















































Many young people are willing to consider religious life. Can we go out to them? And can we invite them into our lives?



A young woman shows her enthusiasm for religious life.

BY SISTER DEBORAH  
BORNEMAN, SS.C.M.



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2011. Prior to that, she was a certified Catholic Campus Ministry Association campus minister and served as vocation director for her institute for 10 years.

## Responding to new openness toward our life

**L**AST YEAR I CONDUCTED AN INFORMAL SURVEY of young adults and their attitudes about religious life for a graduate course I was taking. While the sample was not scientific (it was built on my own network of contacts from my years in campus ministry), I was still pleasantly surprised by the openness to religious life that it revealed.

Before looking at my data and conclusions, I want to pause and recognize what is meant by *vocation*. I like this definition by Sister Laura Leming, F.M.I. in *Vocation and Social Context* (Brill 2007).

Judeo-Christian understanding of vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, “to call”) entails hearing a divine call (sometimes embodied in a human voice) to go somewhere, do something, or be someone in the context of

a relationship with the Divine.... Vocation doesn't happen in a vacuum. Rather, it is a social interaction, a relationship of mutuality where call is both heard and responded to.

My own role in encouraging young people to listen for and hear God's divine call takes many forms, and one of them is coordinator and co-presenter of the workshop "Orientation Program for New Vocation Directors," presented regularly by the National Religious Vocation Conference. I want to present accurate information to new vocation directors about youth and emerging adults. Thus, in my research, I wanted to know if young adults are considering a vocation to become a religious sister, brother, or priest. I wanted to know where young adults are experiencing the presence of God and living their faith. Are these sacred spaces the places religious are or can become present?

I also wanted to know if young people have had any personal experiences with women religious. If given the invitation, would young people spend 24 hours in a convent, and if so, what would they desire to experience? How can vocation directors be relevant and use social media to promote a culture of discipleship? Is there hope for new membership among young adults, or should congregations focus on a future of diminishment? Most importantly, can young adults offer concrete suggestions on promoting religious life vocations and provide insight on why women do not enter religious life?

A total of 343 people between ages 18 and 40 from 22 states took my survey, which was distributed to young people through campus ministers; 79 percent of respondents were women.

## Where young people encounter God

The first question was written to find out where young adults gather: "Where are you most involved in living your faith and experiencing the presence of God?" They had 34 choices for answering this, and respondents were encouraged to check as many as applied. The top five answers in order of popularity were:

- Weekly Mass, 57 percent
- Retreats, 29 percent
- Parish events, 27 percent
- Catholic campus ministry, 23 percent
- Volunteer experiences, 22 percent

We can conclude from this that all the sacred spaces

are very accessible to religious (not just vocation ministers) to build relationships. Consider joining a multi-generational choir, as 17 percent reported they belong to a parish or campus choir. Since a significant amount of young adults participate in Catholic campus ministry, religious also need to be more visible on campuses, especially the colleges their religious institutes sponsor.

## People are considering religious life

By being present in the places where young adults encounter God, vocation ministers will be building on an existing interest in religious life. In my study, 143 young adults (42 percent) responded that they have considered entering religious life as a sister, brother, or priest. While this was a high percentage (the majority had a connection to campus ministry), the fact is that several recent studies have also uncovered that a large number of U.S. Catholics have given serious consideration to a religious life vocation. The box on this page highlights some of the most significant findings. I believe vocation ministers have not yet comprehended the impact of these high numbers. With this many Catholics reporting they have considered religious life, what is happening at a deeper level that stops young adults from considering, discerning, and then applying to enter religious communities? My data suggests young adults need more information and more exposure to women and men religious and more opportunities to experience religious life. Presence

### RELIGIOUS LIFE INTEREST BY THE NUMBERS

- ✓ 250,000 never-married Catholic women in the U.S. have thought seriously about religious life.
- ✓ 350,000 never-married Catholic men in the U.S. have thought seriously about being a priest or brother.
- ✓ 37 percent of former full-time volunteers have considered religious life or priesthood, 27 percent of them "seriously."
- ✓ Approximately one half of men involved in either Catholic campus ministry or diocesan young adult ministry have seriously considered priesthood.
- ✓ Roughly a third of Catholic women with these involvements have seriously considered becoming a sister.

First three facts: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2013. Last two facts: Dean Hoge and Marti Jewell in *The Next Generation of Pastoral Leaders: What the Church Needs to Know* (2010).



Young women visit the Daughters of Charity convent during a London "Nun Run."

PHOTO: SISTER CATHY JONES, R.A.

and availability are the hallmarks of religious life, and the Millennial generation is also asking for women and men religious to spend time with them. "Church-going Catholic Millennials might seem more serious and fervent about their faith than either of the preceding two generations, Baby Boomers or Generation X," reported Heather Grennan Gary in the 2011 *U.S. Catholic* article, "Retro-Actives: The Religious Practices of Millennial Catholics."

Archbishop Joseph Tobin, C.Ss.R., in his keynote address to the NRVC 2012 convocation noted: "A problem for consecrated life in the United States may be that we are slow to recognize the religious aspirations of young people today. We should admit that there is no excuse for such ignorance."

What would it take for a van full of members to be present for campus ministry events or at parishes for Sunday Mass?

## Come to the convent

While it is important to go out to young adults, they also express an interest in coming to us. My research showed that a significant number of young adults would spend 24 hours in a convent.

I would have never predicted that four out of five young men and women would accept an invitation to visit a convent, let alone that nine out of 10 single, Catholic females would report a willingness to pay such a visit. What is even more surprising is what they want to experience. Half of the respondents wanted to "be a sister" for a day, to experience an ordinary day.

Young adults are not so much interested in a convent tour as they are in engaging with the women who live in the convent. For instance, respondents made comments such as these:

- I would like to see what everyone does during the day. Is everyone on similar schedules, or do people do as they please? Does everyone eat and pray together? I think a day in the life of a nun would be cool, exciting and informative.
- I'm curious as to the life that sisters and nuns lead. I'd like a window into their relationships with one another and into their day-to-day lives.

One third of the young adults (33.8 percent) interested in a convent visit wanted to pray with the sisters, to experience the rituals, the devotions, and communal prayer. Over a quarter of the respondents (26.4 percent) wanted



to experience community life, to learn how sisters handle conflicts and converse with one another.

Vowed communal life and prayer are distinct characteristics of religious life that perhaps point to an emerging global consciousness and global solidarity. Can this desire to experience communal prayer and community life among religious be attributed to a culture of broken commitments, strong individualism, and fractured families of the Generation X experience? Or can this be attributed to the Millennial generation's positive experiences of group identity and team projects? It does affirm the 2009 NRVC-CARA study of newer members which found they are attracted to and sustained in religious life by: community life, communal prayer, Eucharist, and visibility. (See the full report on the study, "Recent vocations to religious life," at [nrvc.net](http://nrvc.net).)

Here are comments from Catholic, single females who have considered religious life and would like to visit a convent:

- I would like to see how they keep a sense of community while being independent of each other and how each follows the order her own way.
- What is the community like? Is there conflict at all, as there is with families/friends? Also, how is conflict resolved?
- I'm interested in community dynamics, so I'd love to be a fly on the wall during a community meeting.
- I would love to see how they interact with one another and work out their issues.

Nineteen percent of young adults want to experience the ambiance, the environment of peace, joy, and silence of the convent and its sisters. As for experiencing the ministry and service of a sister's life, 16.9 percent of respondents would like to see this aspect.

Even young adults from other faith traditions, who have had minimal experience with women religious and have not considered religious life, wrote about the value they would find in visiting a convent:

- I think it would be wonderful to witness the relationship that the sisters have built with each

other. I would like to see how they support one another and how that lifestyle serves God.

- It's a culture that I would love to be a part of just to gain knowledge. Obviously, these women love Christ as do I, and I would love to see things from their point of view and have my views expanded and modified.
- For my job, I've spent a lot of time working on Catholic non-fiction books. I love to learn about the work that the nuns are doing to promote social justice and reduce poverty.
- A day in the life of the sisters—from their service, to their contemplative prayer, to their mission. Mostly, though, I think I'd like to hear their call stories. I think they would be very powerful.

## TOP 9 PICKS FOR ONLINE VIDEOS

Asked what they'd most like to watch in an online video produced by women religious, young adults chose:

- Community life
- Living simply
- Comedy
- Finding balance
- Vocation stories
- Discernment
- Finding meaning
- Words of wisdom
- Prayer

## Interest versus reality

Another reality uncovered in my research is that while young people showed an interest in knowing more about religious life and their faith, the reality is that religious communities may not be connecting effectively with them. For instance, social media is one important way to communicate with young adults, particularly through the popular site, YouTube.

I created a question on my survey to uncover topics for vocation presentations and discernment retreats on YouTube. Respondents were asked: "Imagine Catholic sisters/nuns creating a three-minute YouTube video. What five topics would you view/share?" They could select from 41 possible themes. (See their choices in the box above.) I did a quick search on YouTube to find the only topic on which women religious are present consistently is vocation stories. This gap in social media suggests that one way to promote vocations might be short videos on the topics of interest to young adults.

## Stepping out in hope

In light of the interest in religious life that exists among young people, much can be done by religious communities and vocation ministers. Taking action is a sign

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of hope. And hope has always been a stronghold of the Christian faith. John Caputo, author of *After the Death of God*, reflects:

Meister Eckhart said there is a little spark in the soul (*ein Seelenfunklein*), which is the point where God and the soul touch. In postmodern theology the event lends things, we might say, a kind of divine glow, what Deleuze calls a brightness and splendor, "the splendor of Being."

The first women apostles possessed *ein Seelenfunklein* and I have noticed *ein Seelenfunklein* in both vocation ministers and young adults who proclaim boldly and fearlessly the good news of the risen Christ.

I urge vocation ministers to discover the spark within themselves. With members of their community they can create new ways to open their doors with the expectation that young adults are willing to come if in-

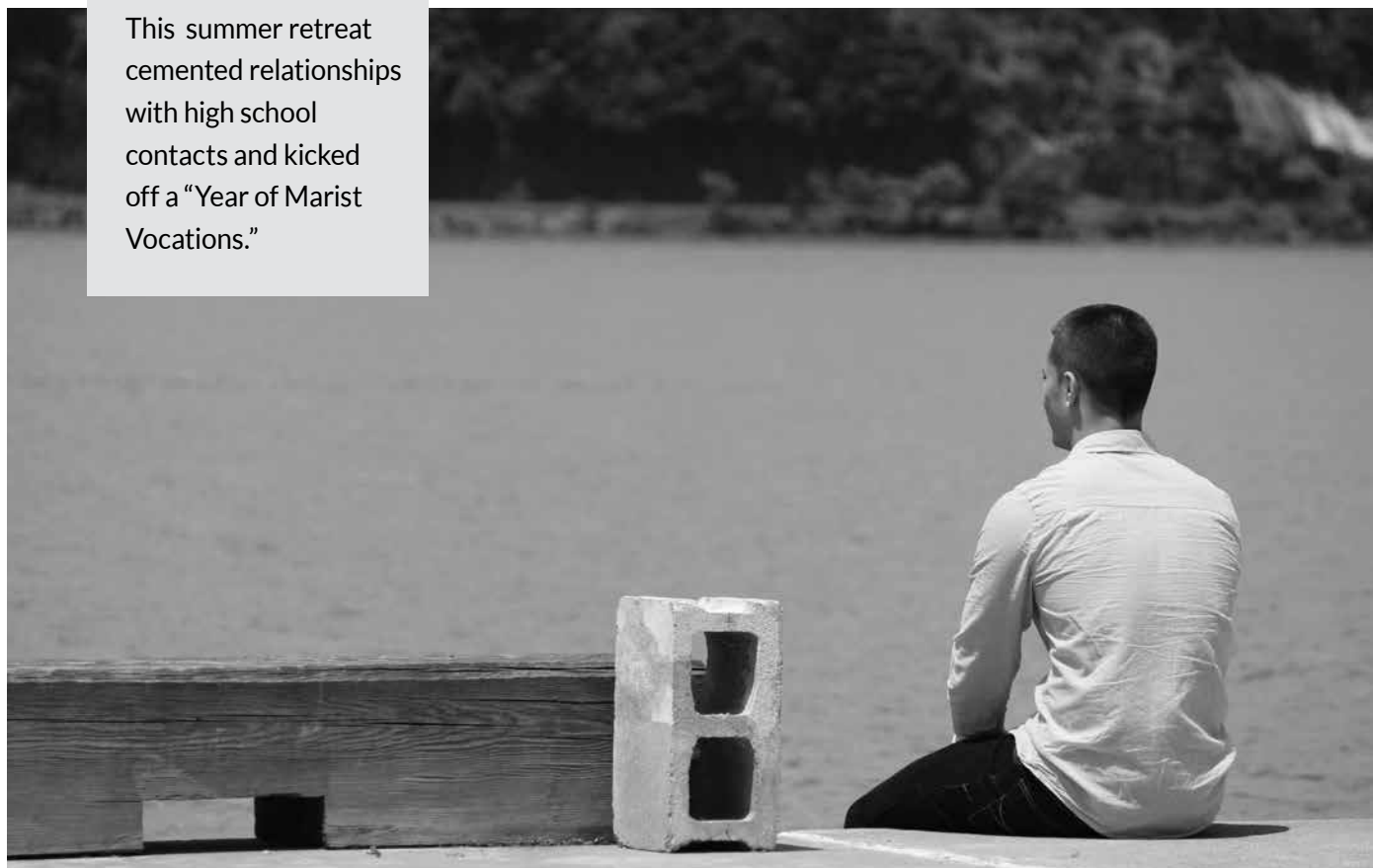
I urge vocation ministers to discover the spark within themselves. With members of their community they can create new ways to open their doors with the expectation that young adults are willing to come if invited.

vited. Many young adults in my survey already report a consistent involvement with women religious, and they want to be around women religious more frequently.

Women religious have much to offer as spiritual mentors, and young adults have much to offer women religious as technology tutors. (Just imagine young adults and religious creating a comedic YouTube video explaining the differences between all the Franciscan communities!) We have much we can learn from each other. In addition to "Come and See" in the convents, women religious are also being summoned to "go and listen" to young adults in the sacred spaces where they gather. Inspired by the Gospel tradition, let us not linger. It is time to go quickly as did the first vocation ministry team—Mary Magdalene, Mary, Salome, Joanna, and other Biblical women. We must go and announce the Good News! ■

This summer retreat cemented relationships with high school contacts and kicked off a “Year of Marist Vocations.”

Photo: CRAIG BARCOCK



The Foundation Stones retreat included time for both personal and communal prayer.

## Summer retreat kicks off vocation year

**A**FTER PARTICIPATING in the 2012 NRVC program “Keys to the Future: Moving Forward in Hope,” I met with my vocation co-director, Brother Dan O’Riordan, F.M.S. to discuss what had been presented and to brainstorm ways to advance our province’s culture of vocations. Capitalizing on the fact that our schools are the primary way many young people experience the Marist charism, we decided to coordinate a Year of Marist Vocations to run from June 2013 to May 2014. I present here an overview of the retreat we organized to inaugurate the year.

With the help of our Province Vocation Committee, we came up with the theme for the year: “Marist: An Authentic Response to God’s Call.” Our goal was to increase awareness and appreciation of the vocation of everyone involved in our schools—brothers, lay faculty, students, staff, parents, and alums—to “be Marist.” The Vocation Office, along with our local Vocation Teams, provided activities, prayer services, and ministry opportunities for all to celebrate their Marist call throughout this year.

To kick off the Year of Marist Vocations in June 2013, we held the first of what we intend to be an annual event: the Foundation Stones week. The

By BROTHER MIKE SHEERIN, F.M.S.



Brother Mike Sheerin, F.M.S. has been the vocation co-director for his community, the Marist Brothers, since 2007. Readers interested in learning more

about the program featured here can contact Brother Mike at [bromikes@gmail.com](mailto:bromikes@gmail.com). They may also view a video summarizing the Foundation Stones retreat experience in the words of the young men who attended it. Go to [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and type “Marist Brothers Foundation Stones” in the search bar.



PHOTO: CRAIG BARCOCK

Participants in the Foundation Stones retreat take part in a group exercise.

intent of Foundation Stones is to invite selected students graduating from our Marist high schools to retreat together at our center in rural Esopus, New York. Foundation Stones offers the opportunity to explore the Marist Brothers' way of life through a seven-day experience, including time to live, reflect, relax, and work side-by-side with the brothers. Support from the province leadership was very strong, as was support from individual brothers. Ten students took part, eight first-timers and two members of our Marist Accompaniment Program (our college program for young men inquiring and discerning a Marist Brother vocation).

## Prayer, learning, service with brothers

So what happened each day during Foundation Stones? The basic schedule consisted of gathering daily for morning and evening prayer. Various forms of prayer were experienced, highlighting our Marist charism, the Liturgy of the Hours, Taize prayer, meditation, the rosary, Holy Hour, the *examen*, and silence. Learning and singing the *Salve Regina* each morning and night was also part of the experience. By the end of the week, the young men could sing the hymn without the Latin words in front of them.

Each morning from Monday through Thursday the young men participated in conferences and discussions facilitated by various brothers. Topics included; celibacy, spirit of our founder, St. Marcellin Champagnat, developing personal spirituality, and Marist life from the perspective of our youngest member. Each afternoon they worked side by side with brothers in service projects on the property, including refurbishing a Stations of the Cross pathway circling our cemetery and creating a grotto to Mary, our Good Mother, on the grounds. Time was also devoted to ice-breaking activities, rock

wall climbing, one-on-one interviews, and opportunities for theological reflection, journal writing, and quiet time. Community recreations included eating all meals together as well as relaxing together at various times during the day.

Friday was a day of relaxation which began with Mass and included a two-hour boat ride up the Hudson River, joined by about 12 more brothers. Most of the young men were impressed to meet the many brothers who visited Foundation Stones to share a meal, work side-by-side, pray with them, and basically show an interest in who they were. We brothers were able to demonstrate what often comes so naturally to us: our way of living together and supporting each other. Young people do not always get to see this part of our lives since they know us primarily as their teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, and campus ministers. Foundation Stones accomplished its ends by enhancing their knowledge and experience of who Marist Brothers are.

The young men were from all parts of our province: New York, New Jersey, Florida, Texas, and Illinois. Many came alone, and after overcoming those awkward opening silences, quite easily formed bonds that will carry them through further explorations of Marist life as they attend college. "It meant a lot to me to come together for a whole week with other guys considering the brother's life," was a sentiment echoed frequently in our follow up discussions and evaluations with retreatants.

Five of the eight first-timers have since joined our Accompaniment Program. Said one participant at the program's end: "This week was an eye-opener for me, living together with others and being immersed in the life of a brother. I thought I knew everything about the brothers, but I realized I learned a lot more during the week."

"I never did anything like this before. I am happy I came, as it opened up a new door in my life to consider," recalled another. Other comments also captured the spirit of the experience: "I didn't realize how much praying the brothers did. I was surprised and pleased to see that brothers began and ended their day with prayer." Another participant said, "The best thing about Foundation Stones was being together from activity to activity and being treated like brothers already."

This experience offered our province a firm "foundation stone" upon which to build a solid discernment process to carry these young men into their future. It also solidified a new program which seems likely to become a strong annual event in our vocation recruitment efforts. ■





The Poor Clare Sisters of Arundel in the UK pray together.

Enclosed life requires certain strengths and dispositions. An insider shares her wisdom about helping a discerner attracted to this life.

# The must-knows about discerning enclosed life

*This article is from a talk given to vocations personnel at the invitation of the National Office of Vocations for England and Wales. The talk was delivered in October, 2013 at Birmingham University Catholic Chaplaincy in the UK.*

**T**HANK YOU FOR ALLOWING me the opportunity to share with you something from my own experience as a Poor Clare of accompanying people and helping them to discern the will of God for their lives. I can only speak about what I know, what I have lived, so inevitably it is limited. I also speak from living in a particular place called Arundel, in the United Kingdom, where I live and breathe the spirit of St. Clare.

I'd like to look at two questions, which perhaps are really only one question, just written slightly differently. First: What will help someone discern, if he or she is called to the enclosed life? And secondly: How might someone accompanying a discerner help that person to discern if the call is to enclosed life?

So you can see that the two questions are very close to each other.

BY SISTER GABRIEL DAVISON, O.S.C.



Sister Gabriel Davison, O.S.C., entered the Poor Clares in 1994 and is currently serving as novice mistress for her community in Arundel, UK. She is also a councillor

for the Federation of Poor Clares in Great Britain. Additionally Sister Gabriel works in vocation discernment and spiritual accompaniment and enjoys cooking and gardening in her community.



Father Peter Funk, O.S.B., of the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Chicago, reads Scripture and prays.

Bishop Kieran Conry of Arundel and Brighton in a recent pastoral letter said,

Hearing and seeing are very important parts of how we know anything or anyone. We know God by what we have seen and what we hear. We see God in the created world, we see God in the community of the church, and we see God in the person of Jesus Christ. We hear God in the words of Scripture, and the teaching of the church.

## Get to know contemplative communities

So for all of us who are working in vocation discernment and may be guiding people who are discerning a contemplative vocation: what is it that we need to be hearing and seeing for ourselves firstly, and then, secondly, what does the discerners need to hear and see?

It helps to think about these questions for a moment before you continue to read on:

- What personal feelings are generated in you when you think about the contemplative life, just now, just for a few seconds?
- What have you seen, heard and experienced personally about the contemplative life?
- What personal experience have you had in the last year with an enclosed community?

I think it is very important, if you are going to help someone discern a contemplative vocation, that you have a personal experience of this way of life for yourself.

What it is to pray in a Carmelite, Cistercian, Benedictine or a Poor Clare house? It is important to know and to feel the difference of each charism—through the atmosphere of the guesthouse, the guest mistress, the liturgy, perhaps through meeting a member of the community.

I do believe in some mysterious way an interior call to a contemplative way of life is also often accompanied by a call to a *particular* community. So it is important that you know, have seen, heard, and experienced the presence of God in a contemplative community. Why? Because the question then to ask oneself is: With what you know, have heard, seen, and experienced—could you advise someone to go to this place for a retreat, or a live-in experience—is there life in this place? Will a discerners be enriched by having an experience in this place? Is it a place of beauty? Could you stay one week in this monastery without losing your faith? (I remember once staying in a monastery where the singing was so bad I thought it would destroy my soul if I had to stay much longer!) It is important that you know good places to send people.

We can't discern the will of God in the abstract. We can't help someone else discern the will of God in the abstract. When someone comes to us, we need to feel where they are; we need to have all our sensory powers alert and we need to listen deeply to what is *not said*. Often they are looking for something they cannot describe until they see it and experience it. It is our job as vocation ministers to be as knowledgeable about good and life-giving communities as possible and to help those who come to us discern and discover the place where they can best seek God. In my own story I had a live-in

experience in a Poor Clare community, and I knew deep in my soul this was the place God wanted me to be. It wasn't rational, it was quite intangible, and I couldn't say to you what it was that drew me. Then I went to a Carmelite community, and I knew that it definitely wasn't the place for me (no offense to any Carmelites reading this!).

When you accompany someone who has this question of the contemplative life, four points are worth considering. It will be important to explore them with the person who is discerning.

## 1. Enclosure: poverty of space

The first point, and it is the only thing we cannot find at all in the apostolic life, is enclosure. All of us in religious life have mission; we all have contemplative prayer, community life, the vows, etc. But what is particular to the contemplative life is enclosure: "the poverty of the space." So, this person, this discernor who is before you, can he or she live the whole of their vocation in one particular place? That place may not be very big. Does this person have the psychological balance to live in a small space, where he or she can potentially find freedom and build a new life in Christ?

As a novice mistress a frustrated and tearful postulant once cried to me, "All I want is to do something 'normal'—buy a newspaper or go shopping in a supermarket!" Imagine, that seemed like an exciting option from what she was living each day in the monastery.

## 2. Life commitment to a group of people

The second point is that the community a person enters will be the same community for all of his or her life. Can this person before you build something with this particular group of men or women? Can he or she grow with this same group of religious? Can this person be him or herself with this group of people? The idea of a lifelong commitment to a particular place is not one that will be familiar to many discerners. They may not know very many marriages that have lasted a lifetime. One postulant said to me she couldn't wait for the group that was coming to visit at the weekend, just so that she could see a new face and talk to someone who wasn't a nun!

## 3. Regular, simple, scheduled life

The third point to explore with a discernor leaning toward the enclosed life is this. The contemplative vocation

sustains a very regular life and timetable. It works its magic by the medium of regularity. There is no opportunity to have a teaching, nursing, or pastoral career. Our life is very simple; one learns how to give oneself quietly to an unexciting and perhaps repetitive task. One learns how to be patient with the inefficient contemplative way of getting things done. Does the person you are accompanying have the psychological and spiritual strength to live this? Can this person deny what he or she could have become in a career? As one postulant I accompanied said, "I was a great teacher before I entered, and now all I do is clean toilets!" Our life is not usually a wise option for the fainthearted and delicate!

In the final analysis our life requires a deep attraction to prayer and a capacity for solitary communion with God, expressed through a particular charism with a specific group of people.

## 4. Adherence to an old tradition

The fourth point is that one enters into a spiritual *tradition*, and most of the time it is a very old tradition. Is this person ready to become a disciple and not a reformer? An imperfect human being is progressively transformed by the spiritual tradition, and by God's grace, to become holy. Humble perseverance in submitting to a way of life is a spiritual tradition that has stood the test of time. It is difficult to be a disciple, to have to learn a new way of living and being.

In my experience a new person entering can always find something that he or she is better at than anyone else in the community. That may be true, but it is not the point. First the new member has something to learn. When I was a junior, a postulant entered who was very strong and robust, and she was put with me to work in the garden shifting wheelbarrows full of manure ... a lovely job. Along she came at breakneck speed, and I did all I could to keep up with her, but to no avail. She wasn't entering into a tradition of manual labour as a way to seek God; she was showing us what she could do, how quickly, and without any help from me, thank you very much.

In the final analysis our life requires a deep attraction to prayer and a capacity for solitary communion with God, expressed through a particular charism with a specific group of people. So when you think of these four



On her knees, Sister Miryam Anastasia, O.P. takes simple vows to join the Queen of Peace Monastery in British Columbia.

points, of enclosure, of living with one particular group of men or women, of the regularity of the contemplative life, and the spiritual tradition that the person hopes to embrace—could this person you are helping to discern be happy and in peace with God and that particular community?

## Discernment in the Poor Clare tradition

Having addressed in general terms the contemplative life, I would now like to share something about discernment from my own Poor Clare tradition. When St. Clare speaks about our life, she begins, “If, by divine inspiration, anyone should come to us with the desire to embrace this life...” Thus, the discernment from the person and the novice mistress is to recognise this “divine inspiration” ... is it a dream or is it from God? Is this person in a personal relationship with God, and is this call from God or is it from me? God has an idea; God sets it free in the person, and we journey together to see where it will take us.

St. Clare goes on to say, “And if she is suitable, let the words of the holy Gospel be addressed to her: that she should go and sell all that she has...” So, *if* it is divine inspiration, she has to go and sell all that she has—that is, this person must leave her life before. She must let go of what is familiar, come to this place to seek God, embrace something new, and follow and be a disciple.

St. Clare then says, “Thereafter, she may not go outside the monastery except for some useful, reasonable, evident, and approved purpose.” Our way to answer the call of God and to follow Christ is to live in this place with this group of people. There is nothing to look for outside, everything we need to seek the will of God is inside this space. The monastery and the community is the place where we seek God, where we struggle, where we fight our demons, and also where we build the kingdom.

St. Clare continues: “The abbess shall carefully provide a Mistress from among the more prudent sisters of the monastery...” The person who enters has to become a disciple. It is a time to learn, to be taught, to listen with humility and docility. There is the whole question of discipline, of obedience, here.

Finally, in the process of canonizing St. Clare, Sister Benvenuta, who lived with her for 29 years, reported that St. Clare taught her three things: *to love God above all*—so it is a love story; *to have an open heart*—that means to open yourself to another, to walk with someone; and *to meditate on the passion of the Lord*—you take up your cross and follow Christ.

## Doing our best in the face of mystery

After we have done all of the above, ticked all of the boxes, given people all the tools they need to make a good discernment, all we can say to the person is: “There is still a massive risk, and I can’t be sure you will be happy because it is for you to discover for yourself.” I have seen people who have a great desire to live our life. They are generous and give up a lot to come and enter. They love the community, the place, the liturgy, and they feel loved and respected as persons, but they are not happy, a deep happiness I mean. It is a real mystery, this discernment of vocation ... to listen to one’s heart and be guided by it into mystery, toward God. The discernor has his or her part to do, and we have ours.

One of our jobs is to become aware, as best we can, of our own unconscious prejudices, and seek to neutralize them because no one in the ministry of vocational discernment claims infallibility. We must be attentive to our own inner work, developing as persons whose hearts are open and discerning, whose faith, hope, and love are tangible. We must tend our own spiritual growth and self knowledge. Then we simply do the best we can for those whom God sends to our doors. We have a most difficult job and yet also a most blessed one because we have the privilege of walking with others and to help them to “Seek the face of God.” ■



# Please celebrate with us in Chicago this November!



**November 6-10, 2014**  
**Chicago Marriott O'Hare Hotel**

## Your presence is requested at the NRVC's Jubilee Year Convocation

Vocation ministers, religious leadership, formation directors, communication directors, and all those who share responsibility and concern for future membership in religious life are invited to attend. Please view the Convocation brochure online at [www.NRVC.net](http://www.NRVC.net) for highlights of the schedule and descriptions of our great roster of speakers and workshops.

Our special celebrity guest host, Mr. Clarence Gilyard, along with the NRVC board and staff, will provide an environment conducive to creative dialogue, prayer, and celebration that will allow participants to leave with a renewed sense of conviction and a fearless desire to continue to invite women and men to religious life.

**Register online for the 2014 Jubilee Convocation:**  
**<https://www.nixregistrar.com/events/578>**

# Join us this July in Chicago for Summer Institute 2014

Each year NRVC provides vocation ministers opportunities for professional growth through its comprehensive Summer Institute. The workshops are designed for those who wish to deepen their understanding of the complex theological, spiritual, psycho-sexual, ethical, and diversity issues often present in contemporary vocation ministry.

Our annual Summer Institute will offer four workshops at the downtown campus of DePaul University:

**Ethical Issues in Vocation  
and Formation Ministry**

July 8-9 | Father Raymond P. Carey,  
Ph.D.

**Behavioral Assessment I**

July 10-12 | Father Raymond P. Carey,  
Ph.D.

**Orientation Program for New  
Vocation Directors**

July 14-18 | Brother Paul Bednarczyk,  
C.S.C. and Sister Deborah Borneman,  
SS.C.M.

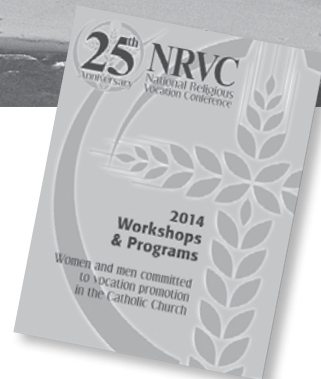
**Understanding, Assessing, and  
Fostering Psycho-Sexual Integration**

July 19-22 | Sister Lynn M. Levo,  
C.S.J., Ph.D.



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The lives and witness of our newest saints, John Paul II and John XXIII, have shaped our church and continue to stir our faith and ministry.

## These two men inspire us

**T**HE FULL MOON HAD RISEN OVER ROME as we settled down in St. Peter's Square to listen to Pope John Paul II. It was the evening of the Feast of the Assumption, and the pope was opening World Youth Day during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

Our excitement at the pope's arrival had now given way to a more reflective silence. The Holy Father started to speak, and though we were tired after a day under the Roman sun, we listened.

Midway through the address, John Paul looked up from his script, paused, and said, "Today I wish to tell you that I believe firmly in Jesus Christ our Lord."

And we believed him.

You could say that it's a pretty basic job requirement for a pope to believe in Christ, but for me and the other young people in the square that night, John Paul was speaking to our greatest faith concern; "Is God real?"

John Paul answered with a strong "yes" and—for us—he spoke with authority. It wasn't necessarily the authority of his office but the authority of his life experience. This was the credo of a man who had experienced

By ANDREW O'CONNELL



Andrew O'Connell is the Communications Director for the Presentation Brothers in Ireland. He has published articles in *HORIZON* and *VISION*, and he is a member of the Editorial Board of the National Religious Vocation Conference.

the evil of two totalitarian regimes and known the pain of personal loss and physical suffering. This was a man who, in his youth, had other life options. He could have been an actor, an athlete, or an academic. But he chose to follow Christ as a priest. This credo had credibility.

He finished his address with some vocations advice: "Do not let the time the Lord gives you go by as though everything happened by chance." And during that week, many young people meditated deeply on that message. Vocations to religious life and diocesan priesthood were discovered and confirmed. In fact I personally know

For religious tasked with the promotion of religious vocations these two popes also had a sense of urgency that should spur us on.

people who trace the defining moment in their vocation journey to the experience of faith and community during that week in Rome.

In a postmodern culture of indecision and doubt, Pope John Paul was encouraging belief and certainty. It wasn't that we were set-

ling for easy certainty in the complexity of a complicated world. This was no comfort blanket religion. Rather, in an undisciplined world which placed no demands on us, John Paul II was encouraging us to go beyond mediocrity and to use Christ's agape love as the yardstick for our lives. In a world of great freedom John Paul was preaching responsibility.

I have no memories of Pope John XXIII. For my generation, he is a figure on the grainy black and white news reel. But for another generation, this was the pope whose word and witness excited and inspired. Many religious have told me about the exhilaration of those years in the '60s when the church set out on John XXIII's new course of dialogue and engagement with the world.

You won't hear Vatican II mentioned too often by my generation, and this worries many. That's because we take the Second Vatican Council as read. It's a given. It's the air we breathe. For us, with no memories of the church before the Council, this is how life has always been. It's just so naturally part of our understanding of Catholicism that it's literally unremarkable.

My generation knows that the legacy of John Paul II was built on the vision and courage of John XXIII. Many of the iconic moments of John Paul's pontificate were made possible by John XXIII: the 1986 visit to the synagogue of Rome and the 2001 visit to the mosque in Damascus, to name but two.

In addition, the ministries of many young Catholics active in the church today, including my own, though inspired by Pope John Paul have been enabled by Pope John XXIII.

It would be nice to think that this could be a time of healing and reconciliation in a church sometimes polarized by differing ecclesiology. Now is a good time to reach beyond caricatures and misunderstandings.

We can learn a lot from our two pope saints. For a start, both had an impish sense of humor.

The story is told that, upon his arrival at the Santo Spirito (Holy Spirit) Hospital in Rome, Pope John XXIII was greeted by the sister in charge. "Holy Father," she said, "I am the superior of the Holy Spirit."

"Wonderful!" the pope replied. "I'm only the Vicar of Christ!"

The joyful example of both popes supports Pope Francis' repeated calls for Christians not to be sour-pusses!

For aging religious, it's also worth noting that Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council in his 81st year, while Pope John Paul taught his most valuable lesson during the sickness of his final years. This should be a great encouragement to aging religious. Age and ill-health don't mean that a life of witness is not possible.

And, regardless of age, religious should stay close to young people. John Paul, quoting a Polish proverb, believed that, "If you work with the young, you will never grow old!"

For religious tasked with the promotion of religious vocations, these two popes also had a sense of urgency that should spur us on. During the planning of the Council, on being told by a worried aide that it was impossible to open the first session by 1963, Pope John replied, "Fine. We'll open it in 1962 so!"

Similarly Pope John Paul was driven by St. Paul's admonition, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." Perhaps that explains why, in the final years of his life, he was to be found in places like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Armenia.

Though aging, both men kept their hand on the plough until they were called home from the vineyard. So, let's draw inspiration from our two pope saints and, in the words of Good Pope John in that famous "Speech of the Moon" delivered the night the Council was opened: "Let us continue to love each other, to look out for each other along the way: to welcome whoever comes close to us, and set aside whatever difficulty it might bring. Let us continue along our path."

Amen. ■

## Insightful data and analysis of sisters

**W**HEN MADE AWARE OF DATA on Catholic sisters, many audiences are shocked to learn about the precipitous decrease in members in recent decades. In 1965, the *Official Catholic Directory* reported the number of sisters at 179,954; by 2013 the number was 52,557, down by 127,397. How did this drastic decline happen? What was behind the enormous demographic change? How have the diminishing numbers affected the ability of institutes to attract new members? How do generational cultures, with their differences and similarities, shape religious life today? What possible futures await sisters in various age groups and distinctive types of congregations?

If these questions intrigue or perplex or unsettle you, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters* by Sister Mary Johnson, S.N.D.deN., Sister Patricia Wittberg, S.C., and Dr. Mary Gautier will provide the most comprehensive responses ever assembled. To examine these questions, they offer a vibrant narrative, interweaving a journal-like story of vocational discernment with extensive data from research studies. These contrasting resources add to the validity, interest, and usefulness of the findings.

In discussing the possible reasons for the decline in the number of sisters, the authors quote several media representatives, whose assessments about the future of religious life are usually dismal. These sources mention various causes for the downward spiral, which they believe has made it difficult to attract new members. For instance, some blamed shrinkage on women's institutes "reassessing their missions and rules of life at the same time as the women's movement was transforming social attitudes and practices." Other sources blamed lower numbers on the "rigid and unreasonable restrictions on women's institutes" by the Catholic Church. Yet another perspective placed blame on the sisters for changing from their traditional way of life.

Reasons for the decrease in Catholic sisters are described more compellingly by the authors through their review of social science research and their knowledgeable interpretation of the facts. Beginning with Sister

## NEW GENERATIONS OF CATHOLIC SISTERS

*The Challenge of Diversity*



Mary Johnson, S.N.D.de N.  
Patricia Wittberg, S.C.  
Mary L. Gautier

BY SISTER KATARINA SCHUTH, O.S.F.



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Marie Augusta Neal's 1982 groundbreaking national study of sisters, research has been wide-ranging in its scope and findings. Sister Neal, already perceiving the decline more than three decades ago, mentioned changes in society, a failure to invite candidates from among immigrants, and "the reduced probability of young sisters coming in direct contact with sisters in ministry," as contributing factors. Other major studies followed, offering reasons for the drop-off as a general crisis in faith, structural changes in religious institutes, individualism, lack of distinctive identity, and the widening of women's professional opportunities. According to the authors of *New Generations*, recently it is the gap between generations that seems to deter interest, especially of those under 40.

In their analysis of various NRVC-CARA studies,

Each generation needs to search for mutual understanding through dialogue if religious institutes are to thrive and survive.

Johnson, Wittberg, and Gautier consider in detail the different forms of religious life, as well as the ages of entrants, their ethnicity, and their choice of religious institutes. Their appraisal details the distinctions among the many alterna-

tives available to young adults who are considering a religious commitment. They believe it is necessary for each institute to define and make known its distinct identity. Certain tensions arise out of these many forms with their diverse theories about and practices of religious life. Church documents, importantly among them *Perfectae Caritatis* and *Vita Consecrata*, along with several Vatican interventions, have contributed to the present state of affairs. In contrasting the content of these documents and reports with a document coming from a 2004 World Congress on Religious Life, the authors suggest that "the differences in language, tone, and emphasis regarding the evangelical counsels, mission, charism, and role in the Church shed light on the strained relationship of some religious institutes with the institutional Church." On closer scrutiny, it is unclear, however, that the intent of the statement of the World Congress was to provide a contrasting view of the key elements of religious life. Rather, that meeting dealt with a much wider agenda. Nonetheless, differences are apparent.

Other chapters of *New Generations of Catholic Sisters* explore the religious and spiritual landscape impacting the younger generation. Among the striking findings are the data related to recent entrants. An almost equal percentage of women join institutes associated with LCWR

and CMSWR, but since LCWR comprises about four times more institutes, candidates are "spread out" over a larger base. The age of candidates attracted to each group differs radically, with older candidates moving toward LCWR congregations, and younger ones tending to favor CMSWR institutes. Chapter 4 captures the challenges for leaders and members as differences are manifested in community living, communal prayer, and ministry.

The next three chapters spell out the many generational challenges facing institutes as they emphasize their charisms and sources of identity. Some built their identity on ministry and social justice, while others accentuated their tradition of Eucharistic devotion. Helpfully the narrative points out that U.S. Catholicism is not monolithic, which suggests that young women with a more activist leaning may well find appealing the more traditional sense of stability and permanence, while women who desire a more "conservative" approach may be dedicated to a ministry of social justice. In any case, a clearly articulated identity is preferable in order to draw new members.

Numerous informative bar graphs show dissimilarities and likenesses among generations. For example, Chapter 6 deals with prayer, spirituality, and the vows; and Chapter 7 looks at community and ministry. Taken as a whole, the findings reveal more commonality than might be expected, but differences are also noteworthy. For instance, younger members lean toward communal life and shared ministry, while older members favor living with those involved in varied ministries. As the authors point out, each generation needs to search for mutual understanding through dialogue if religious institutes are to thrive and survive.

The concluding chapter, "Inviting the Future," is filled with wisdom and sound, practical advice for leaders, vocation directors, and all members of religious institutes—in fact, for anyone sincerely interested in the Catholic Church in the U.S. The goal of articulating "the Gospel message in a language that resonates with changing worldviews" will require all parties to understand "the beliefs, values, desires and preoccupations that attract young people to, or repel them from, considering a religious vocation." It compels generations who hold divergent views to get to know each other and for older generations to actively invite younger candidates to join them. The task for all sisters is to examine their life of prayer and ministry and commit themselves "to widen the space of their communal tents" for the sake of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ—and of regenerating their own institutes. ■



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