rethinking their particular spiritual identity, turned to the program offered by Father André Rochais to immerse themselves in self-development and a new relationship with God.

Father André Rochais (1921–1990) was a French teacher and educator who had been influenced by Carl Rogers' work, in particular On Becoming a Person, which provided him the initial conceptual tools to address human development and then a reconstituted relationship with God. Important components of the workshops and courses Father André and his teams taught, known as Personality and Human Relations (Personnalité et Relations Humaines, PRH), included the notion of persons growing to their full potential, acknowledgment and search of the subjective, existential freedom that can be observed, discovering meanings within oneself, listening to one's self-experience and finding direction from within, looking within oneself to develop unity and harmony, distinguishing between what we say about ourselves (knowledge) and our felt experiences (sensations), being aware of our own sensations, and having a relationship with God. The sisters were eager to be involved in self-development that, in the secular world, had taken on a life of its own in the 1960s, along with the expressivist movement. They searched for clear self-awareness through the meticulous observation of the inner self and the discovery of their individual freedom in their relationship with God.

In the fall of 1970, the leaders of the congregation organized regional meetings to study themes such as conversion of mentalities, government principles, personality zones and relationship with God, within the context already delineated. By the end of 1971, more than 70 sisters had taken those study sessions, and the leaders of the congregation continued organizing them, since they considered the sessions to be of great help.
for better self-knowledge and for greater confidence in self, in God and in others. This approach to the recreation of the sisters’ own selves led to a different notion of the congregation’s mission and ministry. The sisters started to acknowledge and support projects of interest to a particular sister or a small group of sisters that were not collective projects embraced by the community as a whole. However, there was great disparity among the sisters with regard to the changes. As Sister Jeanne Boucher, the superior at the time, said, “It was a very difficult period because for one thing, some were for change and others were against it. And for some we never went fast enough while others thought we went too fast. So it was a period of struggle. I can’t say otherwise.”

Vatican II had delegitimized the tradition and generated new directions that included previously censored views. New terms, such as charism, that appeared in post-council documents quickly became natural words, legitimized by the Vatican. The crisis that accompanied the initial process toward renewal was framed by a directed process of change coming from the centre of power, the male Vatican. In this early phase, many sisters, motivated by their commitment to God as consecrated women, were eager to find new and meaningful ways to channel their vocation. However, they did not seem inclined to discover the spiritual women within themselves.

In the fall of 1973, Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche International, a non-profit corporation providing community living for adults with intellectual disabilities, came to Manitoba to conduct a spiritual retreat in Gimli. The retreat was attended by six hundred people, lay, religious and priests, among whom were several Missionary Oblate Sisters. Vanier’s message, his radical lifestyle, and his commitment to build community with the poor and marginalized and to integrate them fully in society made a profound impression on the sisters who attended, including future general superior Sister Alice Trudeau. She said about the retreat that it had a tremendous impact on her spiritual growth and her growth as a woman. She was impressed by the presence of lay people, women and men, and, as she put it, “Hearing Vanier calling us forth to open up to the world, to the pain of the world, to the people of the world – that was for me a stepping stone.”

Community life changed dramatically and the sisters started to move away from school teaching, since they felt encouraged to follow their own inclinations and gifts. The number of sisters doing university degrees continued to increase and they started to extend their studies to graduate school. In addition, others graduated from normal school.
The Process of Renewal of the Missionary Oblate Sisters

character of the ministry and the mission started to change in practice, although this would be more evident in subsequent years under Sister Lea Boutin's leadership.

In 1977, Sister Lea, at the end of her first term as superior, summarized community life issues from 1969 to 1977, since the previous superior did not make a report in 1973 at the end of her tenure. Sister Lea conceptualized this historical time as one of full transition in the congregation's style of community life. She referred to these years as an era of individualism. She wrote:

We needed freedom and independence. Now more and more we feel the need of others, the need of structures in as much as they help us to live in relationship with others. The Rule is perceived, not so much as an activity to be accomplished but more as a means of entering into relationship, first with God, then with our Sisters and the poor to whom we are sent.

However, Sister Lea was clear that the change in vision and attitude was not happening in all the sisters simultaneously and that many did not feel the need to share their faith, to communicate in depth, and to give themselves periods of silence and reflection. She concluded by saying, "We are experiencing a time of tensions, of fears and of hungers - common in periods of transition." Developments in the sisters' mission in Brazil in August 1966, when three of the sisters stationed there left the congregation as a consequence of misunderstandings with the general administration, show the state of crisis of the congregation in the early years of the process of aggiornamento.

Exploration, new insights and movement toward spiritual renewal and reintegration (1973–1981)

Sister Lea was only 36 when she was elected general superior in 1973, following the resignation of Sister Jeanne Boucher due to health problems. Sister Lea was superior from 1973 to 1981. During her first term (1973–1977), Sister Dora Tétreault, who served as general assistant, produced important documents regarding the congregation's historical identity and its spirituality.

Sister Lea’s initial aim was “to gather” because, in her words, “everybody was all over the place.” Sister Lea reminisced in an interesting dialogue with Sister Jeanne:
I could see that there was a lot of dissatisfaction. There was a lot of "where do we go now?" And some were tired of having done their own thing already and wanted to have a bit more structure but not the old structure. So [this is the reason for] the emphasis that I put on that. The changes like the external changes had to be done: the habit, the rules and so forth, that had to be done.

Sister Jeanne added: "And that had to be done first because you could not build the spiritual unless we had gone through that." The eight-day and the 30-day retreats (called months of renewal) on personality and human relationships conducted by educators who were part of Father André Rochais' Personality and Human Relations program continued to provide a personal and community avenue.

Sister Lea and Sister Dora promoted the emphasis on the spiritual and personal development at a point when the directed retreats movement had already started in religious communities. There were traditional preached retreats for the sisters who preferred them, as well as a good number of directed retreats in various houses. Invited resource people from other religious communities also guided individual sisters. Later on, the sisters participated in inter-community retreats. There was a clear shift from a model based on rigid following of the rule and obedience to authority to a person-centred model.

In the 1970s, Sister Lea and Sister Dora explored the Missionary Oblate Sisters' origin and spirituality in light of *Perfectae Caritatis*. Sister Dora focused on the founder, Archbishop Langevin. Both sisters had a strong sense of history, a desire for refounding grounded in Archbishop Langevin's vision and his spirit of faith, which in Sister Dora's view was revealed in the first constitutions of the congregation (1906). According to Langevin, a spirit of faith was essential to a good religious life. The sisters turned to the past to imagine a future while trying to rediscover the original inspiration for the congregation (a mandate from *Perfectae Caritatis*). This initial search seemed to be guided by the need to find some indication that the community would emerge from the crisis and to take a retrospective look at God's will. The place of women religious and their experience was not articulated in the writings of this period, although, later on, Sisters Lea, Dora and Cécile Fortier were strongly influenced by feminist theologians. There was a delicate balance between questioning the understanding of the congregation's past and acknowledging the legacy that legitimized its own existence. Sister Dora moved away from a language of
pain, which she defined as masochistic, and asserted that “before repairing the neighbours’ houses we should repair ours first.” There was a shift from a language of mortification and grace to a language of social justice that was rooted in Archbishop Langevin’s vision of justice for the Catholic people in Manitoba and Franco-Manitobans. The notion of reparation, central to the congregation’s spirituality, seemed in Sister Dora’s analysis to be attached to the mentality of another time. As Sister Dora explained, “Reparation in the past was part of our identity, but it was reparation to God for offences committed against Him [sic] of course by us, but also by the world, by sinners. So it was a contemplative, cloistered notion of reparation, of adorators who would pray day and night, fast and do all kinds of sacrifices to atone.” Sister Lea interrupted to say that the idea of reparation came from a theology of atonement and redemption. Sister Dora concluded that with the new theology, social justice being one of the elements, the notion of reparation moved from a vertical dimension to a horizontal one, and hence, became restoration, transformation and growth. The new notion embraced the understanding that people were wounded, that it was necessary to repair (heal) the woundedness in all. Instead of an atonement theology from above, it was a theology from human experience that moved away from the notion of a God that had to be appeased. The new notion was elaborated and reframed during Sister Lea’s and Sister Alice Trudeau’s mandates. The preoccupation with poverty, which was central to the new understanding of reparation, appeared grounded in the evangelical notion of poverty.

The leadership of the community made a serious attempt to integrate the richness of ideas, experiences and personal explorations that emerged from retreats, Personality and Human Relations workshops, courses, and new relations with the external world. However, during Sister Lea’s tenure, the priority was, out of necessity, the internal rebuilding of the congregation as a religious community, and the development of a participatory style of leadership and a new model of governance. The Acts of the 1977 chapter show the pursuit of an integrative process, a slight movement away from searching the self in order to favour community rebuilding. Using Evangelica Testificatio and articles on community experience, the chapter approved the creation of community life projects in each group of sisters, thus replacing old regulations and encouraging participation and sharing of faith and prayer. It was also recommended that local communities study an article entitled Consciousness Examen by Father F. A. Aschenbrenner in order to make the daily exam an exercise of conscientization and dis-
The members of the chapter discussed the mission. There was no mention of the residential schools or the historical French issue in Manitoba. The sisters attending the chapter proposed that each Missionary Oblate Sister become more conscious that her first service to the Church is personal and community prayer and a life of fraternal charity, real and profound. They also proposed to “conscientize” the sisters on the importance of their role as educators of the faith and the need to revalorize that role. The sisters seemed to be looking for a new alignment of their charism and the reality surrounding them; they tried to develop a new legitimizing framework. An important issue was that of belonging to the Oblate family and making it concrete through active participation in the life of the community. (It was a time when a number of sisters preferred doing activities with friends and family or just watching television.) The overall approach represented a new turn in the understanding of internal freedom and self-confidence, placed in the context of the community. In this regard, the chapter put great emphasis on continuing formation in relation to the sense of belonging and personal commitment to the community, and on governance and participation. It is not surprising that an important section of the Acts was devoted to the policies on alcoholism and dependency on drugs, although there were no references to specific cases.

During Sister Lea’s second term as superior (1977–1981), the sisters continued exploring Rahner and Congar, in particular when taking courses on theology and pastoral studies. Sister Dora had the privilege of attending Yves Congar’s courses at the Dominican College in Ottawa during the 1978–1979 academic year, when he was a visiting professor there. During the same academic year, Sister Dora and other sisters took courses on social justice and on Christian basic communities in Latin America. These courses covered all the letters and documents on social justice the Canadian bishops had written. Social justice in the context of “the option for the poor” took roots in the congregation. Many sisters, in particular those who took courses on pastoral work, read Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, among others. These liberation theologians strongly stressed the need to deal with social and economic problems. Some sisters went to Gonzaga University (Jesuit) in Spokane, Washington, in the late 1970s. In the 1970s, the Canadian bishops brought attention to issues of social justice and the needs of the poor worldwide. The congregation created a social justice committee in 1976 to make the sisters aware of world problems. The activities included internal educational workshops,
dissemination of information among the sisters, work with the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, and guest speakers from Chile (which was under the Pinochet dictatorship at the time), South Africa (still under apartheid at the time), other South American countries and Asian countries. The sisters participated in letter-writing campaigns and supported agricultural producers from the South. The 1979 meeting of the Latin American bishops in Puebla, Mexico, brought to the forefront “the option for the poor” as an articulated form of the religious vows. The expression carried with it the suffering of the poor and a rich new theology that had emerged from grassroots reflections. “The option for the poor,” Reiser asserts, clarifies what the gospel story and Christian reflection are about: that God has “chosen” the side of the poor and the oppressed in the journey towards justice and equality.

During her second term as general superior, Sister Lea and her administration surveyed in a systematic way the needs and desires of the parishioners with whom the sisters worked. It became evident on one side that the parishioners expected the sisters to be more involved in the apostolate of youth movements and the parish in general. There were suggestions that as a missionary community the Oblate Sisters be in line with an apostolate with the poor, the disabled and the marginalized, as well as with Aboriginal peoples. The parishioners requested more responsibility for the laity. As with the sisters themselves, not all the parishioners were at the same point in relation to changes in the Church. Thus, for a number of those who responded to the sisters’ survey, changes in the sisters’ lifestyle and way of dressing generated concerns regarding the personal engagement of the sisters and their religious vocation.

In 1977, the congregation had 231 sisters; in 1981 there were 208. Four left the congregation and nineteen died. The median age of the congregation was 63 and the average 63.54. There were very few candidates for the novitiate. By the end of Sister Lea’s second term in 1981, the sisters had articulated their role as missionary educators, educators of the faith, inclusive of their role as school teachers. They had also gained a new sense of the institution as a re-organized community based on a participatory model and respect for the individual. There were 33 sisters teaching in schools in 1981. There were also sisters doing pastoral work in parishes and hospitals, and with Aboriginal people. One sister gave reflexology and shiatsu treatments, another provided behaviour therapy, while yet another worked with the deaf. One sister even worked as an audio-visual technician in a college. There were many other occupations.
The number of sisters completing post-secondary studies was again very high and in a variety of fields. The sisters continued taking courses related to the Personality and Human Relations program and had a preoccupation with the healing power within oneself. The *ad experimentum* constitutions were revised and the final version was approved by the general chapter in 1981 and by the Vatican in 1983. The new constitutions reflected many of the changes that emerged from embracing personal development and inner freedom and a new sense of community. The congregation had gone through an intense process of spiritual and personal growth and had redefined its communal identity, having as a mission education in all its forms. The congregation had moved from an authoritarian pyramidal model to a circular one, with the superior at the centre. In addition, communal identity was linked to the desire for a commitment to social justice as restorative justice that could take a more concrete shape.

However, the woman's religious experience had yet not been named and assumed, although the new constitutions talked of "the promotion of women so as to intensify their free and indispensable participation in establishing a society that is more human and life-promoting." The woman's religious experience had yet not been named and assumed, although the new constitutions talked of "the promotion of women so as to intensify their free and indispensable participation in establishing a society that is more human and life-promoting." The woman's religious experience had yet not been named and assumed, although the new constitutions talked of "the promotion of women so as to intensify their free and indispensable participation in establishing a society that is more human and life-promoting."  

At the end of her tenure, at the 1981 general chapter, Sister Lea introduced the sisters to the historical model of the evolution of religious life developed by Lawrence Cada, Raymond Fitz, et al., to situate the congregation in the life cycle of religious communities and to foresee the path toward transformation. The historical model helped the congregation to understand the various phases of breakdown and conflict, darkness and exploration, and reintegration.

**Attempt at revitalization and reintegration: the call for a prophetic leadership (1981–1989)**

Sister Alice Trudeau was elected general superior in 1981 and was re-elected in 1985 for a second four-year term until July 1989. Sister Lea and Sister Dora had set a strong basis for developing the spirituality of the community. Sister Lea instituted a structural framework and a reconstituted model of governance that moved away from authoritarianism. The problem of polarization between those who wanted to continue growing and those who resisted more and more was still a serious concern. The thrust of Sister Alice Trudeau as general superior was external, in relation to the world, directed toward the ministry and a repositioning...
of the leadership at the interface with society and the Church. She had a commitment to social justice and to the oppressed and openness to building a new understanding of the work with the Aboriginal peoples. Sister Alice's approach to leadership and spirituality was women-centred and assertive of their role on equal grounds with men. Her vision of the congregation was nourished by women's experiences of spiritual life. Her style was integrative while pursuing the continuation of healing, the development of a sense of freedom, and the restoration of the person in all phases of growth towards personal and communal integration. However, toward the end of her mandate in 1989, Sister Alice subdued her tone in light of persistent resistance and the conservative approach taken by the Church, although her personal commitment had even increased.

Sister Alice led the sisters in articulating a mission statement that, although within the framework of the 1983 constitutions, represented her unique view of the role of the congregation. It had as point of reference "the needs of a suffering world"; the need to follow in the footsteps of the compassionate Jesus; and the need to be in solidarity with the promoters of peace, justice and unity, empowered by faith and audacity. She defined the mission and vocation of the sisters as missionary-educators who enable individuals and groups, especially those who are most deprived, to undertake their personal growth and self-actualization in order to build a more compassionate society and change the world. The mission statement was also rooted in the community congress of 1983 that revisited the original charism. For Sister Alice, the commitment to justice was not a matter of social action but of social transformation.

In her 1985 circular Onward in Hope, Sister Alice called on the sisters to become challengers in their own communities and to perform concrete actions in line with the radicalness of the Oblate mission statement. She called the sisters to exercise prophetic leadership, a way of life contesting the established order and injustice. Many religious had been advocating this prophetic role since the late 1970s. Sister Alice addressed what continued to be a major issue: the need for solidarity within the congregation. At the same time, she decentralized the office of the general superior and put great emphasis on supporting sisters in their ministry, encouraging new small group projects or even individual ones without being apart from the congregation rather than community projects directed from the centre. Dialogue with the sisters and the right of the sisters to turn down assignments (obediences) was central to Sister Alice's vision of growth. She later elaborated that the change was necessary, saying, "[it was] like
wanting them [the sisters] to attend more self-growth programs and then come back and stay the same, but wanting to journey."

Archbishop Langevin, the founder, had been an Oblate, and the sisters’ spirituality and charism were nourished by Oblate spiritual traditions. However, after the archbishop’s death in 1915, the sisters’ relation with the Oblate Fathers had always been a sensitive one. Sister Alice, even more so than her predecessors, did not hesitate to question oppressive practices of the past, in particular in relation to the congregation’s work in residential schools run by the Oblate Fathers. The residential schools had become over time a very important part of the sisters’ missionary work, although many sisters thought that teaching in residential schools was not their deepest purpose as a congregation. It would not be until 1983 that the sisters would unravel their memories in relation to the residential schools and name their pain. Sister Alice made a presentation to the Oblate Fathers’ congress in which she characterized the sisters’ role as missionary educators and auxiliaries to the clergy as one of subordination. The sisters, she said, were in a disadvantageous and, in some cases, abusive situation. “The Sisters,” Sister Alice told the fathers, “saw themselves as inferior, as not being motivated to develop their autonomy, or to show initiative and assume responsibilities. Immaturity was encouraged and many felt used.” She continued, “Some of the Sisters kept memories of resentment because they felt exploited but they did not have the courage to confront and make their needs known.” In the 1980s and 1990s, the painful testimonies from former Aboriginal students confronted the sisters with a past that had been conceived as God’s will and with the role they played as auxiliary to the Oblate Fathers as stipulated in their 1931 constitutions. The situation generated a degree of sorrow and confusion in some sisters and a desire for understanding in others.

During the 1980s, the sisters were inspired by John Paul II’s message to the Amerindians in 1984. In the 1985 document, *Pastoral Work with the “Amerindians,”* the sisters, in line with the Vatican, acknowledged that the Aboriginal peoples suffered “from our slowness in rightly understanding their identity and their aptitudes to participate in directing their own future.” In the same document, the leadership of the congregation tried to find the future orientation for the apostolate among the Aboriginal peoples and identified the need to grasp and appreciate “the true values inherited and presented by this culture [the Aboriginal culture].” It went on to say, “the Missionary Oblate, aware of her poverty, opens wide her heart to receive the riches that are present in the culture and in the very soul of the
Native People among whom she works.” However, the document reveals contradictory understandings still wrapped in an ethnocentric colonial discourse, such as when it reads, “These values are purified and ennobled by the Revelation of Jesus Christ.” Several sisters attended national Aboriginal conferences over a few years and also the International Conference of Kateri Tekakwitha in 1983 and 1984 in the United States.

It is important to note that Sister Alice had a profound feeling for women well before becoming acquainted with feminist theologians and feminist writers. She said in an interview, “Even with Vatican II opening many doors, I recall as a religious beginning to ask myself: Is there a place for women in the Church? I mean I would carry this question, but not necessarily that I would go out there and do something about it.”

During her second and third year as general superior, Sister Alice became acutely aware of the differential way in which women were treated and had her first struggle with the bishops. She wanted the sisters who were in pastoral ministry in parishes to have a contract. Not a single sister had a signed contract with a local priest or bishop. The sisters had little reward for their work and they did not have even a day off as the priests had. Sister Alice received help from the Canadian Religious Conference so that she was able to ensure that every sister in parish ministry would be under contract when she ended her term in 1989. For Sister Alice, this cause had to do with the dignity and self-worth of the person, so that the person could realize that “Yes, I do have recognition. Though I’ve left teaching, it is not a diminished ministry that I have.”

Sister Alice moved the concept of Christian experience to the concrete lived experience of the Missionary Oblate Sisters as “Women of Good News,” creators of unity, at the forefront to detect what is most needed in the world, and thus, radiate life. During the 1980s, the influence of feminist theologians on many of the members of the congregation became evident and was widely recognized by the sisters who read Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether and later on Barbara Fiand, among others. In 1988, Elizabeth Lacelle from the University of Ottawa was invited to help develop and articulate the congregation’s spirituality and introduce the notion of Jesus as a servant of justice. Lacelle was known for her conceptualization of the women’s movement in North American churches. A few years later in 1991, Sister Lea Boutin authored *Women in the Church: The Pain, the Challenge, the Hope* and argued for a theology of service for women.
Sister Alice and her team understood that Archbishop Langevin had challenged the newly born community to serve the marginal and the poor. The point was to continue exploring what the charism (or spirit) of the congregation was and what it would be for the sisters and their times. The critique of the hierarchical, dualistic and patriarchal character of the Church that characterized many actions and statements during the post-Vatican II renewal never touched the founder. As I said in *The Missionary Oblate Sisters: Vision and Mission*, with reference to Sister Dora’s work on Archbishop Langevin and his charism as founder, there was a delicate balance between questioning the understanding of the congregation’s past and acknowledging the legacy that legitimized its own existence. Nonetheless, the repositioning of the spirit of the congregation, and its mission and vision, implied a dramatic shift that not all the sisters accepted. The attachment to the old way of thinking survived in new forms and content, and generated misunderstandings and resistance. Furthermore, as noted, the discovery of the self did not necessarily nourish a sense of shared community.

Sister Alice embraced personal renewal, an area identified by the participants at the congregation’s 1983 congress as needing further attention, with passion and within the framework of empowerment. She reflected in 1994, “I think empowerment is still with me even now. Empowerment to me is the most precious thing, the most precious gift I can offer a person.” Renewal comprised healing, a sense of freedom and of restoration of the person in all phases of growth toward integration.

Former superior Sister Lea taught the sisters about the Enneagram system, a map of the patterns within our minds, hearts and bodies. The objective was to discern paths of growth (personality types). She had learnt about the Enneagram at Gonzaga University in Spokane. Invited presenters delivered sessions on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as well as courses on preventive care and well-being. The latter was seen as a condition for a person’s wholesomeness. The Personality and Human Relations workshops were delivered again, but this time they were described as a program of adult formation, discernment and understanding of the personal rhythm of growth. Each local community was challenged to become a haven of acceptance and listening, allowing its members to become fully involved in self-knowledge and healing. The Exercises of St. Ignatius (30-day retreats) continued as previously under Sister Lea. Counselling and spiritual direction were aimed at achieving personal autonomy, a sense of interior freedom, and a more profound commitment to the Lord and others.
The persistence of the same needs makes clear that wounds had not been healed and that the reintegration process was still tender.

At the time of the 1989 chapter, held at the end of Sister Alice’s second mandate, the Church had moved strongly to question and dissolve the Christian basic communities that had emerged, along with the option for the poor and liberation theology in Latin America. The position of the Church regarding women remained very conservative and male-oriented, framed by a dualistic spirituality that feminist theologians continued denouncing as representing a hierarchical as well as patriarchal view of the sacred. Sister Alice made a call for community discernment of the will of God.

The setting had changed and the lay presence in the community added an element of renewal but with its own characteristics. Overall, there was still a poor articulation of the multi-faceted newly discovered self alongside a collective commitment to life (as opposed to death) as a congregation. Sister Alice’s prophetic vision found little space to flourish in spite of the work of apostolate the sisters were doing. The changes she envisioned had gone beyond the boundaries set by the Church and many sisters felt comfortable within those boundaries.

The community continued the process of natural attrition, although a small number of sisters left the congregation to start a secular life. In 1989, there were 170 professed sisters, many of the old established missions had closed and new smaller projects were pursued.

After 1989 and through the 1990s, the new leadership of the congregation that succeeded Sister Alice reflected the many contradictions and fears that had grown during the process of change. To an important extent, the new leadership represented a challenge to prophetic renewal as moved forward by Sister Lea and Sister Alice. It found protection in the security of the memories that had made the congregation a growing community with a collective presence in society in the past. But it was also a period of grassroots movements within the community, with visionary insights that questioned memories and historical narratives, traditionalism, spiritual dualism and patriarchy, and that searched for renewed spiritual meanings. The general chapter of 1993 exemplified the characteristics of that decade. The theme of the chapter, “Rebuild the House,” was taken from Haggai 1:8, and was a theme Sister Dora Tétrault used in her writings. It reflected her influence and that of the sisters committed to change. The chapter called once more for “a new collective paradigm to open a way, towards integral transformation” addressing the integration of the sisters’ identity as Oblate women, the refounding of the community, the creation
of diversified types of communities, an understanding of the vows as “elements of transformation for the world,” and the ecological dimension of spirituality. The Aulneau Renewal Centre, founded in 1979 at the mother house in Saint-Boniface, was turned into a counselling service centre, mainly for low-income people. The centre became an avenue to channel visions of social justice and the renewed meaning of reparation.

During the 1980s, Sister Alice and Sister Cecile Fortier had established a strong relationship with the Institut de Formation Humaine Intégrale de Montréal. The Institute, founded in 1976 by Dr. Jeannine Guindon, had as its goal to lead the person to become conscious of her vital human strengths and to realize how they can be actualized in spite of traumatic lived experiences. After her tenure as superior, Sister Alice became a leader in integral holistic formation in her community and beyond. In 1995, as graduates of a three-year formation program at the Institut, Sister Alice and Sister Cecile joined an international team of psychologists and therapists to minister to refugee caregivers in Rwanda, including teachers who, in turn, worked with Rwandan refugee children in crisis. The headquarters were in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, which is on the border of Rwanda. Oxfam Canada and Terre Sans Frontières sponsored the project. Sister Alice was deeply motivated by her ethical commitment to the poor, and she responded from her heart to questions regarding the context surrounding her decision to participate. Before leaving to fulfill her mission in Rwanda, she said:

Even if I were to stay, like staying here, my ministry here I love it, because I know I work with leaders and there is an impact .... But in terms of the Community I don’t sense they are losing a leader. I sense even that my going away, my leaving helps. And I am not saying this out of resentment but I think it is part of reality, and the reality being that my vision is a threat. Even my going to Rwanda, I didn’t see this at first, but a good friend of mine said: ‘What is this silence all about?’ There is a reason for the silence, of not speaking about my going away and about the project. Like saying: ‘It is not a Community project because I have been asked by the Institute (in Montreal).’ And I think that is the tension that we are going through and that is part of the reality.

And therefore, let’s say for myself this new project is like a second wind for me ... I don’t know how long I will last, that is if my health gives in. I do not know that. It is an unknown.
But what I know is maybe that is where I can best bring my contribution.\textsuperscript{71}

Just as she was completing her mission, Sister Alice died on October 27, 2004, in Nairobi, where she had been transferred by air ambulance from Goma, ever faithful to her vision.

**Conclusion**

The developments in the Church and society preceding the opening of Vatican II, the exposure to liberal theologies and the winds of change, found the members of the Missionary Oblate Sisters suppressed by a general superior, Mother Jean-de-la-Croix, who did not acknowledge the shifts that were taking place. The obvious mismatch between the sisters’ lived experience as women religious and the world around them led the way to a profound crisis that crystallized in 1963 and lasted for at least ten years. Sister Jeanne Boucher led the congregation between 1963 and 1973 through a difficult phase of internal breakdown and conflict amidst new freedoms and searches.

The exposure to the writings and ideas of theologians such as Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the exposure to Jean Vanier, and later on to the ideas of liberation theology as expressed by such theologians as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff, nourished the search for a new legitimizing framework. The sisters’ desire to explore the self and discover inner meanings in the pursuit of personal development led them to a lasting participation in the Personality and Human Relations workshops created by Father André Rochais. The search was also inspired by *Perfectae Caritatis* and other documents on religious life. The profound breakdown that characterized the decade between 1963 and 1973 took place when the instrumental mission of the congregation with regard to Catholic French Canadians outside Quebec and the congregation’s auxiliary role to the Oblate Fathers in the residential schools had lost meaning.

It was not until 1973, the beginning of Sister Lea Boutin’s term as general superior, that the congregation started a systematic spiritual renewal process as well as the interrogation of the past to imagine a future. During Sister Lea’s time as superior (1973–1981), and later on as well, Sister Dora Tétreault wrote many historical and spiritual documents that the sisters discussed. It was during Sister Lea’s tenure that the sisters fully
rearticulated their role as missionary educators and gained a new sense of
the institution as an organized community, based on a participatory model
and respect for the individual. The ministry and the mission acknowledged individual and small group projects, a tendency that had started in the previous decade. However, the congregation had great difficulty reconciling the newly discovered sense of self with a sense of community. Furthermore, the sisters were at different points in their development and many resisted new directions for different reasons.

Sister Alice Trudeau, general superior between 1981 and 1989, furthered the sisters’ personal growth as empowerment without neglecting their commitment to the community. Sister Alice called the sisters to enact the radical dimension of the Oblate mission that she had conceived. She wanted the sisters to be engaged with a prophetic leadership committed to social justice, the poor of the gospels and all those oppressed because of race, class or gender. She brought women’s issues and the spiritual experience of women religious to the forefront, and she even confronted priests. During her time, there were efforts to rethink the sisters’ work with the Aboriginal peoples, although the discourse was still permeated by contradictions and ethnocentric overtones. Her call was resisted by many, misunderstood by some and embraced by others. The conservatism of the hierarchy of the Church not only politically but in relation to the role of women did not provide her much room to manoeuvre.

Sister Alice Trudeau’s and Sister Cecile Fortier’s relationship with the Institut de Formation Humaine Intégrale de Montréal led to their participation in the Rwanda mission. Sister Alice left the congregation in Canada to give life to her prophetic call to work toward transformative personal and social change with the poor and with those who suffered. She felt she would have the space that the hierarchy of the Church did not give her as a woman religious and the possibility to move beyond the contradictions and fears that permeated the renewal process in her congregation.

Endnotes

1 The Manitoba School Question refers to the school crisis between 1890, when provincial legislation abolished dual confessional state-supported schools, and 1896, when a settlement, known as the Laurier-Greenway Compromise, was reached. The consequent modification (1897) of the Public Schools Act set
the legal basis for the building of the common school. The Catholic Church was not allowed to have school districts under its jurisdiction. The new legislation allowed for religious exercises under specific conditions.

2 R. Perin, Rome in Canada: The Vatican and Canadian Affairs in the Late Victorian Age (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 127.


7 The Major Seminary had been founded by the Archbishop of Saint-Boniface, Maurice Baudoux, who later participated in Vatican II Council.

8 M. Martel, French Canada: An Account of its Creation and Break-up, 1850–1967.


10 Sr. Dora Tétérault, Comments made on 22 September 2006, written and deposited in Archives of the Missionary Oblates [AMO].

11 Sr. Jeanne Boucher and Sr. Lea Boutin, interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétérault, 26 October 1994, AMO.

12 Ibid.


14 Sr. Dora Tétérault, Comments made on 22 September 2006, written and deposited in AMO.

15 Ibid.


18 Ibid.
270  Changing Habits

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 "Witnesses. Constitutions and Modalities of the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate (ad experimentum), St-Boniface, Manitoba," 1970.
25 Sr. Alice Trudeau interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétérault, 21 October 1994, AMO.
26 Report of the Outgoing General Superior (Sr. Jeanne Boucher), General Chapter of July 1969, 5, AMO. There were, at the time, one sister working on her doctorate and six sisters working on a Master’s degree; ten sisters had completed a B.Ed.; seven were working on a B.Ed.; fourteen sisters had completed a B.A.; 28 sisters were working on a B.A.; and 22 sisters had graduated from Normal School. The report referred to the period between 1963 and 1969. In 1967, there were 278 professed sisters and one postulant.
27 Report of the Outgoing General Superior (Sr. Lea Boutin), General Chapter of July 1977, manuscript, 16, AMO.
29 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 151.
32 Ibid., 152–153.
33 Sr. Jeanne Boucher and Sr. Lea Boutin interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétérault.
34 Report of the Outgoing General Superior (Sr. Lea Boutin), General Chapter of July 1977, manuscript, 4, AMO.
36 Ibid., 34–35.
39 Ibid.
40 Report of the Outgoing General Superior (Sr. Lea Boutin). General Chapter of July 1981, manuscript, 1–2, AMO.
41 “Constitutions and Modalities of the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of the Sacred Heart and of Mary Immaculate, St-Boniface, Manitoba,” 1983, AMO.
42 Ibid., Part One, Chapter one, 5 M4, 3
43 L. Cada, SM, R. Fitz, et al., Shaping the Coming of Age of Religious Life.
44 Sr. Alice Trudeau, MO, interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétreault, 7.
45 Together in Hope: New Evangelical Challenges. Capitular Documents of the 13th General Chapter of the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and of Mary Immaculate. Held at the Mother House, St. Boniface, Manitoba, July 4–July 25, 1985, AMO.
46 Ibid., Circular Letter 16, Onward in Hope, 13
47 Congrès Communautaire M.O. held in St. Boniface on 4 to 15 July 1983.
48 Also Sr. Alice Trudeau interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétreault.
49 See for example Conférence Religieuse Canadienne, Rôle prophétique des religieux, collection Donum Dei, 23 (1977).
51 Ibid. Also Sr. Alice Trudeau interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétreault, 11.
54 Ibid., 154.
Together in Hope: New Evangelical Challenges. Capitular Documents of the 13th General Chapter of the Missionary Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart and of Mary Immaculate. Pastoral Work with the Amerindians, 43–44. AMO.

Also Sr. Alice Trudeau interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétérault, 7.

Ibid., 16.


Sr. Lea Boutin, MO, Women in the Church: The Pain, the Challenge, the Hope (Aurora, ON: Emmanuel Convalescent Foundation, 1991). Former superior Sr. Lea did both a master’s in pastoral studies (University of Ottawa and Saint Paul University) and a doctorate in ministry (University of Toronto and the University of St. Michael’s College) in the 1980s.


Congrès Communautaire M.O. held in St. Boniface on 4 to 15 July 1983.

Sr. Alice Trudeau interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétérault, 12.


Ibid. Sr. Alice Trudeau, Compte-Rendu de la Supérieure Générale de la Congrégation des Missionnaires Oblates du S.-C. et de M.I. Soumis au 13e Chapitre général, St. Boniface, 4–28 juillet 1985, AMO.

See, for example, B. Fiand, Living the Vision: Religious Vows in an Age of Change (New York: Crossroad, 1992).


The Process of Renewal of the Missionary Oblate Sisters

70 Ibid., p. 156.
71 Sr. Alice Trudeau, interviewed by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Sr. Dora Tétreault, 36.