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Rain-soaked Truth

A few weeks ago I was standing in a cold drizzle and it hit me. I knew why—in spite of all the scandal and sin that so publicly plagues the church today—I knew why we stay and what will bring us back to health. And I think that my little glimmer of insight has something to say to vocation ministers as well.

I was at a regatta on a miserable, cold, wet day in May. For those of you who live in the blissfully pre-regatta world—as I did a mere month or two ago—high school regattas are sporting events that involve hordes of teenagers wearing spandex who, every now and then, jump into boats and propel themselves along a river. This is done while their teammates and parents stand alongside the river and shout themselves hoarse. The rowers can only hear a distant hum, but everyone cheers anyway because they've come a long distance and have given up the entire day for this moment.

The standing and shouting is a lot less fun when the weather is foul. This particular weekend the weather was as bad as the news reports about the Toledo diocese. Every day Toledoans were receiving news about Father Gerald Robinson's trial for the 1980 murder of a nun in a hospital chapel. (He was convicted and now faces a separate lawsuit for child molestation.) Other reports informed the faithful that the bishops' high profile, statehouse lobbying efforts had succeeded in preventing a backlog of child abuse cases from being tried. The damp, chilly weather was just as gloomy.

So there we were at the regatta, pulling our parkas tight, half hoping for the whole thing to end early. By afternoon the P.A. announcer informed us that a priest was on his way to say Mass at a waterside tent. He was an hour late. But the people came. And they came. And they came until the tent was

overflowing and half the Mass goers were getting a soaking as they recited the familiar prayers. Teenagers in rowing uniforms, squirming children, grandparents and parents—we crowded in and leaned forward as the Eucharistic rituals unfolded. Rain dripping down, it was silent as the priest spoke, and it was loud when we spoke. We sang hymns, we said prayers for safe travel, we held unfamiliar hands for the Lord's Prayer. Packed together, bending slightly toward the altar, we stood for the entire Mass. The hunger for an encounter with Christ was palpable.

We ran out of hosts, but I knew we had all had communion at one level anyway. As we bowed our heads at the end of the Mass, I knew at that moment that we, as a church, would persevere in spite of the disturbing events in our diocese. The sin and coverups and failure of leadership were true. But a bigger Truth sustained us and indeed had never left us. The Truth of our hunger for God, our Alpha and Omega, the Truth of Christ present and calling us to be our best selves, the mystery of the bread and wine becoming the Real Presence—these Truths were enduring. The hunger of each of us gathered in that tent, straining forward, seeking God, is the very hunger that brings energy and light into our church.

Just as we regatta families sought solid ground on the soil of our encounter with Jesus present in the Eucharist, so, too, do young adults seek solid ground. Religious communities are not utopias, but they *are* built on rich earth and have endured for many centuries. The yearning for God is abundantly present in so many young adults. May this edition of *HORIZON* and our work in this ministry, even on days when we feel only cold and rain, lead us and others toward our deepest Truth. ✚

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor

The concepts of sustainability, niche and diversity offer a helpful framework for thinking about the future of religious life.

Sustainability: new membership through an ecological lens

by Mary Pellegrino, CSJ

See, I am doing something new, even now it comes to light. Can you not see it? Do you not perceive it?

—Isaiah 43: 19

We know now more than ever before the interconnected complexities of the life and well being of the universe. Scientific discoveries and the development of human consciousness have placed at our disposal new insights, awarenesses and understandings of the nature of relationships between and among all life forms in the universe. This awareness awes and humbles us almost daily as we consider the role of the human community in helping to sustain and preserve the delicate balance of life on this planet.

More than ever before, too, ecological principles—those principles that describe and govern the natural world—have become integrated into human thought, discourse and behavior. Religious communities that have undergone building renovations in recent years have had eye and heart inclined toward the ecological implications of design, efficient use of resources and the impact on surrounding ecosystems. Care of water, air and land have emerged as increasingly urgent agenda items for the global community. We know that the same principles that describe and govern patterns and cycles in the natural world describe and govern patterns and cycles in our own lives as well.

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It's not a stretch then to reflect on our personal and communal lives as religious in light of universal ecological principles in order to discern our place in and particular contribution to God's grand design of life.

In this article I hope to reflect on three key ecological principles that contribute to the sustainability of life in all its forms. The concepts of *sustainability*, *diversity* and *niche* provide a context from which to consider the future of religious life as a particular life form in relationship to the broader human community and to all of creation. It's possible that these ecological principles can provide us with images, metaphors and concepts that might help us grapple with our practical, communal circumstances that we may have tended to view as threats to religious life. These circumstances are the diminishment of resources, an aging membership and few new members. It's possible that the language that we use to articulate concepts of sustainability in the natural world can help us to engage our emotionally-laden realities in ways that have the potential to unleash a new creativity, itself necessary for sustainability. Interspersed throughout this article are questions for individual and communal reflection and discernment.

I'd like to note here that I write, not from a studied background in science, but from an interest in finding ways to reframe the questions that religious communities grapple with today in our attempts to discern the call of God in our communal lives.

I write, too, from an interest in supporting vocation ministers in their service to their congregations and to the whole of religious life. We have in recent years become more and more clear in establishing criteria for readiness for potential candidates to enter formation processes in our congregations, and we have become

far more realistic about what we need to see in potential candidates in order for them to be able to live this life fruitfully and healthily. We know that an authentic call to religious life is made up of a mysterious constellation of desire, aptitude and particular life circumstances, and that not one of these alone will suffice in sustaining one in this life and commitment.

As we companion potential candidates through this deep discernment, we also need the skills and the language to companion our congregations through similarly deep discernment and reflection on the call of God in our communal lives, revealed through our collective and communal desires, aptitudes and particular

In an ecological context, “sustainable” could describe any environment or habitat in which a variety of life forms co-exist in a web of mutual relationship over time. With this in mind, it seems indisputable that religious life is and has been sustainable over centuries and across cultures.

life circumstances at any given time. It is nothing less than turning a discerning eye and heart toward the interior landscape of our individual and communal lives, just as we companion potential candidates in turning a discerning eye and heart toward their own interior landscapes.

While numerous ecological principles could aid in our view of the landscape, I find niche and diversity particularly compelling. Each of these contributes to the sustainability of life in all its forms and systems, and each provides a lens through which we can consider the sustainability of religious life.

A word about sustainability and religious life

The energy of the natural world is essentially directed toward balance. This is true both within and among systems and all life forms in order to continually achieve and safeguard patterns or relationships that allow life to be supported in various forms, to thrive and

to be generative and fruitful. Fundamentally the energy of the universe is directed toward right relationship, and sustainability is the fruit of right relationships.

We find Scriptural foundations of sustainability—of right relationships between humans and between the human community and all of creation—in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The creation story itself is the story of God’s original vision—one of reverence, respect and right relationship among all of creation. And the Hebrew practice of jubilee, which calls for the periodic “balancing” of human relationships as well as the human community’s relationship with the land, is rooted in God’s original vision of creation. The reign of God, which is the heart of Jesus’ life, message and ministry, continues to call the human community back into right relationship with God, with one another and with all of creation.

In an ecological context, “sustainable” could describe any environment or habitat in which a variety of life forms co-exist in a web of mutual relationship over time. For our purposes, as we look to the sustainability of religious life, a human form of community, I offer the following definition: “Sustainability, in the sense of community development, is the act of one generation saving options by passing them to the next generation, which saves options by passing them to the next generation, and so on.” (See *Sustainable Community Development: Principles and Concepts*, by Chris Maser, St. Lucie Press, Delray Beach, FL, 1997, p. xv.)

With this in mind, it seems indisputable that religious life is and has been sustainable over centuries and across cultures. Born in the early centuries of the New Testament era from the urgings of the Holy Spirit coupled with human longing, religious life as we know it today has adapted to culture and time and has contributed enormously to the well being and life of not only the church but to civilization as well. Generations of religious have created and provided options for future generations since the early centuries of the church.

Throughout history, men and women inspired by Jesus responded to elements in the culture hostile toward the Gospel with a consciously adaptive and transformative creativity. The history of religious life in Christianity is a remarkable story of intentional and conscious adaptability and sustainability, and

each of us and our congregations are part of that story at a time in history when another fervor of transformative creativity is called for.

Niche: our role in society

In the Fall 2001 issue of *HORIZON*, Catherine Bertrand, SSND, then Executive Director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, identified 10 elements that she found evident in congregations that were attracting and sustaining newer members. Several of these elements are related to identity and purpose.

From an ecological perspective, identity and purpose, as they contribute to sustainability, are related to the concept of “niche.” Niche could be defined as the particular role which a species performs within, on behalf

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of and for the benefit of the larger or whole life system. Each species participates in the cooperative and reciprocal life of the whole by contributing according to its particularity and its nature. In *In The Service of Life: Widening and Deepening Religious Commitment*, Elaine Prevallet, SL notes that “our human place in creation, able as we are to move around and manipulate the environment, requires conscious adaptation and cooperation. That means we must develop skill in discerning where our own particular gift fits with the earth community.” (p. 37). In that sense we’re called to develop our skills in discerning where our particular gifts, *precisely as religious*, fit not only with the earth community, but with the cultural and ecclesial communities as well. Both internal and external influences have, over time, helped to shape and continue to help shape our identity and self-understanding, or our niche, in relationship to all of creation.

In every era and culture “religious life,” in its most generic sense, has existed as a liminal state serving a distinct and necessary role. Diarmuid O’Murchu, notes that “every society has a structure, and a liminal community both clarifies the structure of society and can be instrumental in changing it.” (*Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*, p. 37).

O’Murchu notes that while society needs liminal groups in order to reflect back to the culture its deepest values, it is at the same time ambivalent or resistant toward these liminal groups because the reflection they provide is often challenging, serving as a corrective to what is actually taking place within the culture. Consider here the prophetic tradition in our Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as our own prophetic identity, presence and role that religious communities possess in the church and in the world. “Human civilization needs the values of the vowed life, but in a manner that challenges and inspires in the context of each new age,” writes O’Murchu (p. 38).

In the history of my own congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph, this cultural ambivalence was evident at our founding in 17th century France when the civil and ecclesial structures were unable to care for, provide for or safeguard ongoing social development. At that time, the male population had been significantly reduced and nearly decimated because of cultural stressors, such as war, disease and famine. Works ordinarily performed by men in service to the whole society were taken up by women, not by cultural or ecclesial design, but because of the urgency of the need for the culture and the church to seek stability and balance. Inspired by both their belief in God and the dire needs that were going unmet in their midst, six women from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds came together to live into what eventually became a new life form in the church and culture, “doing all the works of which woman is capable.”

While both civil and ecclesial authorities were reluctant to have women perform the works that had until then been reserved for men, the needs of the whole for stability, balance, health and wellness outweighed social convention, and apostolic religious life began to grow in that era and culture.

In *Finding the Treasure*, Sandra Schneiders notes that religious life within the Judeo-Christian tradition is related principally to the “God-quest.” She writes that “religious life is distinguished by the fact that it has no other legitimating finality except holiness, personal

union with God.” (p. 35). While for some religious communities the God-quest is engaged through apostolic works and ministries, Schneider suggests that clarity of relationship between identity and works could help to allay our fears and anxieties about an aging membership and few new members.

“If ministerial communities could re-examine the relationship between their identity as religious communities on the one hand and their ministries and finances on the other, they might discover that the felt need for numbers is, at best, exaggerated.” (pp. 83-84)

While our presence in direct ministries within the church and culture may have ebbed in recent decades, causing us to question our identity and purpose, what seems to be emerging in its stead is a growing awareness of our political, economic and moral influence within the culture and the global community.

Fewer entrants is normal

A long view of the history of religious life in Western culture, particularly in the United States, reveals that large numbers of religious or large congregations is, in fact, an historical anomaly. Sisters in my congregation who are in their 80s and 90s tell stories of entering the congregation alone or with two or three others. It was not until the 1950s or so that religious communities began to see “crowds” or “bands” or “parties” of 30, 40 or 50 or more people entering at the same time. What is happening now in terms of the numbers of men and women entering religious communities in the Western culture seems to be far more normative within the broad history of religious life than we might experience on an emotional level.

The practical dilemma that many religious communities are faced with now is fundamentally one of care of our members and stewardship of resources. It becomes a crisis of identity only if our identity is wed to a par-

ticular level of activity or to particular corporate works, both of which have natural life spans over which we may have little or no control.

While our presence in direct ministries within the church and culture may have ebbed in recent decades, causing us to question our identity and purpose, what seems to be emerging in its stead is a growing awareness of our political, economic and moral influence within the culture and the global community.

For example, nearly 100 religious congregations in the United States have non-governmental organizational (NGO) status in the United Nations, and have formed the Religious Orders Partnership, influencing the moral, economic and political climate of our global community. The language of the United Nations Charter and the UN Millennium Development Goals, clearly reflect the values of Catholic social teaching, and have indeed been significantly influenced by women and men religious serving on various UN committees or in advisory capacities. More locally, justice offices of many of our congregations engage in similar works of influence when we educate and inform our members, associates and others about what is taking place legislatively and politically in our country and around the world.

“We can’t participate in protest marches; they just don’t happen here,” noted Carol Ann Wassmuth, OSB from the Benedictine Monastery of St. Gertrude in Cottonwood, ID. The community, though, undertakes “lots of letter-writing, lots of phone calls to legislators on the federal level,” and has educated itself extensively, formulating a corporate stance on human trafficking. (“Women Religious Find New Paths,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Feb. 24, 2006.)

In addition, we are learning that the use of our economic resources, either as individual congregations or as collectives, has an enormous potential to transform the economic landscape wherever we find ourselves. In the Pittsburgh area, seven congregations of religious women participate in a program that aids them in purchasing meats and produce from local farmers, thus allowing these congregations to shift a percentage of their food dollars to the local market. The shift in food dollars allows the congregations to positively influence the practices of large corporate food service providers regarding food security and sustainable agriculture. While we may not be farming the land or managing corporations, our economic actions are educating, informing and transforming aspects of the culture.

In “Continuing the Conversation,” the Winter 2006 edition of *The Occasional Papers* of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), various women religious from a variety of backgrounds were asked to reflect on a number of questions related to critical concerns confronting religious. Nearly every responder, many of whom are congregational leaders, either directly or indirectly, addressed the need for contemplative and apostolic religious today to reclaim our contemplative and prophetic roots and identity in order to discern our purpose and meaning for this moment in time—or, as Maser notes, to save options for future generations.

Because of the decline of resources—both human and financial—we might be tempted to skip the contemplative moment or the contemplative dimension of our lives in favor of more actively generating resources. I believe that the tension here is critical, and the temptation is great to sacrifice sound formation processes and the resources needed for them.

Upholding our contemplative roots

“Perhaps our circling back to fewness is both a gift and grace,” writes Margaret Brennan, IHM. “Perhaps the religious life of the future will hold the call to be more radically contemplative in its commitment to that kind of transforming action which is the meaning of the church’s mission to further the *kingdom* of God within the processes and movements of history” (from *The Occasional Papers*, Winter 2006, LCWR).

In his address at the Religious Formation Conference’s 2005 Congress in San Antonio, TX, Donald Goergen, OP also called for religious communities to reclaim, retrieve and rethink the contemplative dimension of religious life. “We can’t,” he says, “skip in our lives or our formation the contemplative moment that grounds us. . . The more active I am, the more contemplative I must

be.”

Because of the decline of resources—both human and financial—we might be tempted to do just that, to skip the contemplative moment or the contemplative dimension of our lives in favor of more actively generating resources. I believe that the tension here is critical, and the temptation is great to sacrifice sound formation processes and the resources needed for them.

Finding ways to live creatively, contemplatively and hopefully in the tension between our deepest and most authentic identity and our very real, concrete needs is a profound and prophetic gift that religious life offers to both our culture and our church.

Consider your own congregation in the grand story of religious life. What was its original vision, its inspired impulse? At its origins, what societal or ecclesial values did your congregation reflect back to the culture and the world of the time? What values might our contemporary culture or world need to have reflected back to it now? Are any of these values connected to your congregation’s original vision or inspired impulse?

In what ways are you and your congregation’s apostolic and contemplative energies being transformed in response to both your interior and exterior landscapes? What are the options that you desire, feel called to or want to place your energies into in order to provide options for future generations? What else needs to be happening in the living systems or processes of your congregation in order for those options to become realities and to be sustained? What needs to be cultivated in both the interior and exterior landscapes of your individual and communal lives in order for your life to continue to be generative and sustainable?

Diversity: mix of ages keeps us strong

From an ecological perspective, the greater diversity an ecosystem holds, the greater its sustainable capacity. Each species within the system contributes something essential to the vitality and vibrancy of the entire system. Each performs a particular function, each plays a part in the longevity and adaptability of whole systems. Ironically, diversity serves the stability, unity and integrity of the entire system. It is one of the benchmarks of an integrated and healthy system.

Because religious life has been sustainable throughout

the centuries and across cultures during times when, by all intents and purposes, one religious congregation looked like every other congregation and everyone, by and large, did the same thing, we have to conclude that the diversity that sustains is related to something other than what we look like or what we do.

In addition, many religious congregations that would be considered “mono-cultural” with regard to ethnic or racial origins, have thrived and continue to be fruitful with no discernible cultural diversity among their members.

And while contemporary religious life itself has a diversity of expressions, historically religious life proved to be sustainable over a long period of time prior to the development of diverse expressions.

It seems that the diversity that has proven to be constant and sustainable over the centuries and across cultures is related to a diversity that successive generations bring to the whole. With persons from a variety of generations at various ages across the life span of a community, the collective consciousness of that community is shaped in such a way that it is continually informed and transformed by new experiences, perspectives, world views, consciousness and thought. And its response in and to the culture and the world is shaped by that ever-evolving collective communal consciousness. In the natural world we might call this a “feedback loop,” which provides the mechanism for a life system or form to balance itself, to adapt when necessary, and to continue to remain healthy and sustainable.

Mysterious zeal

As an indicator of religious life’s capacity for sustainability, generational diversity appears to present quite a challenge—at least in the Western world—as younger generations are largely underrepresented in our congregations. In the life cycle of human development we could conclude that the developmental energy of the majority of our members and therefore our congregations on the whole, is directed toward end-of-life issues and concerns. We could also conclude that because most religious are beyond the developmental task of generativity, that our efforts at providing options for future generations are all but passed. We *could* conclude all these things and yet, many of us are reluctant to do so, I suspect, because age reflects only one dimension of our personal and communal lives.

“It’s a very mysterious thing when all is said and done,” noted Schneiders (*National Catholic Reporter*, Feb. 24, 2006) “These people are living out the spiritual resources they’ve been developing over a lifetime. When you are living for Christ, whom you know and love, you don’t throw in the towel.”

While we experience the effects of the imbalance of few new members and aging membership in very real, practical ways in our personal and communal lives, I believe that with regard to the spirit of many of our

I believe that with regard to the spirit of many of our congregations, the lack of generational diversity is somewhat mitigated because of the adaptability and capacity of our members, regardless of age, to continue to engage in ongoing formation, theological updating, life-long learning, critical thinking and analysis, reflection and prayer.

congregations, the lack of generational diversity is somewhat mitigated because of the adaptability and capacity of our members, regardless of age, to continue to engage in ongoing formation, theological updating, life-long learning, critical thinking and analysis, reflection and prayer. All of these serve to inform and transform our individual and communal lives.

So at a time when it appears as though some congregations should just about pack it up, they are exhibiting remarkable zeal, energy and adaptability for the sake of the Gospel. In response to, or perhaps in spite of, a variety of internal environmental “stimuli,” such as fewer resources, greater demands on members, aging members and few newer members, some congregations have directed their energies toward balancing these realities in new and creative ways. While some congregations or provinces have reconfigured and merged, forming new congregations, other communities have chosen to “refound” themselves, “reconfiguring” themselves interiorly in relationship to their resources, their property and the focus of their energies.

With that said, I do believe that the diversity of thought, consciousness, life experience and world views that generational diversity ordinarily brings to any human community must be tended to intentionally and objectively if we're to continue to allow ourselves and our energies to be transformed for the sake of the Gospel in our culture today.

"We need to be intentional about creating spaces and conversations which include the passion and imagination of the women who have come to religious life since Vatican II so that their voices, although few, do not go unheard or dismissed.," writes Kristin Matthes, SNDdeN. (*The Occasional Papers*, Winter 2006, LCWR). Clearly, Matthes' insight is applicable to men's congregations as well, as they, too, consider issues and concerns arising from the lack of generational diversity.

While many congregations have made what has often been described as a "preferential option for the young," there remains, I believe, some ambivalence toward younger generations in the church that religious communities need to acknowledge, address and clarify if we are to continue to create options for future generations.

Recently I had the opportunity to work with a congregation that was attempting to restructure its vocation/formation team, as well as assess the efficacy of its formation process. One of the sisters in the study group, a college professor, noted that she wouldn't encourage any of her students to consider religious life or her congregation because they were "too conservative," the inference being that they would set the congregation back from the advances that it's made in recent years. In my conversations with members of many religious communities, I don't think that this is an isolated opinion, but I do believe that it continues to perpetuate labels, stereotypes and polarities within the church which are counterproductive to our efforts to establish mutually respectful relationships across generations in the church and in the culture.

Rigidity is a problem

Fundamentally I don't believe that ecclesiology, theology or spirituality are really at issue here at all when we consider the differences among generations in the church today. I believe that it's the rigidity and unyielding nature with which any one of us—young Catholic or seasoned religious—holds our personal view that causes the polarizations and rifts that we

might experience. In *Turning to One Another: Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Margaret Wheatley notes, "It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do" (p. 36).

One of the soul-searching questions that I believe religious, particularly in North America, are faced with today is whether or not we can imagine and will allow the charism and vowed expression of religious life and our congregations to be carried on by those who have different experiences of church and culture from the dominant experience or views within our congregations. There are diverse ecclesiologies and expressions of faith within the Catholic tradition that are alive and well both within our congregations and among young people today. I believe that the invitation this reality offers us is to find ways to establish and cultivate relationships with persons whose ecclesiology, experience of church and life experience are different from our own, but who, like ourselves, may also be called to the vowed life by a generous and mysterious God.

Religious today must be willing and able to enter into relationships with younger Catholics, and to be curious about their religious experience and the expression of their faith. We must allow them to be young as we were once allowed to be young, to be unfinished in their spiritual development as each of us was unfinished in our spiritual development at their age and as we remain unfinished even today. We must mentor younger generations of Catholics and potential members into the depth of our faith and the breadth of its expression in ways that we have been mentored by our forebears.

To dismiss a potential candidate or to refuse to extend an invitation merely because we perceive someone to be too conservative or too liberal, stifles the transformation that could take place for both the individual and the congregation during discernment and formation.

We must be able to perceive with the eye and the heart of the prophet the "something new" that God is doing in, among and through us in relationship to the larger life of the culture and the church. We must enter into relationships with those who may be different from ourselves for the sake of mutual transformation that serves a greater life.

Congregations that are able to respectfully make room for and dialogue with different and diverse perspectives, ecclesiologies and expressions of the faith

within the Catholic tradition, I believe, are far more poised for sustainability than those whose members are not able to do that or who judge the differences based on their personal experience or perspective.

I find the recent work and study in the area of spiral dynamics, a theory of human consciousness, to be particularly helpful in moving toward the type of transformation that seems to be necessary in order to embrace our current realities in fruitful ways that will continue to set a course for sustainability.

The pioneering work of Clare Graves in the area of human consciousness development, as well as more recent work with Graves' findings, provides compelling research that indicates human development proceeds through eight successive stages, called memes, which interweave, overlap and flow in waves, resulting in a dynamic spiral of unfolding consciousness. In order to more readily grasp the concepts contained in the theory each successive stage, or meme, is assigned a color. These colors identify each of the eight stages which theorists believe comprise two tiers, and "each successive stage, wave or level of existence is a state through which people pass on their way to other states of being" (*The Theory of Everything*, Ken Wilbur, p. 6).

These stages guide the development of both whole cul-

tures and individuals through stages whose primary concerns range from survival to the presence and use of power and authority, to order, to life's purpose and meaning, to the inner world and to integration of all.

I find that this theory accounts in compelling ways for the tensions that exist within the ecclesial community – and perhaps in our own communities as well – around concerns related to the function and role of authority, the relationship between church doctrine and pastoral practice, orthodoxy and fundamentalism and other concerns that represent what appears to be competing values.

In his address to the RFC Goergen playfully notes that "all hell breaks loose" when "blue" persons who are fundamentally oriented toward order and absolute truth, enter "green" communities, who are fundamentally concerned with relationships, communitarian good, and will most likely have a relativistic value system determined by fluid and competing values within a broad framework.

The momentous leap that propels an individual, a community or a culture from the first tier of consciousness to the second tier of consciousness is that capacity to grasp the inherent and functional value of each stage and level and to understand that each wave

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is “crucially important for the health of the overall Spiral.” (Wilbur, p. 11) This capacity to “transcend and include” enables each stage to go beyond its predecessor, while embracing or including it in its makeup. Until second-tier thinking is achieved those at each stage find themselves using energy to compete with those at other stages, thus diminishing energy that could be directed in more sustainable and fruitful ways and inadvertently and unconsciously providing resistance to the progressive transformation that will allow for greater understanding and relationship.

Questions to ponder

What resources do we have available to us—as individuals, congregations or constellations of congregations—for ongoing formation, life-long learning and authentic transformation and growth? In what ways are our congregations open to diverse thought, ecclesiology, expressions of faith within the Catholic tradition—both within our congregations and from younger Catholics in the Church? How can the energy of the all the generations, but particularly the younger generations within religious life be harnessed for the sake of the Gospel, the mission of Jesus Christ, and the gift of religious life itself? When we gather with one another to discern or to make decisions, to whom could we expose ourselves or whom could we include

around our table in order to help us to think, reflect and discern more holistically?

In the interconnectedness of all of life, any single act influences the whole and is an act of both faith and hope in the fidelity and generosity of God, the source and summit of the mystery of life.

The single acts of deep listening and discernment in which many religious communities are engaged with regard to their futures, the health and well-being of their communal lives, the prioritization of their values and the focusing of their energies and resources within those priorities, I believe, is a great and prophetic service that religious life offers the church and the world at this time.

In this article we’ve considered just three ecological principles—sustainability, niche and diversity—that can serve as a threshold for our ongoing reflection on the future of religious life and our unique role in life-giving relationships.

There are other principles that can serve us in similar ways, and my hope is that in our ongoing work of transformation, we each find those avenues that can open before us new vistas of consciousness and action in response to the call and promise of God ✚

Is 30 the new 20? Adolescence seems to linger much longer with this generation. Here's a look at why so many young adults feel anything but "adult."

Grow up? Not so fast

by Lev Grossman

Michele, Ellen, Nathan, Corinne, Marcus and Jennie are friends. All of them live in Chicago. They go out three nights a week, sometimes more. Each of them has had several jobs since college; Ellen is on her 17th, counting internships, since 1996. They don't own homes. They change apartments frequently. None of them are married, none have children. All of them are from 24 to 28 years old.

Thirty years ago, people like Michele, Ellen, Nathan, Corinne, Marcus and Jennie didn't exist, statistically speaking. Back then, the median age for an American woman to get married was 21. She had her first child at 22. Now it all takes longer. It's 25 for the wedding and 25 for baby. It appears to take young people longer to graduate from college, settle into careers and buy their first homes. What are they waiting for? Who are these permanent adolescents, these twentysomething Peter Pans? And why can't they grow up?

Everybody knows a few of them—full-grown men and women who still live with their parents, who dress and talk and party as they did in their teens, hopping from job to job and date to date, having fun but seemingly going nowhere. Ten years ago, we might have called them Generation X, or slackers, but those labels don't quite fit anymore. This isn't just a trend, a temporary fad or a generational hiccup. This is a much larger phenomenon, of a different kind and a different order. Social scientists are starting to realize that a permanent shift has taken place in the way we live our lives. In the past, people moved from childhood to adolescence

and from adolescence to adulthood, but today there is a new, intermediate phase along the way. The years from 18 until 25 and even beyond have become a distinct and separate life stage, a strange, transitional never-never land between adolescence and adulthood in which people stall for a few extra years, putting off the iron cage of adult responsibility that constantly threatens to crash down on them. They're betwixt and between. You could call them twixters.

Where did the twixters come from? And what's taking them so long to get where they're going? Some of the sociologists, psychologists and demographers who study this new life stage see it as a good thing. The twixters aren't lazy, the argument goes, they're reaping the fruit of decades of American affluence and social liberation. This new period is a chance for young people to savor the pleasures of irresponsibility, search their souls and choose their life paths. But more historically and economically minded scholars see it differently. They are worried that twixters aren't growing up because they can't. Those researchers fear that whatever cultural machinery used to turn kids into grownups has broken down, that society no longer provides young people with the moral backbone and the financial wherewithal to take their rightful places in the adult world. Could growing up be harder than it used to be?

The sociologists, psychologists, economists and others who study this age group have many names for this new phase of life—"youthhood," "adulescence"—and they call people in their 20s "kidults" and "boomerang kids," none of which have quite stuck. Terri Apter, a psychologist at the University of Cambridge in England and the author of *The Myth of Maturity*, calls them "thresholders."

Lev Grossman is a staff writer for TIME. ©2005 TIME Inc. reprinted by permission.

Apter became interested in the phenomenon in 1994, when she noticed her students struggling and flailing more than usual after college. Parents were baffled when their expensively educated, otherwise well-adjusted 23-year-old children wound up sobbing in their old bedrooms, paralyzed by indecision. “Legally, they’re adults, but they’re on the threshold, the doorway to adulthood, and they’re not going through it,” Apter says. The percentage of 26-year-olds living with their parents has nearly doubled since 1970, from 11 percent to 20 percent, according to Bob Schoeni, a professor of economics and public policy at the University of Michigan.

Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental psychologist at the University of Maryland, favors “emerging adulthood” to describe this new demographic group, and the term is the title of his new book on the subject. His theme is that the twixters are misunderstood. It’s too easy to write them off as overgrown children, he argues. Rather, he suggests, they’re doing important work to get themselves ready for adulthood. “This is the one

“Legally, they’re adults, but they’re on the threshold, the doorway to adulthood, and they’re not going through it.”

time of their lives when they’re not responsible for anyone else or to anyone else,” Arnett says. “So they have this wonderful freedom to really focus on their own lives and work on becoming the kind of person they want to be.” In his view, what looks like incessant, hedonistic play is the twixters’ way of trying on jobs and partners and personalities and making sure that when they do settle down, they do it the right way, their way. It’s not that they don’t take adulthood seriously; they take it so seriously, they’re spending years carefully choosing the right path into it.

But is that all there is to it? Take a giant step backward, look at the history and the context that led up to the rise of the twixters, and you start to wonder, Is it that they don’t want to grow up, or is it that the rest of society won’t let them?

School daze

Matt Swann is 27. He took 6-and-a-half years to graduate from the University of Georgia. When he finally finished, he had a brand-spanking-new degree in cognitive science, which he describes as a wide-ranging interdisciplinary field that covers cognition, problem solving, artificial intelligence, linguistics, psychology, philosophy and anthropology. All of which is pretty cool, but its value in today’s job market is not clear. “Before the ‘90s maybe, it seemed like a smart guy could do a lot of things,” Swann says. “Kids used to go to college to get educated. That’s what I did, which I think now was a bit naive. Being smart after college doesn’t really mean anything. ‘Oh, good, you’re smart. Unfortunately your productivity’s s____, so we’re going to have to fire you.’”

College is the institution most of us entrust to watch over the transition to adulthood, but somewhere along the line that transition has slowed to a crawl. In a TIME poll of people ages 18 to 29, only 32 percent of those who attended college left school by age 21. In fact, the average college student takes five years to finish. The era of the four-year college degree is all but over.

Swann graduated in 2002 as a newly minted cognitive scientist, but the job he finally got a few months later was as a waiter in Atlanta. He waited tables for the next year and a half. It proved to be a blessing in disguise. Swann says he learned more real-world skills working in restaurants than he ever did in school. “It taught me how to deal with people. What you learn as a waiter is how to treat people fairly, especially when they’re in a bad situation.” That’s especially valuable in his current job as an insurance-claims examiner.

There are several lessons about twixters to be learned from Swann’s tale. One is that most colleges are seriously out of step with the real world in getting students ready to become workers in the postcollege world. Vocational schools like DeVry and Strayer, which focus on teaching practical skills, are seeing a mini-boom. Their enrollment grew 48 percent from 1996 to 2000. More traditional schools are scrambling to give their courses a practical spin. In the fall, Hendrix College in Conway, Ark., will introduce a program called the Odyssey project, which the school says will encourage students to “think outside the book” in areas like “professional and leadership development” and “service to the world.” Dozens of other schools have set up similar initiatives.

As colleges struggle to get their students ready for real-world jobs, they are charging more for what they deliver. The resulting debt is a major factor in keeping twixters from moving on and growing up. Thirty years ago, most financial aid came in the form of grants, but now the emphasis is on lending, not on giving. Recent college graduates owe 85 percent more in student loans than their counterparts of a decade ago, according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research. In TIME's poll, 66 percent of those surveyed owed more than \$10,000 when they graduated, and 5 percent owed more than \$100,000. (And this says nothing about the credit-card companies that bombard freshmen with offers for cards that students then cheerfully abuse. Demos, a public-policy group, says credit-card

Twixters expect to jump laterally from job to job and place to place until they find what they're looking for. The stable, quasi-parental bond between employer and employee is a thing of the past, and neither feels much obligation to make the relationship permanent.

debt for Americans 18 to 24 more than doubled from 1992 to 2001.) The longer it takes to pay off those loans, the longer it takes twixters to achieve the financial independence that's crucial to attaining an adult identity, not to mention the means to get out of their parents' house.

Meanwhile, those expensive, time-sucking college diplomas have become worth less than ever. So many more people go to college now—a 53 percent increase since 1970—that the value of a degree on the job market has been diluted. The advantage in wages for college-degree holders hasn't risen significantly since the late 1990s, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. To compensate, a lot of twixters go back to school for graduate and professional degrees. Swann, for example, is planning to head back to business school to better his chances in the insurance game. But piling on extra degrees costs precious time and money and pushes adulthood even further into the future.

Work in progress

Kate Galantha, 29, spent seven years working her way through college, transferring three times. After she finally graduated from Columbia College in Chicago (major: undeclared) in 2001, she moved to Portland, Ore., and went to work as a nanny and as an assistant to a wedding photographer. A year later she jumped back to Chicago, where she got a job in a flower shop. It was a full-time position with real benefits, but she soon burned out and headed for the territories, a.k.a. Madison, Wis. "I was really busy but not accomplishing anything," she says. "I didn't want to stay just for a job."

She had no job offers in Madison, and the only person she knew there was her older sister, but she had nothing tying her to Chicago (her boyfriend had moved to Europe), and she needed a change. The risk paid off. She got a position as an assistant at a photo studio, and she loves it. "I decided it was more important to figure out what to do and to be in a new environment," Galantha says. "It's exciting, and I'm in a place where I can accomplish everything. But starting over is the worst."

Galantha's frenetic hopping from school to school, job to job and city to city may look like aimless wandering. (She has moved six times since 1999. Her father calls her and her sister gypsies.) But Emerging Adulthood's Arnett—and Galantha—see it differently. To them, the period from 18 to 25 is a kind of sandbox, a chance to build castles and knock them down, experiment with different careers, knowing that none of it really counts. After all, this is a world of overwhelming choice: there are 40 kinds of coffee beans at Whole Foods Market, 205 channels on DirecTV, 15 million personal ads on Match.com and 800,000 jobs on Monster.com. Can you blame Galantha for wanting to try them all? She doesn't want to play just the hand she has been dealt. She wants to look through the whole deck. "My problem is I'm really overstimulated by everything," Galantha says. "I feel there's too much information out there at all times. There are too many doors, too many people, too much competition."

Twixters expect to jump laterally from job to job and place to place until they find what they're looking for. The stable, quasi-parental bond between employer and employee is a thing of the past, and neither feels much obligation to make the relationship permanent. "They're well aware of the fact that they

will not work for the same company for the rest of their life,” says Bill Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution, a think tank based in Washington. “They don’t think long-term about health care or Social Security. They’re concerned about their careers and immediate gratification.”

Twixters expect a lot more from a job than a paycheck. Maybe it’s a reaction to the greed-is-good 1980s or to the whatever-is-whatever apathy of the early 1990s. More likely, it’s the way they were raised, by parents who came of age in the 1960s as the first generation determined to follow its bliss, who want their children to change the world the way they did. Maybe it has to do with advances in medicine. Twix-

“They’re not just looking for a job,” Arnett says. “They want something that’s more like a calling, that’s going to be an expression of their identity.” Hedonistic nomads, the twixters may seem, but there’s a serious core of idealism in them.

ters can reasonably expect to live into their 80s and beyond, so their working lives will be extended accordingly; and when they choose a career, they know they’ll be there for a while. But whatever the cause, twixters are looking for a sense of purpose and importance in their work, something that will add meaning to their lives, and many don’t want to rest until they find it. “They’re not just looking for a job,” Arnett says. “They want something that’s more like a calling, that’s going to be an expression of their identity.” Hedonistic nomads, the twixters may seem, but there’s a serious core of idealism in them.

Still, self-actualization is a luxury not everybody can afford, and looking at middle- and upper-class twixters gives only part of the picture. Twixters change jobs often, but they don’t all do it for the same reasons, and one twixter’s playful experimentation is another’s desperate hustling. James Côté is a sociologist at the University of Western Ontario and the author of several books about twixters, including *Generation on Hold* and *Arrested Adulthood*. He believes that the economic bedrock that used to support adolescents on their journey into adulthood has shifted alarmingly.

“What we’re looking at really began with the collapse of the youth labor market, dating back to the late ’70s and early ’80s, which made it more difficult for people to get a foothold in terms of financial independence,” Côté says. “You need a college degree now just to be where blue-collar people the same age were 20 or 30 years ago, and if you don’t have it, then you’re way behind.” In other words, it’s not that twixters don’t want to become adults. They just can’t afford to.

One way society defines an adult is as a person who is financially independent, with a family and a home. But families and homes cost money, and people in their late teens and early 20s don’t make as much as they used to. The current crop of twixters grew up in the 1990s, when the dotcom boom made Internet millions seem just a business proposal away, but in reality they’re worse off than the generation that preceded them. Annual earnings among men 25 to 34 with full-time jobs dropped 17 percent from 1971 to 2002, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Timothy Smeeding, a professor of economics at Syracuse University, found that only half of Americans in their mid-20s earn enough to support a family, and in TIME’S poll only half of those ages 18 to 29 consider themselves financially independent. Michigan’s Schoeni says Americans ages 25 and 26 get an average of \$2,323 a year in financial support from their parents.

The transition to adulthood gets tougher the lower you go on the economic and educational ladder. Sheldon Danziger, a public-policy professor at the University of Michigan, found that for male workers ages 25 to 29 with only a high school diploma, the average wage declined 11 percent from 1975 to 2002. “When I graduated from high school, my classmates who didn’t want to go to college could go to the Goodyear plant and buy a house and support a wife and family,” says Steve Hamilton of Cornell University’s Youth and Work Program. “That doesn’t happen anymore.” Instead, high school grads are more likely to end up in retail jobs with low pay and minimal benefits, if any. From this end of the social pyramid, Arnett’s vision of emerging adulthood as a playground of self-discovery seems a little rosy. The rules have changed, and not in the twixters’ favor.

Weddings can wait

With everything else that’s going on—careers to be found, debts to be paid, bars to be hopped—love is

somewhat secondary in the lives of the twixters. But that doesn't mean they're cynical about it. Au contraire: among our friends from Chicago—Michele, Ellen, Nathan, Corinne, Marcus and Jennie—all six say they are not ready for marriage yet but do want it someday, preferably with kids. Naturally, all that is comfortably situated in the eternally receding future. Thirty is no longer the looming deadline it once was. In fact, five of the Chicago six see marriage as a decidedly post-30 milestone.

"It's a long way down the road," says Marcus Jones, 28, a comedian who works at Banana Republic by day. "I'm too self-involved. I don't want to bring that into a relationship now. My wife is currently a sophomore in high school," he jokes.

One way society defines an adult is as a person who is financially independent, with a family and a home. But families and homes cost money, and people in their late teens and early 20s don't make as much as they used to.

"I want to get married but not soon," says Jennie Jiang, 26, a sixth-grade teacher. "I'm enjoying myself. There's a lot I want to do by myself still."

"I have my career, and I'm too young," says Michele Steele, 26, a TV producer. "It's commitment and sacrifice, and I think it's a hindrance. Lo and behold, people have come to the conclusion that it's not much fun to get married and have kids right out of college."

That attitude is new, but it didn't come out of nowhere. Certainly, the spectacle of the previous generation's mass divorces has something to do with the healthy skepticism shown by the twixters. They will spend a few years looking before they leap, thank you very much. "I fantasize more about sharing a place with someone than about my wedding day," says Galantha, whose parents split when she was 18. "I haven't seen a lot of good marriages."

But if twixters are getting married later, they are miss-

ing out on some of the social-support networks that come with having families of their own. To make up for it, they have a special gift for friendship, documented in books like Sasha Cagen's *Quirkyalone* and Ethan Watters' *Urban Tribes*, which asks the not entirely rhetorical question Are friends the new family? They throw cocktail parties and dinner parties. They hold poker nights. They form book groups. They stay in touch constantly and in real time, through social-networking technologies like cell phones, instant messaging, text messaging and online communities like Friendster. They're also close to their parents. TIME'S poll showed that almost half of Americans ages 18 to 29 talk to their parents every day.

Marrying late also means that twixters tend to have more sexual partners than previous generations. The situation is analogous to their promiscuous job-hopping behavior—like Goldilocks, they want to find the one that's just right—but it can give them a cynical, promiscuous vibe too. Arnett is worried that if anything, twixters are too romantic. In their universe, romance is totally detached from pragmatic concerns and societal pressures, so when twixters finally do marry, they're going to do it for Love with a capital L and no other reason. "Everybody wants to find their soul mate now," Arnett says, "whereas I think, for my parents' generation—I'm 47—they looked at it much more practically. I think a lot of people are going to end up being disappointed with the person that's snoring next to them by the time they've been married for a few years and they realize it doesn't work that way."

Twixter culture

When it comes to social change, pop culture is the most sensitive of seismometers, and it was faster to pick up on the twixters than the cloistered social scientists. Look at the Broadway musical *Avenue Q*, in which puppets dramatize the vagaries of life after graduation. ("I wish I could go back to college," a character sings. "Life was so simple back then.") Look at that little TV show called *Friends*, about six people who put off marriage well into their 30s. Even twice-married Britney Spears fits the profile. For a succinct, albeit cheesy summation of the twixter predicament, you couldn't do much better than her 2001 hit *I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman*.

The producing duo Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz, who created the legendarily zeitgeisty TV series *thirtysomething* and *My So-Called Life*, now have a pilot with ABC called *1/4life*, about a houseful

of people in their mid-20s who can't seem to settle down. "When you talk about this period of transition being extended, it's not what people intended to do," Herskovitz says, "but it's a result of the world not being particularly welcoming when they come into it. Lots of people have a difficult time dealing with it, and they try to stay kids as long as they can because they don't know how to make sense of all this. We're interested in this process of finding courage and one's self."

As for movies, a lot of twixters cite *Garden State* as one that really nails their predicament. "I feel like my generation is waiting longer and longer to get married," says Zach Braff, 29, who wrote, directed and

Most people believe that the transition to adulthood should be completed by the age of 26, on average, and that number is only going up. "In another 10 or 20 years, we're not going to be talking about this as a delay. We're going to be talking about this as a normal trajectory," says Tom Smith, director of the General Social Survey.

starred in the film about a twentysomething actor who comes home for the first time in nine years. "In the past, people got married and got a job and had kids, but now there's a new 10 years that people are using to try and find out what kind of life they want to lead. For a lot of people, the weight of all the possibility is overwhelming."

Pop culture may reflect the changes in our lives, but it also plays its part in shaping them. Marketers have picked up on the fact that twixters on their personal voyages of discovery tend to buy lots of stuff along the way. "They are the optimum market to be going after for consumer electronics, Game Boys, flat-screen TVs, iPods, couture fashion, exotic vacations and so forth," says David Morrison, president of Twentysomething Inc., a marketing consultancy based in Philadelphia. "Most of their needs are taken care of by Mom and Dad, so their income is largely

discretionary. [Many twentysomethings] are living at home, but if you look, you'll see flat-screen TVs in their bedrooms and brand-new cars in the driveway." Some twixters may want to grow up, but corporations and advertisers have a real stake in keeping them in a tractable, exploitable, pre-adult state—living at home, spending their money on toys.

Living with Peter Pan

Maybe the twixters are in denial about growing up, but the rest of society is equally in denial about the twixters. Nobody wants to admit they're here to stay, but that's where all the evidence points. Tom Smith, director of the General Social Survey, a large sociological data-gathering project run by the National Opinion Research Center, found that most people believe that the transition to adulthood should be completed by the age of 26, on average, and he thinks that number is only going up. "In another 10 or 20 years, we're not going to be talking about this as a delay. We're going to be talking about this as a normal trajectory," Smith says. "And we're going to think about those people getting married at 18 and forming families at 19 or 20 as an odd historical pattern."

There may even be a biological basis to all this. The human brain continues to grow and change into the early 20s, according to Abigail Baird, who runs the Laboratory for Adolescent Studies at Dartmouth. "We as a society deem an individual at the age of 18 ready for adult responsibility," Baird points out. "Yet recent evidence suggests that our neuropsychological development is many years from being complete. There's no reason to think 18 is a magic number." How can the twixters be expected to settle down when their gray matter hasn't?

A new life stage is a major change, and the rest of society will have to change to make room for it. One response to this very new phenomenon is extremely old-fashioned: medieval-style apprenticeship programs that give high school graduates a cheaper and more practical alternative to college. In 1996 Jack Smith, then CEO of General Motors, started Automotive Youth Educational Systems (AYES), a program that puts high school kids in shops alongside seasoned car mechanics. More than 7,800 students have tried it, and 98 percent of them have ended up working at the business where they apprenticed. "I knew this was my best way to get into a dealership," says Chris Rolando, 20, an AYES graduate who works at

one in Detroit. “My friends are still at pizza-place jobs and have no idea what to do for a living. I just bought my own house and have a career.”

But success stories like Rolando’s are rare. Child welfare, the juvenile-justice system, special-education and support programs for young mothers usually cut off at age 18, and most kids in foster care get kicked out at 18 with virtually no safety net. “Age limits are like the time limits for welfare recipients,” says Frank Furstenberg, a sociologist who heads a research consortium called the MacArthur Network on Transitions to Adulthood. “They’re pushing people off the rolls, but they’re not necessarily able to transition into supportive services or connections to other systems.” And programs for the poor aren’t the only ones that need to grow up with the times. Only 54 percent of respondents in the TIME poll were insured through their employers. That’s a reality that affects all levels of society, and policymakers need to strengthen that safety net.

Most of the problems that twixters face are hard to see, and that makes it harder to help them. Twixters may look as if they have been overindulged, but they could use some judicious support. Apter’s research at Cambridge suggests that the more parents sympathize with their twixter children, the more parents take time to discuss their twixters’ life goals, the more aid and shelter they offer them, the easier the transition becomes. “Young people know that their material life will not be better than their parents’,” Apter says. “They don’t expect a safer life than their parents had. They don’t expect more secure employment or finances. They have to put in a lot of work just to remain OK.” Tough love may look like the answer, but it’s not what twixters need.

The real heavy lifting may ultimately have to happen on the level of the culture itself. There was a time when people looked forward to taking on the mantle of adulthood. That time is past. Now our culture trains young people to fear it. “I don’t ever want a lawn,” says Swann. “I don’t ever want to drive two hours to get to work. I do not want to be a parent. I mean, hell, why would I? There’s so much fun to be had while you’re young.” He does have a point. Twixters have all the privileges of grownups now but only some of the responsibilities. From the point of view of the twixters, upstairs in their childhood bedrooms, snuggled up under their Star Wars comforters, it can look all downhill.

If twixters are ever going to grow up, they need the means to do it—and they will have to want to. There are joys and satisfactions that come with assuming adult responsibility, though you won’t see them on *The Real World*. To go to the movies or turn on the TV is to see a world where life ends at 30; these days, every movie is *Logan’s Run*. There are few road maps in the popular culture—and to most twixters, this is the only culture—to get twixters where they need to go. If those who are 30 and older want the rest of the world to grow up, they’ll have to show the twixters that it’s worth their while. “I went to a Poster Children concert, and there were 40-year-olds still rocking,” says Jennie Jiang. “It gave me hope.”—With reporting by Nadia Mustafa and Deirdre van Dyk/ New York, Kristin Kloberdanz/ Chicago and Marc Schultz/ Atlanta. †

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The question on every vocation minister's mind is how to move people toward a final decision. While there aren't any shortcuts, there are some practical steps to take.

Moving from inquirer to applicant

by Anita Louise Lowe, OSB

What needs to happen to help an individual move through the information-gathering time of vocation discernment to a time of greater discernment and, finally, to the moment of actually entering a formation program? This, it seems, is the million dollar question. How do we help individuals move from a time of inquiry to a readiness to apply for membership? How do we help these individuals to see that the call to religious life either is or is not their calling? And, if it is their calling, how do we help them to move along in their discernment, consider a variety of congregations, and, ultimately, make a choice—a decision? I'm afraid none of us has a fail-proof formula for this. My years in vocation ministry and my conversations with former discerners have taught me a few things, however, about the million-dollar question, and I hope to share them here.

Set up a response system

First, it is important to examine the process we have in place for responding to an inquirer. What do we send in the mail? A brochure, a video, a DVD? Do we send an e-mail or a letter? Is it a form letter or personalized?

As I have talked with people who are in the exploration phase, I have discovered that more and more of

them are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information they receive from all of our communities. How can we include a personal touch, allowing the person to ask questions about religious life in general and about our communities in particular? We must get information into the hands of inquirers and yet also suggest tools to help them sort through it all.

This time of initial exploration serves also as an initial time for us as vocation ministers to screen potential candidates. Does this person seem to fit us? Or should I direct her or him somewhere else? Are there impediments to proceeding which need to be addressed, such as having children or not being Catholic? If no obstacles are obvious and the person seems to be interested in our community, what can we do to stay in contact with this individual and to offer our assistance to him or her during continued discernment?

It's important to look for ways to connect...making phone calls, sending e-mails, visiting. A meeting in person can be a very important tool to move someone into more serious discernment or to help move them in a different direction. Always we need to remember to hold these individuals lightly, to encourage them to check out other communities, to read, to view websites, to visit other places, and, most importantly, to be in spiritual direction.

If someone has been discerning awhile or moves beyond the initial stages of discernment, then we can ask what that person needs to help make a good decision. Does she or he need to visit one of our mission houses? Would ministering with community members be of help? Would it be helpful to talk with another member of the community as a mentor?

Anita Louise Lowe, OSB has served in vocation ministry for her community, the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, IN, since 1997. She has been a member of the NRVC board since 2001 and currently serves on the leadership team of the board.

As we look at moving people from inquirers to applicants, though, it seems that just talking about programs isn't enough. If it were, then there could be a systematic way of moving people. "Mary" has been in discernment with us for one year; therefore she can enter next year. If only it were so easy! While much of what we do in vocation ministry can gain insights from the world of sales and recruitment, this is the point at which that can't happen anymore. This is not about closing a sale! It's not always easy to step back at such

Our job is to show discerners that they *do* have the skills and abilities to make a good choice. We can assure them that choosing to enter community or seminary is not the end of the process but rather the beginning.

times. The pressures on those of us serving in vocation ministry are great. We all want and need new members. Our community members may frequently ask us who's joining or why more individuals aren't entering. Within ourselves, even, we may feel such a push and wonder if we're truly doing a good job if we don't meet some expected "quota" of new members. But, this is about discernment and about God's call for an individual. The Spirit is at work, and we need to allow room for the Spirit to work while doing our part to help nudge and guide.

Inviting as Jesus did

So, perhaps we need to look to the model of invitation that Jesus used. In the pastoral plan that emerged from the 2002 North American Congress on Vocations, we find this model delineated into five parts: to sow, to accompany, to educate, to form, and to discern or choose.¹

When we look at the Gospels, we see that "Jesus sows the good seed of vocation in each human heart." We, too, are called to sow abundantly. Timing is crucial. While people may not act on their vocations until they are young adults, the first inclination can usually be traced back to childhood or adolescence. What are the

key moments when we can plant the seed? How can we sow in a more prolific way?

Second, "as with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus draws near to us, walks beside us, and accompanies us on our journey of faith." How are we called to accompany others? How do we allow the Spirit to guide this accompaniment? Often the simple sharing of our personal stories gives a concrete example of vocation and God's call. Can we share the struggles along the way as part of our stories, not glossing over them, yet not focusing totally on the negative aspects of our journeys?

The third step is that "Jesus educates us, drawing out those truths about ourselves that we ourselves did not yet know." Drawing out someone's truth is the root of the word, "to educate." How can we help inquirers see the link between increased self-knowledge and the revelation of God's call in their lives? How can we assist them to see and accept their strengths, weaknesses and fears? How can we help them through this process so that they can be ready to embrace their true selves, and, therefore, their true callings? In addition, how can we help inquirers to develop their relationship with God so that they encounter a real and heartfelt presence of God, of Jesus? Perhaps we can assist them with prayer, helping them to be in the silence and assisting them in examining their lives in the context of prayer.

The fourth step is that "Jesus forms us along the way, teaching us to recognize him as we reflect on our experience with him on the road." In the Emmaus story, the disciples' eyes were opened. Can we be attuned to such "peak," eye-opening moments for those who have contacted us? Can we notice and help the individuals to discover the truth God is seeking to reveal to them? We must risk noticing these moments as times when we can call a person to make a choice, to commit. Further, we must challenge discerners to act on the gift they have received without being pushy or overbearing.

The final moment as we look at Jesus' example is that, "in the light of what has been revealed in this discernment, Jesus calls to an explicit and effective choice and sends us on a mission." How do we help inquirers see that they need to choose... that, at some point, they need to get off the fence. We know there are perpetual discerners. How can we move them? What do they need to make a choice and go with it? Our job is to show discerners that they *do* have the

skills and abilities to make a good choice. We can assure them that choosing to enter community or seminary is not the end of the process but rather the beginning. While it needs to be a serious decision, it's not a commitment for life right away. We can show them and share with them our own commitments, our own choices in life and be an example for them as they strive to make good choices in their lives.

This leads to the question of how do we, who are religious and priests, witness to the vocation of our lives? What do people see when they observe us? Do they see people who are too busy, frazzled, or overworked? What does that say to them? How would that attract them to inquire into this vocation for themselves?

Or do they see peaceful, joyful, and fulfilled individuals? We do not need to be false and put on a face that's not true, but we do need to ask ourselves what would encourage someone to join us in our vocation if they do not see us as living a basically joy-filled existence. Young people know that all marriages are not bliss and that not every day of any life, including religious life, is forever happy. But if they only see us as tired, frustrated, and perhaps even angry, why would they want to be like us?

New membership can come down to our being visible so young people know what we do and why and how we do our ministries. But, more importantly, do young adults know who we are, what makes us tick, and, most importantly, what makes us commit our lives?

Since I couldn't come up with the million-dollar answer to the question of how to move inquirers to applicants, I decided that perhaps it would be most helpful to hear the stories of some women and men who recently made that move. I wanted to learn what helped or hindered them.

When asked what helped them to move from a time of inquiry to application for membership, one person reported that visiting the community and feeling a sense of being "at home" was key. She felt welcomed, yet not pressured to decide to enter. Rather she felt she could allow God to lead the process. She said that she also felt free to ask questions and that no question was too silly to ask.

Another person said that being immersed in the sisters' lives for a week was very important. It allowed her to see sisters in their "real" life, where she observed that they were down to earth. She also reported that she

was encouraged to visit other places and that this gave her a sense of freedom in her choice. She found it important to be able to talk with others who were also discerning. In addition, it was helpful to be connected with sisters other than the "dreaded" vocation director in order to ask questions! Another woman mentioned that meeting with the prioress during weekend visits was helpful. She appreciated the freedom to talk about fears, trepidations, challenges and hopes, and to be who she was while being challenged to grow.

One woman said that the sisters' interest in meeting her without making her feel "sucked in" as the community's only hope of survival was very important

Others commented that discernment took lots of prayer! And that the offer of a retreat at a seminary seemed non-threatening and didn't require much commitment. One person said that the support of his family was key and that learning about the process to become a priest helped demystify it. This man also found written discernment questions to be of great help. A woman mentioned that when she visited a community she felt genuinely cared for.

Another woman said that the patience of the vocation director was important, as was the community's efforts to keep in touch. She also found helpful the offer to have a sister visit her when that sister was traveling. In fact, it was this visit that gave her the incentive to make a trip to visit the community.

Another man, a third year seminarian now, said that it was helpful for him to encounter seminarians and also to go to the seminary to visit, to see the environment within which he might be. He also said that he needed some space, some quiet time to be away from the routines of life in order to reflect and think, so he made some retreats. He found it helpful to be separated from concerns, responsibilities and distractions.

One woman said that the sisters' interest in meeting her without making her feel "sucked in" as the community's only hope of survival was very important.

She said that she felt a freedom to come because she felt free to go. She said that meeting some other vocation directors and finding them “desperate” was a turn off. Such experiences made her want to run quickly in the other direction!

Another woman said that it was helpful to interact with sisters of a variety of ages. She also said it is helpful for the vocation director to not be overly excited when someone moves into a deeper discernment. ... too much excitement can feel like control and pressure. Another woman told me that having our video to show her family and friends was very helpful, as was bringing her family to visit the community. One woman mentioned the help of participating in normal conversations at the dinner table, interacting with a variety of ages, the personal touches in the mail we sent, and our Web site with its daily photo blog.

When asked what hindered them, the replies were as follows: my own fears of whether I could be a good sister, brother, priest. Several mentioned that their families were a hindrance, at least at first. Also, overly eager vocation directors who didn’t want to let go were a major hindrance. One mentioned that it was difficult when she visited a community and could only meet the older sisters--at times she felt that she might be the sole provider for these sisters, and that was scary. At the same time, peers in the community were not the only deciding factor. Other hindrances included hearing sisters complain about other sisters, and misperceptions on the discerner’s part about the life of a priest or religious. A seminarian stated that he was hindered at first by looking at seminary not as continual discernment but as entry into the priesthood. He believed he had to be 100 percent sure before he started seminary.

Another man mentioned the nagging questions in his mind: What if I decide to leave? Would I be okay? Would I be able to start over? This same man said letting go of his current support system was a challenge.

Regarding what could have been more helpful in the process or transition, a suggestion was made that new members check in with the vocation director once a month for awhile after entering the community. This would allow entrants to check whether what they experience is a normal part of the transition. Another suggested that entrants better understand life after the initial year or two. A priest recommended a pastoral year as a time to live and see the life of a parish priest prior to ordination.

On a practical note, one woman said that when communicating initially with so many communities, it would be most helpful to identify a name and e-mail with a community and location. (This involves using an e-mail “signature” so that your name, community and address appear at the bottom of each e-mail. The “help” section of your e-mail software should explain how to do this.) One cannot assume that the individual will remember which vocation director goes with which community. A seminarian suggested presenting more information in non-threatening ways. And a newer member to religious life suggested having family members visit the community prior to entrance.

These are the gleanings from a variety of individuals either in formation or recently ordained. Perhaps their words and experiences can help as we accompany those in discernment, as we try to help them move along in their decision-making.

There is no one answer to the question of how to move someone in this process. Sometimes the approach needs to be gentle and caring. At other times, we might need to be more forceful—kicking someone off the fence or at least nudging the person to move independently. Perhaps what is most needed on our part is patience, prayer and perseverance. The task of helping someone discern requires prayer and discernment on our parts. How can we be like Jesus as we invite men and women to follow this way of life? Most importantly, I believe, is that we not act desperate or clingy or hold people with tightly clenched hands. We have to always remember that discernment isn’t about trying to convince a person to join one congregation over another or telling a person which orders to visit and which ones not to visit. Also, we, as vocation ministers, are not in control of a person’s calling, and we need to walk that fine line that exists between inviting and harassing an individual who is discerning. We need to act with faith, to encourage, to hold lightly, and to allow individuals to hear and respond to God’s call, whatever that may be. In the end, it’s really up to the Spirit, and then it’s up to us to listen, to discern, to act—all under the guidance of that same Spirit. ✚

1. *Conversion, Discernment, Mission: Fostering a Vocation Culture in North America*. Pastoral Plan of the Third Continental Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life in North America. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Those who go through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults experience both education and transformation. What can vocation ministers learn from the wisdom of RCIA?

Lessons for vocation ministers from the RCIA

by Joel Schorn

Many vocation ministers today have noted a lack of basic formation in Catholicism on the part of candidates for religious life. The issues, says one vocation minister, are, first, “a lack of basic catechesis of even foundational teachings and traditions. The second is the challenge of discerning with those who are suddenly in love with Catholicism and have become deeply committed Catholics but interpret this as a call to religious life.” Many candidates have not had much, if any, religious education since childhood and have little idea how the church has developed in the last few decades.

Like vocation ministry, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) deals with people who sometimes have only partial knowledge of the Catholic faith but who at the same time have experienced some kind of conversion and have expressed an interest in joining the Catholic community in some form. Both take people through stages of discernment, formation and initiation.

In this article I do not want merely to draw parallels between the RCIA process and discernment of a vocation to religious life, interesting though those con-

nections may be. Rather, I would like to highlight some aspects of what happens in the RCIA that I think are relevant to the tasks of vocation ministers, especially as they work with candidates who may be lacking in basic Catholic formation.

Origins of the RCIA

When the Second Vatican Council called for renewal of the way adults entered the Catholic Church, it was responding in part to calls, first, from the church in developing countries where large influxes of people were seeking to enter and, second, from the church in places where people were lacking in basic knowledge and experience of the Catholic faith, such as Europe. The renewed rites of initiation of adults were also part of the council’s principle of turning to the early church as a source for present-day renewal. The new Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults drew heavily on the early Christian process of bringing adults into the church—adult initiation, not infant baptism, being the norm in the early church. Also consistent with a return to Christian basics was the new rite’s emphasis on conversion and discipleship in the initiation process.

The new rite was to be a means not only of evangelization of potential new members, but re-evangelization of the whole church. It also made public what had been largely a private affair. The witness of participating in rites and other events would serve to reawaken in the rest of the faithful an awareness of their own involvement in the church.

Questions from RCIA for vocation ministers

Those seeking to enter religious life today tend to be older than in the past and have a variety of life experiences. Do your vocation discernment efforts take their

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adult experiences into account and encourage them in Christian discipleship, eventually to be lived out in the church through your community?

When faced with candidates for religious life who lack basic Catholic knowledge and experience, it's natural for a vocation minister to want to throw up her or his hands in despair. But this "deficit" can also be an opportunity. Longtime Catholics frequently express the wish that they would have had the kind of formation those in RCIA receive. While it will be more work to

When faced with candidates for religious life who lack basic Catholic knowledge and experience, it's natural for a vocation minister to want to throw up her or his hands in despair. But this "deficit" can also be an opportunity.

bring the undercatechized candidate along, is it not also a blessing and a huge potential benefit to welcome a person who, with zeal, has become a newly formed and newly informed Catholic before your very eyes? The effort will probably be worth it.

Are there ways for those interested in your community to re-energize your whole community? Can their desire to join you "re-evangelize" current members to reflect on the privilege, joy and responsibility of religious life, and therefore make your communities a more effective witness to candidates?

Evangelization and precatechumenate

The initial phase of the RCIA is called the period of evangelization and precatechumenate. The use of the word evangelization is a bit loose: it is not as if evangelization is confined to this period. In all likelihood a degree of evangelization has already taken place in the lives of the inquirers. Some combination of life events and God's grace moved these women and men to step forward and express an interest in becoming part of the church. At this point evangelization primarily entails the response to what has happened to the inquirers.

The fact that these people are presenting themselves is also the result of the parish community's outreach to potential inquirers through publicity, personal contacts, word of mouth and other means. In this sense, reaching out to possible new members really needs to be part of a parish's whole evangelization effort, an effort that draws on Pope Paul VI's words in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "Evangelizing is, in fact, the grace and vocation proper to the church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize...."

But some spreading of the Good News also occurs in this period after the inquirers have come forward to meet regularly as a group with the RCIA ministry team. The precatechumenate is essentially a mutual "getting to know" period. The team previews the RCIA process, while the inquirers share their stories of what brought them to this point. The good news, both of the inquirers' stories and of what the church has to offer, is shared.

The goal of the precatechumenate is to get to the point where the inquirers feel they have enough information about the Catholic way of life to make a decision about whether they want to continue, and the team feels it knows the inquirers well enough to affirm their readiness to move to the next phase. Any potential problems the inquirers may have can be discussed. Toward the end of the precatechumenate, if the inquirers are going to continue, a sponsor is found who will accompany them throughout the entire RCIA process. At its best, the precatechumenate is a year-round activity, not merely a feeder stage that comes up only once a year. Ideally a parish would have a precatechumenate group up and running all year.

The spirit of the precatechumenate is informal, non-committal, nonjudgmental, hospitable and open. The RCIA team welcomes the inquirers and their interest without making them feel their showing up implies a commitment at this time. Inquirers should feel free to ask about anything or express any concerns they have.

Questions from the precatechumenate period for the vocation minister

Do all the able members of your community see themselves as evangelizers, especially when it comes to attracting candidates? Does your community get out a vocation message in every way it possibly can, not only through the vocation office but in its ministries, on the Internet and in other media, and in every other place it presents its face to the world? Is your effort to

attract people a year-round, ongoing activity, not confined to certain times or places?

Is the period of exploration with candidates one where you hear their story and tell them the story of your community? Is enough information exchanged so that both of you get to know one another enough to allow for both of you to make good decisions about further

Do your initial interactions with potential candidates have a spirit of informality and openness? Do the people you talk with feel they have the freedom to ask about anything they have on their minds?

pursuing membership? Does your account of your community's life provide a thorough introduction to that life?

Do your initial interactions with potential candidates have a spirit of informality and openness? Do the people you talk with feel they have the freedom to ask about anything they have on their minds? Are you nonjudgmental of people enough to avoid subtly discouraging them, as if you have already begun the "weeding out" process in your mind?

The catechumenate

With the celebration of the rites of acceptance and welcome, inquirers formally enter their preparation for full membership in the church. They become candidates (the baptized) and catechumens (the unbaptized).

As the name of this period implies, the focus of the catechumenate is catechesis, especially in the areas of message, community, service and worship. Within the given constraints on time and energy, the catechumenate is the time to offer as complete as possible a general education in the Catholic Christian faith. Many times the RCIA process begins from the ground up, starting with basic questions like who is God, who am I, and what is the purpose of my life? It can also use a

Trinitarian and creedal approach that starts with what faith is and what it means to believe in God, the meaning of belief in Jesus and the Gospel he proclaimed, embodied and witnessed to, and the action of the Holy Spirit.

Once this foundation has been laid, one can move on to the nature of the church and its relationship to faith. Avery Dulles' models of church as institution, mystery, herald of the gospel, community, and servant can be particularly helpful in this area. They provide a way to understand the church in its different dimensions and to see how those dimensions must be in balance for the church to function well. The models are also useful because they overlap nicely with the catechetical emphases on message, community, service and worship. And they also serve to introduce more in-depth discussion of Scripture, sacraments, the church as communion, prayer, liturgy, morality and social teaching. In addition to these topics, people in RCIA usually have questions regarding what Catholics believe about the Blessed Virgin Mary, the communion of saints, especially prayer to saints, and the hierarchical and teaching authority of the church.

Throughout the period of the catechumenate, the RCIA leadership team also looks for evidence of conversion on the part of the candidates and catechumens. Have their ways of thinking and acting changed? People going through RCIA are almost always in the process of conversion. Their conversion may have started before they entered RCIA—in fact, it may have brought them there—and it certainly should continue in RCIA and beyond. They entered the process at a certain stage of faith, which will hopefully continue to develop. They benefit when others acknowledge their progress and encourage them to continue.

At the same time, it is wise not to press too hard for signs of conversion on the part of the candidates and catechumens. As part of their conversion, they are leaving behind parts of their identity and moving into new ways of being. In these "liminal moments," candidates and catechumens are somewhat exposed and vulnerable.

Questions from the catechumenate period for the vocation minister

Might your discernment and formation processes, especially when you are dealing with undercatechized individuals, benefit from a "catechumenate" period? This could be a time in which the people with whom

you are working go through a process of education in the faith tailored to their level of knowledge. Perhaps you could come up with a short but solid mini-curriculum of Catholic studies.

Would it help for your candidates to have a “sponsor,” someone from the community who would walk with them through their discernment process? The relationship could be as formal as spiritual direction, which many communities already utilize, or as informal as a friendly companion who has experience of religious life and can help the person discern his or her compatibility with it.

Is the discernment process sensitive to your candidates’ stages of faith—as well as their capacity to grow?

Might your discernment and formation processes, especially when you are dealing with undercatechized individuals, benefit from a “catechumenate” period? This could be a time in which the people with whom you are working go through a process of education in the faith tailored to their level of knowledge. Perhaps you could come up with a short but solid mini-curriculum of Catholic studies.

Do you acknowledge progress in your candidates’ discernment and encourage them in finding their vocation?

Purification and enlightenment

The Rites of Election (for catechumens) and the Continuing Call to Conversion (for candidates) mark the end of the catechumenate and the beginning of what is known as the period of purification and enlightenment. At these rites, the candidates and catechumens express their final decision to become members of the church, and the church, in the person of the bishop and the assembly, affirm their call to membership.

In this period the emphasis is not on catechesis in terms

of internalizing information, but more on spiritual preparation for celebrating the sacraments of initiation. This period coincides with Lent, the Rite of Election usually taking place on or around the First Sunday of Lent.

As the elect approach full initiation, they use this period to deepen their spiritual connection with the church, primarily through growth in prayer, both personal and public. But, with the whole church, they are also deepening their relationship to the paschal mystery. They prepare for Easter, not only as the time of their initiation, but also as the celebration of the passion and resurrection of Jesus.

Throughout both the catechumenate and enlightenment periods, minor rites are celebrated in addition to the major rites. These include anointing and other blessings, scrutinies and presentations of the creed and Lord’s Prayer.

This period ends, as does Lent itself, with the Triduum and the celebration of the Easter Vigil. At the Vigil, as part of the initiation rites that with the liturgies of the Word and Eucharist make up the vigil, the unbaptized are baptized, confirmed, and receive communion with the rest of the assembly. The baptized are received into the Catholic Church, confirmed, and receive communion with the rest of the assembly.

Questions from the purification and enlightenment period for the vocation minister

Do you offer a balance of education and spiritual preparation to those interested in being part of your community? Do you find ways to integrate education and spiritual preparation while giving each of these areas enough attention on their own?

Is there a place in the discernment process for “minor rites”—informal blessings, presentations and so on—that would symbolize and celebrate the candidates’ journeys through discernment?

Mystagogia

This Greek term means “entering into the mysteries” and refers to the period of reflection on membership in the body of Christ on the part of the newly initiated. It formally lasts from Easter to Pentecost, but of course it, like conversion, really lasts a lifetime. This period also presents an excellent opportunity for the newly initiated to find their place in the church community, whether that be in a parish group or ministry

or simply settling into the vocation of being a practicing Catholic.

One unique thing the “neophytes” have to offer is what one writer on the RCIA has called a “charism for evangelization.” While, as we know, evangelization is the responsibility of all members of the church, the newly initiated’s experience of responding to evangelization, experiencing conversion and taking concrete and courageous steps to connect with a Christian community are fresh in their minds and hearts; and they may be able to share this experience with others in a special way.

Questions from the period of mystagogia for the vo-

cation minister

What efforts does your community make to help candidates, those in formation, or even those recently professed to find their place in the community’s life?

Do the recently professed have an opportunity, such as a retreat, to reflect on what they have just experienced, or do they tend to plunge into ministry without looking back?

Have you ever considered asking the recently professed to take advantage of their experience by devoting some time to vocation work?

Resources

The 2005 issue of *VISION* magazine contains the article, “Enter the holy mysteries: Books for Catholic seekers,” which offers an annotated list of books recommended by vocation ministers on Catholic life and spirituality, vocation, Scripture, church, sacraments, theology, the saints and Mary, mission, ministry, history, sexuality and stewardship. This article is also available online at www.visionguide.org.

While forming and educating newcomers in the faith, the Rite of Christian Initiation often elicits profound, life-altering experiences. Catechumens and candidates grow, learn and are stretched. It’s not hard to find parallels in vocation ministry. Deep-seated transformations frequently occur during the process of discernment with a vocation minister. The discernor often discovers new depths and new identities within him or herself. RCIA offers vocation ministers fruitful terrain for reflection as they seek new ways to walk with those who turn to them in trust. ✚

The U.S. Passionists knew they needed a new way to do formation. Here's the story of how they came to that realization and what they did.

Creating a welcoming community that can help form new members

by Kenneth O'Malley, CP

Take a community that hasn't seen a new member in a decade. Add three young men who want to join and who are not from the community's dominant culture. What do you get? If you're the U.S. Passionists, you'll get a whole new way of doing formation. Here's the story behind one community's attempt to reinvent the way they welcome and incorporate new members.

The Congregation of the Passion, popularly known as the Passionists, was founded in Italy in 1721, by Paul Daneo, better known as St. Paul of the Cross. This charismatic founder is recognized as one of the great 18th century mystics.

Initially, his followers were to be a group of men, and later women, dedicated to the preaching of the Passion and Death of Christ. The Passionist community, like so many other communities at this time, was regarded as a monastic-apostolic community. The members were committed to the full recitation of the Divine Office, spent several hours a day in communal prayer, and study. It sailed under the flags of prayer, penance, poverty and solitude. The ideal for the membership was to spend six months of the year preaching the passion as itinerants, and the other six months they were expected to be on their knees in monasteries at the foot of the cross. This was the context for all formation programs from the beginning.

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This, also, was pretty much the way it was when the Passionists came to the United States in 1852 to Pittsburgh, PA. It continued this way up until the early 60s when there were dramatic shifts because of Second Vatican Council's emphasis on renewal of religious life and the major social changes that faced the Church and religious communities. Clerics studying to become ordained ministers needed to be equal in preparation for their profession to other professionals, such as doctors and lawyers. Not only did the rigor of studies increase substantially, but as that happened, the Liturgy of the Hours and the liturgical feasts were undergoing changes. Up until this shift, the monastic-apostolic spirituality formation prevailed, and the horarium of the communities was uniform from monastery to monastery throughout the United States, and more than likely, throughout the world. But a shift necessarily had to take place.

With the demands for academic excellence accelerated and the monastic horarium mitigated, another change took place in the formation program for the United States Passionists. Up until this time, the monastic horarium was an integral part of the formation program. The masters of novices and the directors of students were to be holy men who lived exemplary lives. Most of these men were strong, larger than life figures, intellectually and spiritually, but they did not have to be so necessarily. They were to be the spiritual guides and mentors, communicating with the candidates the charism of the community, its history, knowledge of its founder, and the gift of discernment. This was usually a 10-year process, from postulancy to ordination for clerical students or from postulancy to final profession for brother candidates. However, with the changes that took place in the 1960s, this changed too. Also, at this time, the

Passionists began to define themselves not as having a monastic-apostolic spirituality but a contemplative-apostolic spirituality, a major shift.

The strong novice master model

The monastic horarium lent itself to a very contemplative mindset. What happened in the 60s—with the emphasis away from the monastic horarium—is that the responsibility for formation also shifted from the horarium to the persons of the master of novices and director of students. These men were expected to be larger than life and to bear the most responsibility for the communication of the charism and the character formation of the candidates. This was a tremendous responsibility for any one person, because it was through

Rather than the masters and directors being the most forceful element in the formation of candidates, the *community* has emerged as the primary element.

an uncharted wilderness they had to lead their disciples to get to the promised lands of final vows or ordination. Some who were called and anointed for this task were equal to it, some were not. It asked an awful lot of one person. So as previous generations remembered the important and dominant force in their formation to be the monastic horarium, this generation would remember these Olympians of wise, strong and forceful masters and directors. This model lasted up into the new millennium when another shift took place in the formation of the candidates to the Passionists in the United States.

What is happening in the Passionist community in formation in the United States, is probably happening throughout the entire congregation. The Passionists are in 56 countries throughout the world. As the number of candidates diminished, collaborative models of formation emerged. In the United States in 1981, between the two United States provinces, a joint novitiate was placed in the Eastern Province, Pittsburgh, PA, and later Shrewsbury, MA, and the joint theologate for both provinces was in Chicago at the Catholic Theo-

logical Union. This type of collaboration is also taking place in Northern Europe, Italy, Africa and Latin America. Frequently the master of novices may be from the Eastern Province of the Passionists, and the director of students will be from the Western Province, or vice versa.

Another change in this new millennium for U.S. Passionists is that candidates coming to the community are not all from the dominant culture. These candidates are coming from the Hispanic and Asian communities. After a nearly 10-year hiatus without candidates in the Western Province of the Passionists, there are now three candidates. So another shift was seen as necessary for a viable formation program to take place. So, just as there was a shift from the monastic horarium as the dominant shaper in the formation program, to the larger than life masters and directors, more recently another shift has been seen as necessary. Rather than the masters and directors being the most forceful element in the formation of candidates, the *community* has emerged as the primary element.

A communal approach to formation

We decided as a community to have a pre-novitiate program in which candidates could finish undergraduate studies before entering the novitiate. It was decided this program would be in Houston, where there is both a community residence and an active retreat center.

Eight Passionists live in this community. All have agreed upon a schedule in which there is maximum participation. All of them are committed to spending time with new candidates. All members of the community are involved, to some degree, in the formation of the candidates. There is a local leader, who is also the formation director; another who is a co-local leader, and a co-formation director. The others are very conscious of being role models for the candidates. They are present to the candidates and to one another as much as their schedules allow, as tutors, academic advisors, etc. This program was hammered out and shaped with the help of Carole Riley, CDP, who acted as a resource person and facilitator as the elements of the program took shape. The meetings were not always easy—and the change involved was sometimes taxing, but the community persevered. At these meetings, representatives from the other house of formation, the academic advisor for both provinces, and the provincial councilors responsible for formation also participated. (See the next article on page 30 for more on the process.)

We used the same process to shape the joint-novitiate program, which was positioned in Citrus Heights, in Sacramento, CA. As in Houston, there is an active retreat center attached to the community residence. In both communities all the members have covenanted to take a responsible role in the formation of the three novices there. In both of the communities there is a local leader for the total community, a director or master, two retreat directors from the retreat centers, as well as four other men. These men are full time itinerants, chaplains or semi-retired. In both sites, there are elders who are considered crucial to the formation as transmitters of the tradition, as wisdom figures. We have found that the inter- and intra-generational membership in these formation communities is both healthy and growth-inducing.

The next step in the journey for these young men will be to join the Passionist Community in Chicago at the Catholic Theological Union. (The Passionists were one of the three CTU founding communities.) The CTU community of Passionists has been a site for formation since 1968. It has been a joint theologate since 1981 for both United States provinces. In order to make sure there is a seamless transition and no dissonance between the pre-novitiate, the novitiate, and the theologate program, Carole Riley, CDP will meet with the formation teams and the Passionist community at CTU. This meeting will be held as *HORIZON* is being published in June, 2006. Our goal is to maximize the harmony throughout the total program for its participants.

Hopefully the above sketch of the Passionist formation program in the United States will assist other communities. Perhaps it can begin a conversation of what other formation programs look like, what has proven helpful and what has not. In the sharing, we will all be enlightened and strengthened in our service to building up the reign of God and furthering our missions. ✚

This author led a men's community through a five-year process of evaluating its way of incorporating new members and creating a new way to meet that need.

Process for preparing a community to welcome and mentor new members

by Carole Riley, CDP

My challenge in this article is to present the process of several years within a few pages. I feel like the artist asked how the Beethoven sonata is interpreted. The community, like the sonata, exists, has a history, and has intact items, rubrics, and dynamics. The community can go through the motion of playing the notes or following the rules, while actually living out of touch with the inner significance of the music. Or the community can interpret and artistically play the music. The community with whom I worked, is composed of artists of the spirit. The whole community participated in the interpretation of the "work" and played a part in creating an atmosphere of acceptance for new members.

My fear in endeavoring to describe this process is that the reader may assume that to play the notes and do the exercises will yield an artistic rendition of the sonata. The real change agents were members of the community who displayed spiritual maturity, emotional integration, courageous conflict management and willingness and ability to correct the course of the process as it moved along. A steadfast council, good leadership and a consistent facilitator helped to keep the clarity needed for the changes to occur. We developed a shared history together.

Several years ago, I was invited by the province voca-

tion director of the Passionists to present the concept of a mentoring community for initial formation. (See the preceding article by Kenneth O'Malley, CP.) The community was frustrated because the vocation program did not seem to be working, and inquirers did not stay long in their discernment program. The last profession had taken place in 1995. Adding to the need for adjustments was a new challenge that had presented itself: the need to welcome an Hispanic candidate. The group to whom I presented the mentoring community concept included the provincial council, the formation team and any interested members of the community at large. We began with a preliminary meeting that included a presentation, discussion, reflection and dialogue. We asked foundational questions at this preliminary meeting, which evoked a charged, emotional response. (See "Creating a welcoming community that can help form new members" on page 27.)

A few months later the community invited me to develop a process to make concrete the mentoring process in the house of initiation, that is, the first living experience of the new members. A group of members at large and persons interested in learning about the mentoring process attended. A shift to a formation process carried out in a mentoring community was a big change for this congregation. The old system gave the formation director all the authority and responsibility for formation; the new mentoring process meant sharing this authority and responsibility. The agenda at the second meeting included identifying what was needed to "put new wine into new wine skins." The group reflected on the essentials of their charism, endeavoring to separate the essentials from the accretions. The day ended with a statement of how they saw themselves, what they had to offer new members, and

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why they stayed and were interested in the new member process.

After this meeting, and with men waiting to enter the community, the decision was made to gather a mentoring community and to admit the men to the pre-novitiate. At this time, a novice director and novitiate house did not yet exist, but the group embraced the concept of a mentoring community for the formation process. The leadership council was involved in all meetings as observers and participants. This level of support was invaluable to the process because change was happening. In retrospect, the group acknowledged that the whole community was affected by the change in lifestyle at the formation level.

The goal was to have the new member become identified with the community charism through the mentor models.

First meeting

The initial meeting entailed surfacing how the mentoring community would be different from the formation community of the past. All participants were committed to embracing the mentoring concept wherein each individual had a formation task, and the new members would have equally important tasks. At this meeting the goals for the community were set on a three-tier level: 1) goals for the professed community in relationship to the formator, 2) goals for the formator and the new members and 3) goals for the professed members and the formator. The latter would share the responsibility for formation.

The group felt that if they were successful in their embrace of the potential member as a *member*, not as a trainee, then issues of belonging and commitment would be resolved more effectively. This view helped new members identify with the mission and ministry and relate as adults with other adults. The formator was the animator of the community setting, which housed several ministries. The formators met with the professed community separately for feedback and con-

sultation.

The new members were ready for the novitiate within a year. The questions of who, where, and how this mentoring model would continue were addressed in a goal-setting meeting which included members of the pre-novitiate and the newly formed novitiate mentoring community.

When the novitiate was established, a similar process was developed. I facilitated two meetings a year. The agenda was set in the previous meeting. What questions would need to be addressed? Simply, *the group asked what was working, what was not working, what needed to change, what process would be used to change, and how the change would be evaluated.* The group was faithful. These questions formed the core of our work together.

How did we solve problems? Initially, resistance to change characterized the interaction. Anger, grief, and frustration yielded only when members decided that continuing on the same path would mean the death of the community. We developed materials for reflection and discussion, and the role of emotion in the change process was kept central. Daily issues were addressed at the local level with one of the systems developed during the mentoring meetings. Unforeseen problems that emerged were handled by applying the principles set up by the group. The goal was to have the new member become identified with the community charism through the mentor models. With a sense of belonging and with a specific role to play in the ministry and mission, the new member was free to participate more fully in the formation process.

During the novitiate, although the role of the formator-novice director increased, the mentoring community concept continued through the changes in the schedule that modeled mature living of the life. A significant amount of time was spent on the physical set-up of the house, in order to allow natural relationships to develop and to prevent isolation of the novices.

The new members were included in the evaluation and planning meetings. All followed the same process.

Scheduling

Most meetings required arriving the night before. The meeting lasted from 9-5, which included shared meals, liturgy and process time. The evening was sometimes a session and sometimes sharing. We followed the open space rule that when we were done, we were

done. The exact processes were developed between the person appointed as liaison (normally the formation director for either the pre-novitiate or novitiate) and myself. How did we do that? The liaison provided specifics of the goals, needs, fears and problems that needed to be surfaced or addressed. I developed a process to achieve those goals.

What facilitated the success? The individual members were committed to the mentoring process and were able to respond differently in situations that were formerly "rote." They had a tolerance, love and understanding of one another that evoked honest dialogue, with no one controlling or being controlled. I observed

What facilitated the success? The individual members were committed to the mentoring process and were able to respond differently in situations that were formerly "rote." They have a tolerance, love and understanding of one another that evoked honest dialogue, with no one controlling or being controlled.

their interactions, which were often characterized by emotion because of the depth of the change that was being envisioned.

Good communication between those who were closely involved in the process and the larger religious community also contributed to a successful outcome. The leadership council and formation community educated the larger community about the process as it unfolded. They asked candidates to write articles about their formation for the community newsletter. They also introduced candidates to members of the larger community.

Other factors that contributed to our success were: the consistency of the councils' presence and support, the training and openness of the formators, the dedication and energy of the mentoring community, and fidelity on everyone's part to the process. Success in this undertaking is defined by new members incorpo-

rating, identifying and continuing in healthy ministry and mission. New life is born! But, not without struggle, pain and groaning during the birth.

By their fruits you will know them. This group has refounded. The mentoring model facilitated the change. I am honored to have been part of their process.

Overview of the process

Preliminary meeting

This meeting included the leadership council, the formation personnel and all who were interested in mentoring new members. I asked the community to open the invitation rather than pre-selecting participants.

During this phase those attending were to accomplish four tasks:

- 1) Answer these foundational questions.
 - Do you want new members?
 - What are you bringing new members to?
 - What keeps you a member of this community at this time, in this place?
 - What is your vision for the community?
 - Who will not fit as a member of the community? (Exploring this question surfaces stereotypes to be shattered and profiles to be respected, so I allowed ample time to explore, expand, confirm, reflect and decide.)
 - What are the essentials of your life together?
 - Describe your conflict management styles.
 - Are you able to change your way of living together, or do you change the names while adhering to the same behaviors?
 - What will you gain if you change?
 - What will you lose?
 - Is the endeavor worth the energy for you at this time?
 - How many members do you feel ought not to still be here? (I encouraged participants to explore characteristics of those who ought not be members because the longer there are no new members, the more our fantasy and imagination bring us to a false nirvana.)
- 2) Create a shared understanding of the past, of the present situation and the desirable future.
- 3) Identify remedies.
- 4) Make plans for assembling a mentoring commu-

nity.

Initial actions, meeting to make mentoring process concrete for pre-novitiate

During the first three-to-six months after the preliminary meeting, the community made more precise plans—creating a basis for formal decisions, assembling a mentoring community, and enlisting me as a facilitator they could trust and be honest with. I knew I would need to balance confrontation of problems with compassion and care for each person involved.

We met with a goal of making the mentoring process concrete so the community could begin to use it during a pre-novitiate period. At that meeting, my role was to ensure that all the tasks listed below were addressed.

- 1) Gather a mentoring community that includes one formator, at least three professed for each two new members. I instructed the community to ask for volunteers. If someone wants to succeed as a mentor to a new member, he will succeed. The new model is helping someone who feels called to your community to succeed. The old model looks at, criticizes and evaluates before accepting. The new generation is fragile and lacks stability. Who is attracted to your community?
- 2) Listen to the minority voice of what is needed to

help new members.

- 3) Assess who has the authority to remove road-blocks of emotional baggage; answer current questions and provide ongoing support.
- 4) Read, reflect and envision yourself as a mentor.
- 5) Assume that those volunteering as mentors embody the religious life and charism of the founder. A person witnesses to the truth of adaptation and sanctity, imitation of Christ in this century. New members need authentic relationships and models who can name the truth of their experiences, pray, forgive, laugh, make mistakes, have leisure and probably learn a second, third or fourth language. (In the case of this community, many candidates were from other cultures and spoke other languages.)
- 6) Adhere to the process. Avoid the temptation to philosophize about what could have been. Focus on what is. Identify the stereotypes, reviewing and acknowledging our prejudices, risking other kinds of people belonging, developing inner freedom to embrace the current.
- 7) Engage in a goal-setting meeting, which would include specific tasks for all. No one needs to be full time. The experience ought to mirror the real life of the community. A sense of community and belonging is essential during the initial period in order to develop the interdependence needed for most religious lifestyles.
- 8) At the initial meeting, plan to develop an evaluation tool for the community (not the new member).
- 9) Plan to evaluate semi-annually and adjust expectations and schedules to the reality.
- 10) The community evaluates novitiate readiness.

Meeting to plan continuation of mentoring process during the novitiate (Years 1-3)

Following are the elements of the process I facilitated to prepare the community to establish a new novitiate mentoring community.

- 1) Presupposition: Novitiates can continue the process without starving the candidate emotionally. A similar process of goal setting is advantageous so that the candidate understands the goal of a novitiate: breakthrough to Gospel living. Without an understanding (we are incorporating adults) a per-

Schedule for most meetings

Day 1

7 p.m. Arrival and social; orientation to task of a formation community

8 p.m. Evening prayer

Day 2

8 a.m. Breakfast

9 a.m. Opening ritual surfacing gifts and talents and reviewing shared understanding of mentoring

12 p.m. Lunch

1-3 p.m. Plan the schedule of the mentoring community, volunteer for tasks within the mentoring community, develop new member curriculum, plan for evaluation.

son breaks down emotionally and spiritually. The challenge for the novice director is to embrace a new model of fostering a “re-founding” spirit in the novice.

- 2) The novice director benefits from grounding in the theological and psychological skills needed for handling the confusion accompanying growth.
- 3) The novice needs to be geographically in a new place to foster the task of the novitiate. Where is that place? What ministry will be helpful, if any?
- 4) Who will support the process? Are there professed available of different ages, lifestyles and talents?
- 5) Will the facilitator be available for semi-annual evaluations?
- 6) Who will fulfill the teachings, develop the content, foster the structure?
- 7) What role is reserved for the novice director?

Semi-annual meetings to monitor and troubleshoot mentoring process

At each of these meetings, the group would ask the following.

- What was working?
- What wasn't working?
- What needed to change?
- What process would be used for change?
- How would change be evaluated?

Post Novitiate Years 4-5

If the process has been embraced, the community at large will have developed so that a number of mentors will have emerged with whom the candidate can minister, whether as vowed person or as a lay associate. This, in fact, is what occurred. The community went through the following steps to prepare for post-novitiate mentoring.

- 1) Change geographically but stay connected.
- 2) Identify the needs, gifts and challenges of the new member.
- 3) Decide the goals through mutual dialogue.
- 4) What are the challenges? What are the risks? Are you able to embrace the current felt call of the new member? +

A true sense of mission will attract people ready for more than a casual commitment.

Vitality of mission encourages a vocation culture

by Father Raymond Lafontaine

In the last edition of HORIZON, Father Raymond Lafontaine revisited the document that emerged from the 2002 Continental Congress. He reflected on the various dimensions of establishing a vocation culture, including engagement with the larger culture, conversion and discernment. In this article, Father Lafontaine looks at a final element in establishing a vocation culture, that of mission.

Father Gilles Routhier has articulated a vision of vocation ministry rooted in a renewed sense of the mission of the contemporary church. This was the theme of his address in Montreal to the 2002 North American Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life Congress. He noted that the great periods of spiritual ferment in the church's history—of renewal within the priesthood, of the founding of new religious congregations and the reform and revitalization of older ones—correspond precisely to those moments when the church has been most attentive and responsive to the real needs emerging in a given society. These founders and reformers showed themselves able to correctly “read and interpret the signs of their times in the light of the Gospel,” and they envisioned

new ways of responding to real and pressing social and ecclesial concerns. They reformed dioceses, established lay movements, and founded new religious communities that provided the structure and continuity that would ensure an ongoing spiritual and pastoral response to these situations. Conversely, when the church neglects this concrete pastoral response to the demands of the present mission, in favor of a narrow focus on institutional survival, on “managing the assets of the past,” the church enters a period of decline.

Routhier's first major recommendation springs from this insight. As church, and in a special way those charged with the responsibility of vocation ministry, we are called to develop “a genuine spiritual intuition,” rooted in a careful discernment of the church's mission, *right here and right now*. To follow the call of Jesus “into the deep” requires of us a willingness to abandon the comfort and security of the familiar waters near the shoreline, plunging into the unknown. Routhier stresses the concreteness of this task, inviting us to shift away from the good intentions of “generic mission statements” to the articulation—in each local church, in each religious congregation, in each ecclesial lay movement—of “clear, concrete, and compelling missionary projects” that respond to the demands of proclaiming the Gospel in this particular social and cultural context.

Routhier's second recommendation is intimately related to the first. Echoing the request of the young adults at the Congress that they be supported and trained “to become leaders and risk-takers for the sake of God's Kingdom,” he invites dioceses and religious congregations to be open to a shift from a focus on “Old-Age Security” to “The Young and the Restless.” This renewed focus on mission over structure, this in-

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itation to daring and creativity, requires a twofold act of trust: trust in God, and trust in the new generation of young people, *without whom the future cannot and will not be built*. In this respect, Routhier invites us to a shift in our vocational language and reality: from “Come and See” to “Come and Live and Work”; from “Come Join our Structure” to “Come Dream and Build With Us.”

Most essentially, we are dealing here with a shift away from a “recruitment” or “candidacy” model where we seek out potential candidates who “already have” a vocation to priesthood or religious life. In its place, he advances a “missionary” model in which the whole process of vocational discernment and invitation would be related to concrete service projects which incarnate here and now the mission of this local

In what way do we actually incorporate the young—our own junior members and the youth and young adults we encounter in the context of our ministry—into our mission, taking their perspectives and viewpoints seriously?

church, the charism of this particular religious community. Young people would be invited to share in this mission, whether or not they have expressed formal interest in ordained ministry or consecrated life. They would work side by side with consecrated men and women, with priests and lay ecclesial ministers, benefiting from their witness and example. In this model, it is not so much the predispositions of the individual, but rather the missionary project itself, and the witness of those with whom this mission is being shared, that become the primary locus for initial vocational awareness and discernment. This would have the added benefit, Routhier argues, of shifting the focus away from a “privatized” notion of vocation as “personal choice and disposition,” and of highlighting the properly ecclesial and missionary context in which all “personal vocations” need to be discerned.

Challenge of renewal in religious life

Routhier’s overall challenge to the church also needs

to be taken up by each religious congregation, as it seeks renewal in its life and mission, and, more specifically, in its vocation efforts. How “clear, concrete, and compelling” is the way in which we present our life, our mission, our charism to potential candidates, to young people in general, to the world? To what extent do we content ourselves with generalized mission statements which, in trying to say everything, end up saying nothing very specific about who we are, what we do, and what we stand for? How far have we progressed—at international, provincial, and local levels—in our reading and interpretation of the missionary needs of the contexts in which we serve, so that our works actually respond to real and pressing needs of the church and society, while remaining faithful to our foundational vision and charism? In what way do we actually incorporate the young—our own junior members and the youth and young adults we encounter in the context of our ministry—into our mission, taking their perspectives and viewpoints seriously, including the reality that “the future cannot and will not be built without them?”

In an important article summarizing and further developing a workshop he gave at the Montreal Congress, Daniel Cadrin, OP invites religious congregations to consider three essential dimensions for vocational renewal in their life and mission by asking themselves three fundamental questions:

- I. Conditions for the renewal of community life:
 - What needs to be already in place in the congregation so that vocation efforts can be effective?
 - a) A clear, conscious, and coherent decision to live, to build for the future: as individual members, in local communities, and in the congregation as a whole. Putting it bluntly, if you have already decided that you are dying, you cannot attract new life.
 - b) Identity, to clearly know and believe in who you are. This implies a specific mission, a Gospel-based spirituality, and a community life that incarnates and sustains the mission and the spirituality of the congregation or institute.
 - c) Coherence in leadership: for a) and b) to happen, those in leadership must be able to make decisions—even difficult ones—that honor the congregation’s fundamental choice to live, and that sustain its mission and spirituality. Failure of nerve, or unwillingness to rock the boat, can sabotage the best of intentions.
 - d) A choice to focus a significant proportion of

congregational resources on evangelization, faith education, and outreach to youth and young adults, as well as explicit vocation and formation ministry.

- e) A willingness to go beyond the tired liberal/conservative split, being open to “traditional” as well as “modern” practices, and not expecting candidates who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s to refight the battles of the 1960s.
- f) Cooperation with other congregations, especially in the areas of vocation, formation, and ministry to youth.
- g) Presence in diverse contexts and cultures.

“Vocation efforts” must never be seen in isolation from the renewal of the life and mission of the entire congregation.

II. Sources of attraction: what will draw young people to your community? What are they looking for and attracted to?

- a) To attract and retain a core of younger members, who will in turn attract others. This may be, in the end, the single most important factor: “To those who have, more will be given; to those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.”
- b) A “structured and relational” community, that includes common life, shared prayer, shared commitment to the charism and mission, and genuine community life (not just its institutional forms).
- c) A strong prayer life and an explicit “spirituality of communion,” fostering bonds within the congregation and the whole church.
- d) The presence of credible and authentic witnesses, in all age-groups within the community.
- e) Concrete presence to young people: in high schools, colleges and universities; in short- and long-term volunteer and mission projects; with immigrants and members of “cultural communities.”
- f) Gracious, welcoming, hospitable local communities—for short-term visits, to “come and see,” and for longer stays, to “come and live.”

- g) Openness of older members—especially Baby Boomers now in leadership—to the perspectives of a new generation seeking to “explore and appropriate a Catholic tradition in which they have received little formation.”

III. Factors for duration: If they come, what will help them stay? What will help their vocation to grow stronger and more deeply rooted?

- a) High-quality personal accompaniment: human, intellectual, psychological and spiritual.
- b) In communities where newer and younger members are fewer, to decrease their isolation by fostering inter-congregational initiatives.
- c) Providing them with excellent theological and spiritual formation.
- d) Conferring real responsibilities on younger members, commensurate to their ability, and entrusting them with community projects that will benefit from their capacity for innovation and creativity, their knowledge of the culture and world-view of their contemporaries.

Much more could be said, obviously, on the concrete implications of the points raised in Cadrin’s programmatic article. But it does serve as a necessary reminder that “vocation efforts” must never be seen in isolation from the renewal of the life and mission of the entire congregation.

Commitment to a vocation culture

The renewal of our mission within the church and within individual communities is one aspect of the creation of a vocation culture. (For a discussion of other aspects, see “Forming a vocation culture since the Continental Congress,” by Father Raymond Lafontaine, *HORIZON*, spring 2006.) An essential presupposition underlying the entire notion of the “vocation culture” is that renewal in our vision and methodology of promoting and calling forth vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life cannot be understood in isolation from the universal baptismal call of all Christians to holiness and mission, and to the deeply personal nature of that call in the individual human heart. At the same time, the wide casting of the nets demanded by this vision of the vocation culture in no way diminishes the continued need, in our church, for the specific and unique witness offered by those who commit themselves to ordained ministry and to consecrated life. Contrary to the view of some, priesthood and religious life are not merely “assets of the past,” a

part of the church's collective memory more or less relevant to present needs and concerns. They continue to be a vital and permanent dimension of Catholic life. When lived well, they are necessary and prophetic reminders of Christ's call to a total and unreserved commitment to the message of the Gospel, to the possibility of staking one's life on the decision to leave everything behind in order to follow Jesus. In this regard the encouraging words about priesthood

Priesthood and religious life continue to be a vital and permanent dimension of Catholic life; when lived well, they are necessary and prophetic reminders of Christ's call to a total and unreserved commitment to the message of the Gospel.

and religious life that Donald Senior, CP said at the congress need to be repeated loudly and clearly:

Has there been a time in our memory when the need for consecrated life was more urgent? To demonstrate in a world filled with violence and with increasing chasms of hostility between cultures and races and ideologies, that it is possible for people to live together in harmony and love—that human and Christian community is possible through God's grace? To witness in a public way for a whole generation that thirsts for authentic spirituality that a life of holiness is indeed possible in our time? To be willing to take up the missions that so often governments and private agencies are attempting to abandon: working with victims of AIDS, feeding the hungry, throwing one's lot in with the homeless and abandoned, demonstrating for peace? To represent in the life of the church that charismatic dimension of God's spirit that must not be suppressed? These are some of the reasons the church desperately needs vocations to the consecrated life. (*Conversion, Discernment, Mission: Fostering a Vocation Culture in North America*, p. 53)

Has there ever been a time in our collective memory when the need for the vocation of the priest in the church has been more urgent? To draw a diverse and sometimes fractious community into the unity of prayer and faith, to preach the gospel with

power and clarity, to live an exemplary gospel life that inspires the people of God, to work with skill and sensitivity with lay co-workers in building up the community, to be a source of unity and not division, to publicly represent the mission and purpose of the church with integrity. These are some of the functions of the priesthood, and they are desperately needed for the church to be healthy and alive in our time. (*Conversion, Discernment, Mission: Fostering a Vocation Culture in North America*, p. 50)

And what of those of us who have been charged with the responsibility of inviting young men and women to open their hearts and lives to the message of Christ: teaching them to pray; exposing them to the message of the Gospel and the witness of our Catholic tradition; providing lived experiences of the church's fourfold mission of worship, community, service, and proclamation; serving as mentors, wisdom figures, and spiritual guides; and finally, inviting them to commit their lives whole and entire to Christ—whether they do so in single life, marriage, priesthood, or consecrated religious life in my own community or congregation?

We, too, have an important challenge and task ahead of us. May we be empowered to embrace anew our vocation to be "sacraments of hope" for a church wounded yet unbowed, confident that the Lord of life continues to call all of us—young and not-so-young—to "life in abundance."

Those entrusted with fostering vocations to priesthood and religious life at this moment in the life of the church in North America must be sacraments of hope for a wounded church. Only if we passionately believe in the church and its ministry, only if we believe with all our hearts that God will not abandon us and that God will call us to life, only if this faith and this hope is alive in us will we be able to speak without embarrassment or hesitation to young Christians who feel called by God to bring the Gospel to the world. Only when we summon up our own best ideals and deepest faith, will be worthy of this new generation of Christians who seek a life of holiness. (*Conversion, Discernment, Mission: Fostering a Vocation Culture in North America*, p. 53)

As vocation ministers, this is our ministry; this is our vocation. We are proud to profess it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. ✚