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THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE is a catalyst for vocation discernment and the full flourishing of religious life as sisters, brothers, and priests for the ongoing transformation of the world.

The need is great

EVERY GARDENER KNOWS you can't rush a plant. I can start seedlings early; I can fertilize, weed, feed, and water. But the final results and the timing of the harvest are never completely within my control.

That maxim applies equally when it comes to cultivating callings. God does the calling, and vocation directors can publicize, encourage, and fan the flames of interest, but in the end, they must let go. That can be hard, especially during a time when religious orders throughout the developed world are becoming smaller.

The need to be with people as they sort out their best path of discipleship is very great. Many young people seek wisdom figures in their spiritual life, and religious communities have members who are well suited to walk with them. That process may or may not land a person in a formation program, but it is never "wasted." It is of immeasurable value to encourage and accompany the young as they come to know and live their authentic calling.

No matter where you and your community are in cultivating callings, HORIZON is here for you. This edition points the way toward some helpful communications approaches, to relevant church teaching, and to practical programs and resources. Be sure to let us know how your garden grows.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber,
cscheiber@nrvc.net



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Updates

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Live boldly is one message among many in *Christus Vivit*, the latest apostolic exhortation from Pope Francis.

***Christus Vivit* reflects on young people, offers encouragement, vocation wisdom**

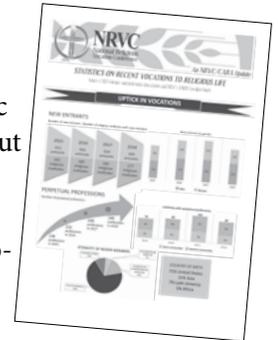
Pope Francis released *Christus Vivit* on April 3, a 48-page message reflecting on the needs of young people, what young people told church authorities at the October youth synod, and what the church can do to encourage and harness the enthusiasm of the young faithful. Find the document online at nrv.net, along with a summary and other synod-related documents. See “Resources / Church documents.”

NRVC’s new blog delivers news immediately

Members of the National Religious Vocation Conference can now receive the latest news about NRVC, vocation ministry, and related areas at *The Catalyst* blog, which is on nrv.net. Members will receive an email once a month with posts from the blog. They can view it and download it anytime at nrv.net.

Infographic with latest info

The NRVC has produced an infographic handout with essential information about religious orders and new membership. Stay updated. Keep your staff, your membership, and your supporters up-to-date about the picture of contemporary religious life.



NRVC adopts team leadership model

After its April 2019 board meeting the National Religious Vocation Conference announced it will adopt a team leadership model, departing from its historical executive director model and in keeping with the form it has used for the past two years.

“We recognize the professional skills of each member of the national office and board, and we want to bring those skills together in strong collaboration,” NRVC stated. Board members and National Office staff noted in a video announcement that finding a religious sister, brother, or priest to lead the organization has been difficult because of the demands of ministries for members of religious communities.

Reserve your copies of 2020 VISION Vocation Guide



The 2020 edition of VISION will be published in August 2019; please go to VocationNetwork.org to sign up for copies to distribute in parishes, retreat houses, campus ministry offices, etc. VISION is the premier

Catholic vocation discernment resource and one of the largest circulated publications in the Catholic press. With a Spanish section in print and a multilingual website, it meets the needs of a global audience. ■



Your online image: what it is, why it matters

THERE IS A HOUSE IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD that never fails to captivate me. During my walks, I can't wait to get to that block. As I approach, I can already see the flag *du jour* waving in the breeze. The patch of earth in front is covered with a menagerie of plants—it's wild and inviting. The bird feeders are overflowing with sunflower seeds. The porch and fence walls have beautiful artwork of clay, metal, and wood, featuring images of the sun, moon, and stars. As I come upon the house, I look up the path to the door. Always the light is on, at the ready to receive a visitor. The stained-glass window in the transom reads, "Peace to all who enter."

I want to meet the people in this house. I want to know who tends so lovingly to the flora and fauna, who has such creativity and artistic flair. Who is it that gives even the simple passerby a moment of solace and beauty? Who is it that seems to invite me in?

The image we present to others can be powerful just as the image I have of the inhabitants of this house. In fact it's something we tend to every day! We do this when we choose to comb our disheveled hair, and when we chose to wear business attire instead of pajamas to work. Our choices communicate something of who we are and how we want others to experience us.

By SISTER JULIE VIEIRA, I.H.M.



Sister Julie Vieira, I.H.M. belongs to the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan. She is the program director of the IHM

Spirituality Centers. She has served for many years in online engagement, blogging, and podcasting.

Your online image matters

Religious communities have an image too that needs care and tending so that the public can know who we are and what our mission is. Because the Internet is a major way that the public gets information about us, our online image—that is, how we present ourselves on the Internet—matters.

1. YOUR ONLINE IMAGE ALREADY EXISTS

Your religious community already has an online image. Even if you do not have a website or a Facebook account or any content whatsoever on the internet, your community's online image is defined by its absence. This online image can indicate, for example, that the community is not relevant to today's world or that it does not care to engage with people.

2. YOUR ONLINE IMAGE IS SUBSTANTIVE

Sometimes online image is seen as superficial. It is considered a mere external that reflects little or nothing of what is real. But online image has a lot more depth than this. While it certainly has the capacity, like everything else in life, to be used poorly or inauthentically, online image also has the capacity to communicate substance. It can be used to extend our presence, our charisma, our hospitality, and who we are as a community to new and larger audiences.

3. YOUR ONLINE IMAGE IS OFTEN THE FIRST POINT OF CONTACT FOR POTENTIAL NEW MEMBERS

Encountering a community's online image is particularly important for potential new members exploring religious communities and their calling. Many rely on the Internet to meet a community for the first time. They search our community websites and social media platforms for information, to get a feel for the community, to see what ways they can connect with the community—mass time, day of retreat, vocation director's email, volunteer help, a collaborative social justice project. Because they are discerning religious life, they are also assessing the community's online image to see if their own personal image of themselves connects with the community's life, spirituality, and ministry.

4. YOUR ONLINE IMAGE IS A CRUCIAL PART OF YOUR MARKETING PLAN

There it is. The "M" word. Most of us do not think of our vocations work as being part of a marketing plan; the corporate term seems so out of place with the spirituality of calling. Yet, we can learn some valuable tips to

complement our vocation promotion efforts and align our online image with our desire for new members. Online image should be considered in the various aspects of a marketing plan such as the following:

What is our community's vocation or membership situation right now? Who is our target audience? What are our short-term and long-term goals? What strategies and actions will we take to meet our goals? What resources will we need in terms of time, treasure, and talent? These considerations can help not only our online vocation plan, but our vocation plan in general.

5. IT TAKES LESS THAN A SECOND TO MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

Whenever people are online, they are barraged with all kinds of information. They have to make quick decisions as to what data they are going to take in. They scan websites, articles, and photos and mentally filter the content to see if what they want is there. How does our online image measure up to all the other content? What is distinctive about it that can give visitors pause? What captivates their attention and draws them in?

What is your online image?

Your online image is comprised of all the places that your community is publicly present online. This is primarily the community's website, social media platforms, and email communication (e.g., newsletters). These are the most significant because they are your home base, they are the place where you are saying in your own voice who you are as a community. Depending on the community, there may be other significant public places such as a blog, podcast, or app.

There are likely other places where your community is online such as in advertisements, on sponsored institutions' web pages, on individual community members' websites or social platforms, in directories, on Wikipedia, and so on. It is helpful to periodically do an inventory of your community's digital footprint and to track where the community might be mentioned by individuals or the media.

In each of these online places, your image is given shape by every piece of content, the visual design, and the functionality, all of which are interrelated. As you assess your community's online image, consider each of these areas and how it can positively or negatively impact a discernor's experience.

CONTENT refers to all text and media on your web-

site or social platform. Media includes images (photos, graphics, animations), video, and audio. Content is the substance of your messaging. And as the saying goes, content is queen/king. Your community might have the latest and greatest web design, but if the content is of poor quality, dated, or unrelated, even the most expensive website won't be able to improve your online image to discerners!

VISUAL DESIGN refers to the overall look and feel of a website. (Note: There's less control over design and technology in social media, but they still benefit from these considerations.) It includes general principles such as balance, flow, consistency, as well as style elements such as color, shapes, and how visual content is presented.

FUNCTIONALITY is closely related to design but refers more to the technical design of the website, how the website actually works, and ultimately how well it facilitates the interactivity of the website with the user. It includes how easily (or not so easily) users can navigate the website, how fast or slow web pages load, how well video or audio players work, the nature of popup ads, etc.

Let's look at a few examples specific to how discerners might experience your community's online image.

- *The presence of vocation messaging in main, high-traffic areas such as the home page, headers and footers, and navigation.*

Keep it simple, direct, and in language that a discerner will recognize! "Become a ___ Brother" is easy to understand and invitational. If vocational messaging is lacking or too difficult to find, it may send the message that the religious community does not prioritize it or is not welcoming of new vocations.

- *Engaging content about your religious community that is relevant to discerners.* Remember, your audience is discerners, not people who have been in religious life for a number of years! Find the points of connection between the story of your religious community and discerners.

Show the vitality! A story about how a sister discerned her vocation (even if it was 80 years ago!) can speak directly to a young person currently struggling to understand her or his calling. A history buff may adore the website's image gallery of founders and early community members, but a discerner might wonder why there are few recent images of what the

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members are doing today in terms of ministry, prayer, or fun community events. She may be more interested in hearing about the story of the zeal and challenge of following God's invitation!

- *Images that are diverse and that show that you (the discerner) could belong.*

Even if your religious community is largely homogenous in terms of age, race, geography, type of ministry, it is important to find authentic ways to express diversity. Discerners want to see someone like themselves right alongside the other sisters and brothers—not just being ministered to!

- *Design that is fresh and modern.*

Design has a shelf life. It doesn't have to be a massive overhaul, but it does have to be fresh and modern. Even the classic iconic McDonald's branding has been updated! Old design can signal an online image that the religious community is old-fashioned. If their style is old-fashioned, could they be old-fashioned in other ways too? Do they really want someone from a younger generation?

Feeling overwhelmed? Fear not

If you're new to vocations ministry or working in the digital landscape, it can be tough trying to discern which need to meet first when there are so many, but the important thing is to take one step, even if it's small, toward assessing or improving your online image. Start with the platforms where your community is already present. Your website, Facebook, and email newsletters are good places to begin. Assess what your platforms are currently saying about your community, then develop a list of goals based on what you've discovered. For example, perhaps you decide that your Facebook cover photo will be a place to advertise Come and See events, or that your website will feature the latest news stories about your members. When you've come up with a solid plan for platforms that already exist, it will be much easier to allow yourself to explore new ways of developing your online image.

Be sure to collaborate with others! You'll find help in many places. Ask new members and young people for their thoughts on your online image. Check in with others who share responsibility for your online presence such as communications, development, and leadership.

HAVE A GENEROUS SPIRIT

Online image goes both ways. It's not just religious communities that tend to their online image. Potential discerners do too! It is always good practice to research the online image of potential candidates. But as vocation ministers, it is important we embrace a spirit of generosity and remember that the people submitting inquiries are in a vulnerable space in their life. They are feeling this crazy draw to God and religious life that is mystifying them. They likely are unfamiliar with the culture of religious life, vocation and calling, sometimes even of the Catholic faith. Additionally, their more casual approach mixed with nervousness about actually making contact with you may throw them off their game.

Always respond to them and give them a chance – a third, fourth, and fifth chance too. I have met discerners whose first impression was not stellar or whose framework was so different from my own that I could have misjudged them. Your response matters to them, and can be a great source of encouragement to them. Even if you know the person is not a good fit, respond to him or her and give encouragement, for this is a person on a journey of discernment, even if it is not to religious life.

And fear not. One of the best pieces of advice about online image I ever received was from one of my sisters. My co-host and I were nervously preparing for a live podcast. She took our hands and said very calmly, "Just be yourself." This is good advice for our religious communities too. While a lot of factors go into our online image, the most important is to just be ourselves and let the content and everything else flow from this.

Peace to all who enter

As we work on our online image, let us remember that being ourselves and communicating who we are includes who we are becoming—it includes that next generation of religious who are encountering us every day online. For their sake and for the sake of God's mission alive and well in our religious communities, let us be sure to keep the outside of our house warm and welcoming, attractive and inviting with the light always on. And let us be ready to open the door saying, "Peace to all who enter"! ■

DESIGN HACKS FOR VOCATION MINISTERS

Like me, the vast majority of vocation ministers are not graphic artists. Therefore we're always looking for helps to make our work easier and successful. That's where phone apps and computer software that help make short videos or beautiful social media posts come in handy.

While I still need the assistance of communications experts, it helps if I don't need to turn to our communications office each time I need to make a poster, create content for social media sites, or come up with some other visual content related to vocation ministry.

These apps save me time and allow me to concentrate more on the deepest part of this job—being with people as they consider how they are meant to put their gifts in service to the world. However, women and men can't discern with us if they don't first come to "see" us. These tools help us exercise creativity in telling our stories. This is not a comprehensive list, but here are some of the technologies that vocation directors are using.

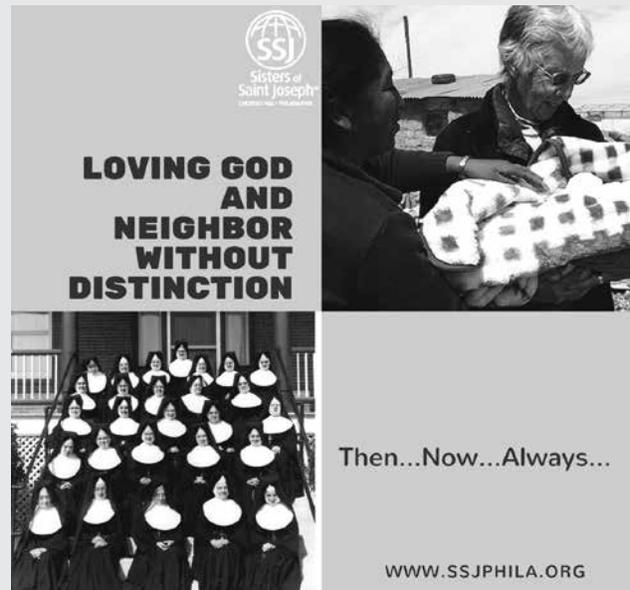
Canva	Spark Page / Post / Video
Magisto	PicStitch
Ripl	Google Photos

I have dabbled with i-Movie, Magisto, Ripl, Spark Page, Spark Post, and Spark Video, and I've used Canva quite a bit. Each of these design applications aids a successful project beginning. They offer starting points for designing posts and other content that is visually exciting. For me this experimentation helped unleash creative potential lurking just beneath the surface, and I continue to enjoy creating with these tools.

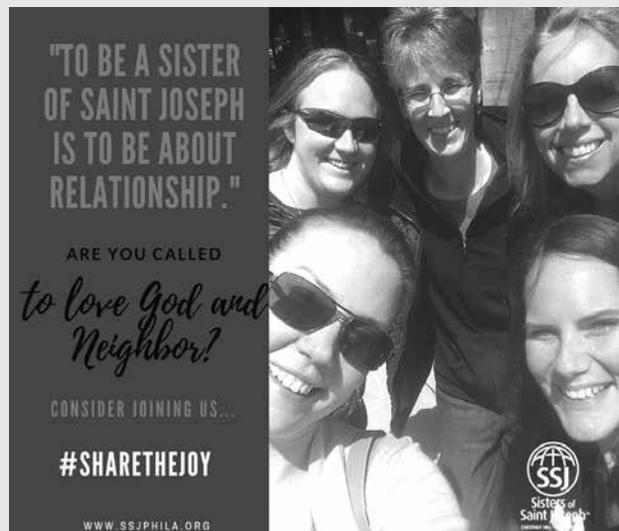
While I wholeheartedly embraced a variety of tools, one stood out as being particularly user-friendly for designing social media posts, flyers, and invitations: Canva. A few years ago, during the Vocation Ambassadors Program (sponsored by the National Religious Vocation Conference) I had so much fun with it that I was dubbed the "Canva queen," even making "canvas" about making canvas. Any program that can make me feel accomplished doing artistic work is worth a closer look. Prior to being exposed to this design software, I would scroll through Facebook noticing what my eyes were drawn to and what I passed over, at a loss to figure out how to make events and members of my community come alive for our social media contacts. Canva enables me to craft posts that encourage viewers to linger longer, even if just a few moments. That is why I continue to use it and other design apps and software. ■

—Sister Michelle Lesher, S.S.J.

Sister Michelle Lesher, S.S.J. is a co-vocation director for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia.



"THE CATHOLIC CULTURE TEACHES STUDENTS THAT THEY ARE CHILDREN OF GOD FOR WHOM ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE."
SISTER KAREN DIETRICH S.S.J.





Renae Bauer, communications director; Sister Mary Kabat, O.S.F., development director; and Sister Laura Zelten, O.S.F., vocation director.

COLLABORATING WITH OUR COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

MY COMMUNITY's communications director and I share the same birthday, and we both like sushi and good coffee—which have helped us through some arduous projects. We've been working together for awhile now, so I hope to share here a little of what I've learned about our collaboration.

Begin with an open mind

The success of my relationship began before she was hired in 2010. Our community development director and I both wanted a staff person who could support us in our roles and responsibilities and help us lead efforts to communicate the community's story through traditional and emerging media. We expressed our needs to our leadership team, who then selected someone familiar with the community and who had more than 20 years of journalism and diocesan communications experience.

Recognize mission and gifts

Over the years, our development director (Sister Mary Kabat, O.S.F.), the communications director (Renae Bauer), and I have recognized and discussed the benefits of working together, beginning with our common mission: to build relationships in the name of Jesus Christ. To paraphrase a passage from our community constitution (rooted in Acts 2:42-47), we know that we can be and do more together than we can be or do alone.

Our shared commitment to mission and collaboration resulted in a successful event a few years ago when the first National Catholic Sisters Week was announced. I thought it would be fun to host a "mosaic pilgrimage" featuring our motherhouse's mosaics, which are based on St. Francis of Assisi's Canticle of Creation. Sister Mary and Renae agreed. It would be a great opportunity to talk about religious life, show people our fairly new motherhouse, share the rich spirituality of the Franciscan mosaics, and reconnect with friends. At the communications end, Renae developed the timeline, promotions,

and supporting materials, and our sisters volunteered for the mosaic stations and other hosting duties. Our goal was to have 100-125 people make the mosaic pilgrimage with us. We met our goal in the first hour. By the end of the day more than 300 people had come through the front doors.

Could I have planned the promotions and materials for such an event? Maybe. But they wouldn't have been as compelling as Renae's were. Could Renae have talked about the theology and spirituality of our mosaics as our sisters did? Probably not. But together we had the right combination of gifts that allowed us to create an event that spoke to people's hearts. Years later, sisters and friends still talk about the gift of that mosaic pilgrimage.

Grow, grow, grow

I like change. I like technology. I like social media. So do Sister Mary and Renae. I think it would be difficult to do our ministries without some openness to our ever-changing world, particularly in the area of communication. When there's some buzz about a new tool or technology (usually it's a social media channel), Renae studies it and presents it to Sister Mary and me during our monthly meetings. The three of us talk about what it would take to effectively use a technology, whether we have the resources for it, and whether it's a good fit for us. We use this approach because we share the responsibility of social media audience engagement. In any given week, one of us is responsible for creating, scheduling and monitoring posts; however, we talk ahead of time about important feasts and other dates to highlight. Beyond that, each person puts her creativity to work by creating anything from fun to deeply prayerful posts. We create posts deliberately to resonate with our audiences.

I believe our monthly meetings are the glue in our relationship. Each meeting begins with prayer. Sometimes it's formal prayer, sometimes it's intentions, sometimes it's both. Whatever form it takes, it is a pause in our day to ask God to help us. From there we talk about short- and long-range plans in all three areas and where we can build ideas and synergy.

Here's what else we do together: we make mistakes. And when we do, we talk about why they happened and how to address them. Our willingness to learn from one another helps each of us succeed; in turn, the community succeeds.

Remember to celebrate

Who doesn't like a party? All of us in vocation ministry work hard. What is your counter-balance? For the three of us, we make an effort to acknowledge a project's conclusion, someone's extra efforts, birthdays, milestones, etc. Maybe it's through a shared treat or a shared meal. Both are an expression of our appreciation and respect for and trust in one another. ■ —Sister Laura Zelten, O.S.F.

Sister Laura Zelten, O.S.F. is the vocation director for the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

What's working for you? How do you tend to the vocation ministry of your community? Share your ideas about tips and techniques that have helped you at nrvc@nrvc.net.



The exhortation *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, Rejoice and Be Glad, emphasizes how every person can live a life that bears fruit and “reflects God’s holiness in the world.”

“Rejoice and Be Glad” The call of holiness for all

MATTHEW’S GOSPEL MANDATE, “Rejoice and be glad” (Matt. 5:12) was not written to be delivered as a nostalgic discourse to a grateful crowd of witnesses. Rather, these words were remembered by this evangelist as ones articulated by Jesus. Matthew was writing for a new community that was being pursued and persecuted. Like the historical writers of the Old Testament, Matthew is conveying a singular devotion and joyful passion in the midst of all that life brings. What an amazing choice of words for a call to holiness today. Inherent in these words is the conviction that no matter what we believers are asked to do, we must do it all with joyful hearts.

The sense of joy that comes with holiness is something Pope Francis embodies, and it is an important theme in his exhortation, *Gaudete Et Exsultate*/Rejoice and Be Glad. In this beautifully written work, he leads us to the call of the One who loves us beyond measure, so that we might respond to our unique callings with love and joy.

BY SISTER PEGGY RYAN, O.P.



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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OPUS PRIZE

to holiness. Quoting the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis illustrates, “Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us” (20). Using stories of mothers, grandmothers, and neighbors, or as Pope Francis calls them, “the saints next door” (6), as well as giving examples from the communion of the saints, this work focuses on how each believer’s baptism can be a seedbed for a life that bears fruit and “reflects God’s holiness in the world” (12).

Each of us embodies the love of God in our time and place. Silence, action, mistakes, missteps, distractions, choices, attitudes, are all included in our path to holiness. The whole of our lives, all the ups and downs, emerge as our reflection of Jesus Christ in the world today. We are even encouraged by Pope Francis to look beyond the partitions of our own faith tradition to

Caring for the vulnerable becomes a way of life for those who follow Christ, Pope Francis reminds us in *Gaudete Et Exsultate*. Above Sister Tesa Fitzgerald, C.S.J. talks to a girl and her mom. Fitzgerald’s ministry, Hour Children, helps care for the children of women prisoners in Long Island City, New York.

The call to holiness embodies

Pope Francis has offered vocation directors and all those who support vocational ministry a practical gift with this exhortation. It is a discernment guide or outline of a “practical way for our time, with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities,” (2) to live a holy life. From the outset, the call to holiness outlined by Pope Francis indicates a journey profoundly rooted in reality. The fact is that the world pushes us toward another way of living and this call to holiness requires “going against the flow” (65). We are offered, however, countless examples along the way. From cover to cover, the call to holiness is a story told by the Bible writers.

Throughout the 55 page document, Pope Francis teaches that God asks everything of us and offers us everything we need to answer our unique mission or call

see other stellar examples of holiness. Witnessing to the life of Christ, including to the point of martyrdom, is a tradition shared by many Christian faiths. Attempting to answer the call to holiness dims any noise that divisions among us try to make.

The heart of the document begins by naming two flagrant enemies that get in the way, and lead us off-course from our call to holiness: gnosticism and pelagianism. These ancient heresies display themselves in many unhealthy and unholy behaviors today. Rigid elitism, myopic ideology, and punctilious justification are often practiced by those who are easily seduced by beliefs without love or truths void of charity. Today’s gnostics fall into the temptation of believing that all of faith is graspable. Modern day pelagians hold fast to the concept that their call to holiness depends on themselves alone. Each believer is called to reflect upon how and where

these modern day deviations of faith may be present in our lives. Pope Francis clearly states that the call to holiness is profoundly rooted in what he calls the “summation of the law” (60). God’s grace is pure gift. All is gift. Love of God and charity toward our neighbor, especially the most vulnerable, is what truly counts and where God’s image is found.

The Beatitudes are enumerated in this exhortation as a rich outline or guide to living in Christ today. “Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes”(63). Before expounding on the Beatitudes, the pope recognizes how all-encompassing living these guidelines can be. “Let us allow his (Jesus’) words to unsettle us, to challenge us, and to demand a real change in the way we live” (65). Francis explains each Beatitude using examples from actual life situations. He addresses themes such as security, trust in God, and authentic happiness. He defines a life full of mercy, faith, and compassion.

As a follow-up on the Beatitudes, Pope Francis calls Matthew 25 the “great criterion” (95). He is not just implying that wherever we might happen to meet the hungry, the naked, the stranger, the sick, or imprisoned, we are called to feed, clothe, welcome, care for, and visit. But, he says we must fashion our lives in such a way that we go out to meet them and attend to them. Here he believes the very heart of Christ is revealed to us as a way of life. “This is what it is to be Christian” (99).

Pope Francis continues by defining five modern-day signs or attitudes of holiness, explaining that this list is not exhaustive, but includes important approaches. These five signs—perseverance, joy, passion, community life, and prayer—offer us a way to express our love of God and neighbor.

This apostolic exhortation concludes with a reminder to practice spiritual combat and discernment. The devil or “evil one” exists, and spiritual corruption can lead to various forms of blindness, such as self-centeredness or self-deception. Discernment will allow us to follow Christ more faithfully.

In keeping with tradition, Pope Francis concludes this exhortation by dedicating to Mary his reflections on the call to holiness in these modern times. In her life we are offered the most hallowed of examples. We are reminded that all we need to do is to call upon her name, “Hail Mary...,” and we will be centered in our desire to live like Christ in our world (176).

The call to holiness emboldens

Throughout this exhortation, it is evident that Pope Francis envisions the call to holiness as a spiritual mission. The God who fills these pages has a loving and inviting Spirit. All are welcome! Those seeking to live out this quest for holiness encounter the course where gospel living meets faith.

Following is a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) for vocation directors. In the responses, I reflect on the sorts of answers Pope Francis gives within this exhortation.

Perseverance, joy, passion, community life, and prayer—these offer us a way to express our love of God and neighbor.

FAQ: Who is called?

In an effort, I believe, to root the theology of call in the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis begins the section entitled, “The Lord Calls,” by quoting from *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Nations):

Yet, with this exhortation I would like to insist primarily on the call to holiness personally, to you: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44; cf. I Pet. 1:16). The Second Vatican Council states this clearly: ‘Strengthened by so many and such great means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord—each in his or her own way—to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect (14).

All are called and each believer has a vocation. The faithful are advised to not be turned off by the lives of saints that appear out of reach or too divine. Discern your own path in your own way. There are many ways of bearing witness. Whether you are discerning a call to religious life or another vocation, Pope Francis insists that each is “called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves” (14).

How great is it to be able to use these words to encourage the searcher who claims she loves to party too much or the one inquiring who says he did not grow up in a “religious household”: “We should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable. The important thing is that each believer discerns his or her path, that they bring out the best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts” (11).

Often vocation directors communicate with seekers who seem to be discerning life in general, much more than a vocation. How frequently do conversations with interested individuals include themes about call or the plan God has for us? How does the vocation director answer questions about responding to God's call? Pope Francis offers great advice for initial conversations with

At the heart of every vocation is this recognition of our dignity and the ideal that caring for each other is caring for God.

those who ask you to explore with them: "Let the grace of your baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness. Let everything be open to God; turn to him in every situation." (15)

It is heartening to see how Pope Francis prophetically includes "the feminine styles of holiness" (12). The Holy Spirit of God did not ignore women, despite how history has treated them.

Women were used by God for reform and spiritual renewal in the church. Specifically mentioned are some famous women saints, Hildegard of Bingen, Bridget, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Thérèse of Lisieux. But, as he does throughout the whole document, Pope Francis also remembers the countless unnamed, unknown, and perhaps forgotten women who sustained and transformed lives wherever they lived.

FAQ: What does becoming a sister or brother or priest involve?

In the most simple, yet most profound way possible, Pope Francis describes what is at the heart of the call to holiness—the common good. This exhortation offers the opportunity to dive deeply into conversations with those looking for a birds-eye view of religious life. This document on holiness offers a context for a spiritual life and a framework for a direct engagement with the demands of the Gospel. Here is the message any vocation director longs to communicate—how his or her charisma brings the Good News to our world. In defining what a Christian is, this pontiff, himself so well practiced in reaching out to the poor and vulnerable, clearly states that the "lively recognition of the dignity of each human being" (98) is primal.

If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, or even a piece of refuse cluttering a public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity, and see in this person with a dig-

nity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father, an image of God, a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. That is what it is to be a Christian. (98)

At the heart of every vocation is this recognition of our dignity and the ideal that caring for each other is caring for God. We are bound by a common Creator, a loving God who asks all of us to be that love for others. Pope Francis enumerates this dedication to the common good by specifically naming the migrant. And, this Pope who has been so dedicated to the causes of the migrant and refugee, is profoundly clear: "there is the error of those Christians who separate these Gospel demands from their personal relationship with the Lord..." (100). Addressing the individual or collective needs of our common humanity, Pope Francis spells out, is not enough. We must also work to change the social, economic, and political systems, as well as the ecclesial structures, that create division and injustice.

FAQ: What is life as a religious like?

Vocation directors often need to distinguish between a profession or career and the foundations of the call to holiness. Clearly this devoted man of prayer, Pope Francis, believes that my vocation is not what I do, but who I am. Religious today, according to this call to holiness, should be modeling a transcendent trajectory patterned after gospel living. Does my life show others how to live an alternative to the superficial, worldly, materialistic, or consumeristic lifestyles of today? Is my worship pleasing to God because my prayer leads me to give freely of myself? "The best way to discern if my prayer is authentic," Pope Francis says, is to judge to what extent our life is being transformed in the light of mercy" (104).

To answer a call to holiness means letting go of suspicion of the social engagement of others. Have we as religious fallen into the unholy trap of being devoted to one ethical issue over others? Do we label how another chooses to live her or his gospel values? The pope writes:

Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm, and passionate for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every other form of rejection. (101)



At the heart of each vocation is an understanding that caring for each other is caring for God. Pictured here is Brother Chris Patiño, F.S.C. with two graduating students.

Dedicating your life to others requires living with hope and joy. Pope Francis would say that this is not the joy found in a life chasing after the latest smart phone. “Consumerism only bloats the heart” (128). This is a joy rooted in God’s love. It is a joy that is always accompanied by a sense of humor. How many religious women and men, when telling their vocation stories, say they were attracted by the laughter and joy they witnessed? When hard times come, being joyful carries you through. It is a joy that brings “deep security, serene hope, and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate” (125).

Religious today must be the prophetic voice of the church. We are called to live with what Pope Francis refers to as *parrhesia* or boldness (129). We are the ones in the boats pushing off from the shore. Ours is a fervor or passion that takes risks and leaves a mark in this world. The compassion of Jesus we are called to model with our lives as religious women and men leaves no room for hesitancy or self-consciousness. It is impossible to be about a mission of liberation if we are timid. Apostolic courage is given to all.

The call to holiness embraces

Throughout this beautifully inspired exhortation, what comes across with a profound depth is the universality of our church, our catholicity, we could say. The call to holiness is a global endeavor. In one paragraph, Pope Francis is quoting a Vietnamese cardinal and in the next, he recounts something said by the New Zealand bishops. Biblical figures stand next to modern day examples of those who work for peace and justice. We are

offered examples by the “great cloud of witnesses” and reminded of the sanctity of all the ordinary folks, the neighbors of our lives. Famous saints, and lesser known ones, such as Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, are presented as witnesses of faith. Holy women and men of other faith traditions are recalled.

It is in this ordinary, worldwide way of life, this common journey that we all share, where the call to holiness is found. And Pope Francis constantly puts himself, as supreme pontiff and head of the church, right there with everyone else. You can just picture him, as you read this definition of holiness, driving in his little car behind others in the big Cadillacs. It is so easy to see him taking the bus to work each day as cardinal of Buenos Aires. Reading in between the lines helps us recall how he has given up a palatial residence at the Vatican for simpler quarters. We are reminded of his making room in Rome for a place to feed the hungry and give shelter to the homeless.

Gaudete Et Exsultate (Rejoice and Be Glad) is truly an example of this man’s singular devotion and joyful passion, both of which come through in each word on every page. No matter how we answer God’s call to holiness with our lives, we are given everything we need to be women and men of faith, hope, and love. ■

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Welcoming communities have allowed us to share our charism with young people.

Welcoming communities have been a way for the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to reach out to young people while building on already existing interests and activities of members. At Kearney Street Community, from left to right, are (standing) Brooks Zitzmann, Carole Sargent, Sister Diane Roche, R.S.C.J., Morgan McKeon. Seated are Mara Nogueira and Sister Julie Yachtis, R.S.C.J.

We're embracing welcoming communities

WELCOMING COMMUNITIES are an idea whose time has come (again). Religious communities that reach out to young adults are hardly new. Particularly in the 1970s and 80s many religious congregations had vibrant communities made up of religious sisters and young lay women who shared a passion for some aspect of social justice and an interest in community living.

My own community (Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus) was deeply active in the South End of Boston in the 1970s, running recreation programs for kids and helping immigrants sell their crafts and learn English. My community also worked to promote integrated schools and affordable housing. University students flowed in and out of the old brownstone on

BY SISTER DIANE ROCHE, R.S.C.J.



Sister Diane Roche, R.S.C.J. is a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She is on the congregation's leadership team.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SISTER DANIE ROCHE, R.S.C.J.

poor lighting. While the spirit is still willing, it is just not possible to continue doing many of the strenuous, interesting ministries that drew young people decades ago.

Interest in prayer, meals, and conversation leads to houses

Recently, however, there seems to be a resurgence of interest among young adults in coming together with sisters to share a meal, conversation, and prayer. Some of these young people actually share a house with sisters while others simply join the religious for regularly scheduled events, such as watching a documentary about a social issue (like mass incarceration) and having a discussion to explore the issue through the lens of Catholic social teaching. Sometimes this leads to participation in a march, lobbying or some other effort to effect social change.

In the case of the Society of the Sacred Heart, the first of these new “welcoming communities,” (Duchesne House) began in New Orleans in 2007 as a response to the destruction of Hurricane Katrina. The initial vision was that high school and university students

would come and spend a week living with three sisters in a former rectory provided by the Archdiocese, and they would go out every day to help rebuild houses. Every morning and evening the students and their teachers gathered with sisters to reflect prayerfully on their experiences.

DUCHESNE HOUSE

When the house was not full of short-term visitors, the sisters have reached out to local Jesuit Volunteers and invited them over for a meal and prayer. This led to several of the young volunteers wanting to spend a year living in community and helping with the ministry of welcoming the work parties.

SOPHIA HOUSE

A few years later our community opened a second house with a special mission to young adults in Berkeley, California: Sophia House. This community began with sisters who shared a deep interest in advancing permaculture and protecting the environment. They invited young men and women to join them for potlucks and prayer, “movie nights” featuring documentaries, and

Young people who visit the welcoming community in New Orleans, Louisiana—Duchesne House—work on landscaping a rehabbed house. Volunteers who come to Duchesne House take part in social justice education, cultural immersion, and environmental learning in addition to performing service work. The house attracts high school and college groups in particular.

Pembroke Street, often staying for liturgy and supper. In the 1980s students from St. Mary’s College in Indiana spent summers working with the community of sisters that lived in a low-income housing development in Washington DC. In the 1990’s we began “Volunteers in an Act of Hope” which invited young women to spend a year living with us in Houston and elsewhere while they worked with us in inner city schools and other ministries that served the poor. While not the norm, these experiences did lead some young women, including myself, to enter religious life.

Over the past 20 years these “mixed” communities have tended to disappear, along with ministries in poor neighborhoods, which were often a key part of them. Sisters are fewer in number and generally older. Many no longer have the energy and strength to live in dangerous neighborhoods with uneven sidewalks and

work parties in the garden. Proximity to the University of California at Berkeley and the fact that one of the sisters teaches at the Jesuit School of Theology led to a natural flow of young adults and their friends into the various programs offered at the house.

KEARNEY STREET COMMUNITY

In 2015 a third welcoming community opened close to Catholic University in Washington, DC: Kearney Street Community. It began in a four-bedroom rented bungalow with two religious and 2 bedrooms set aside for young women from local universities. These women needed to be interested in spirituality and social justice and be open to an experience of community living. By listing the rooms on the Catholic University (CU) housing website, there were always many more applicants than rooms, and the sisters were able to screen carefully to assure that those who came were serious about the mission of the house.

The CU website also led to applicants from El Salvador, Italy, Argentina, and Brazil who came for short-term stays, often to work on English skills. In 2017 an Associate of the Sacred Heart rented a second small bungalow on the same street and offered that house as an extension of the original community. For a few years, there was a community of seven women, ages 23 to 67 in these two spaces, sharing prayer on weekdays, having a community meal every Sunday, and participating in many justice related events in DC. The actual house location and configuration has evolved since then, but the welcoming community continues. Many of the women are studying at local universities or working for justice oriented non profits. The rent that each woman pays is enough to make the community sustainable financially. In addition to the women who actually live together, a growing number of young men and women have asked to be included in the events sponsored by the Kearney Street Community. They attend Taize prayer, engage in Just-Faith programs and come for parties and home-cooked meals.

HEART OF OAK COMMUNITY, REBECCA HOUSE

Two more “welcoming communities” opened in 2016 and 2017, one in Newton, Massachusetts (Heart of Oak Community) and the other in White Plains, New York (Rebecca House). One of the sisters who lives in the Newton community works at Boston College, so there is a natural relationship with students there, especially those who have had experience with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps or a Sacred Heart school. The community in White Plains has a special focus on immigration

and global leadership programs for young adults. Since both the sisters who live in that community are fluent in Spanish, they can easily welcome young women from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking communities.

Ways these new communities are different from earlier ones

Unlike the radically demanding open communities of the past, these new initiatives often build on the interests of one or two active (but older) sisters. These communities are inviting young adults to join in an activity that the sisters would be doing anyway, like attending a lecture, going for a walk in the woods, or watching a documentary. The young people who show up are looking for wisdom and spiritual depth from our community members. It helps if sisters in these welcoming communities enjoy sharing food and conversation with young people. It’s worth noting that the young adults are often quite happy to do the actual cooking. In the case of communities where young women live-in, the quieter, more introverted sisters can often play an important role simply by listening.

Sometimes it happens that a young person is exploring the idea of a religious vocation. A welcoming community is a safe place where questions can be raised in an environment where everyone, old and young, takes faith and its mysterious demands seriously. Regardless of whether young people connected to our welcoming communities opt for vowed or ordained life, the majority who become associated with these communities will find themselves on a path of spiritual growth. They are on their way to becoming better human beings no matter what path they choose in life.

These ministries of welcome and spiritual accompaniment fit squarely within the vision that young people put forth in their gathering prior to the 2018 synod:

Young people are looking for companions on the journey, to be embraced by faithful men and women who express the truth and allow young people to articulate their understanding of faith and their vocation. Such people do not need to be models of faith to imitate, but instead living testimonies to witness. Such a person should evangelize by their life.

For the majority of young adults, connecting with a welcoming community can help them be better human beings regardless of their vocation choice. And that makes our involvement in welcoming communities an investment worth making. ■

LET'S LEARN AND INNOVATE AS IF OUR FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT

I SENSE THAT MOST OF US approach vocations ministry with an inherent bias. Like a family system where (for better or worse) people raise their children as their parents raised them, we take our personal experiences as discerners and the behavior of our own vocation directors as baselines for how we help nurture for the next generation. After all, we are here; it worked. The problem is that whether we discerned a decade ago or several decades ago, the world and discerners have changed.

In organizations steeped in tradition, adaptation and change can be tricky. Consider the decisions in our congregations forced by the invention and widespread use of the automobile, television, computer, and cell phone during the 20th century. The world fails to ask our permission as to how its evolutions might benefit or detract from our missions, even less so in an increasingly secularized environment.

To be sure, we vocation ministers have changed too. Exterior forces continue to move us in the direction of increasing sophistication in the *evaluation* of candidates for our congregations. However, progress in the approach to *finding* prospective members doesn't seem to have evolved much at all. Rather, we tend to summarize each successive generation with a few generalizations gleaned from popular sociology and leave it at that. "This particular generation likes [blank] or does not like [blank,]" we tell each other to knowing nods.

What if rather than attracting roughly 500 men and women to religious life in the United States each year, God is asking us to find a way to attract 1,000 or even 2,500? If that were the case, how would we build our capacities of attraction and engagement? I would suggest we need to learn from the best of the secular trades: communications, marketing, human resources, information technology, graphic design, data analytics, and economics. Yes, economics. It might be the most influential and least understood aspect of our work. (We tend to treat budgets as higher than God. At least we are allowed to question God.)

What tactics we might collectively employ in reaching such heights lives beyond the scope of this article. What I propose is simply this: some organizations learn well, transmitting that data to successive generations, and some do not. In his doctoral thesis, now retired Col. John A. Nagl makes this exact point in the context of military organizations. He notes that the American Army's shortcomings as a "learning organization" were contributing factors to the American woes in Vietnam. Nagl's thesis title evokes the words of British officer T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935) who describes organizational learning as, "messy and slow, like trying to learn to eat soup with a knife." (*Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*).



The key phrase in all of this is *to learn*. Think of the dogged effort it takes for a relatively ungifted student to conquer math, spelling, or reading. It's a slow, arduous, uphill climb. I suggest that as religious in the American church we find ourselves in a similar moment in finding and engaging candidates. Whatever modeling our forebears demonstrated, we face a fundamental opportunity to embrace the struggle of improvement and to intentionally pass along its hard-won fruits—not just of tactical success but of *how to learn* in the context of vocation ministry.

Recently, at a social before dinner, a Jesuit from another Western country described the decline in the number of religious and capped his commentary with the comment, "Eventually, the tide of history buries all of us. You just can't fight it." Attempting to be polite and not spill my drink, I refrained from comment. But inside I was screaming. Really? Such defeatist thinking is self-fulfilling. Moreover, the great founders of religious congregations did not ride the tide of history but cooperated with God's grace to *create* it. Prayerfully, God seems to be offering a grace, not just to succeed but to learn how to learn. It will surely be "messy and slow." Can we embrace it?



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What if rather than attracting 500 men and women to religious life in the U.S each year, God is asking us to attract 1,000 or even 2,500? How would we build our capacities of attraction and engagement?



Invite young adults to come rest in Christ

HERE'S AN EXERCISE I'VE SEEN DONE with young adults. After putting up posters around a room featuring words often connected to those in their 20s and 30s (such as *transitional, digital, communal, prophetic* and *global*), participants are asked to move to the poster that best describes life as a young adult at this moment. Once there, they can write one or two additional words or phrases that give more insight into their own experiences.

Each time I've seen this done, the same thing happens: young adults gravitate in massive numbers to the poster marked "overwhelmed." Usually the space is so crowded that it needs additional posters so everyone can jot down their contribution.

Regardless of where this exercise is done, what we see is eerily consistent: young adults are, by and large, feeling burdened, stressed, pressured, and overwhelmed. This is a reality that vocation ministers cannot ignore, and it is one that merits attention for the church's efforts not only in vocation ministry but also in missionary discipleship.

Some might scoff at the suggestion that young adults feel stressed, thinking that most young people are doing just fine: they are enjoying the good life on credit in a consumer society, and they don't have a care in the

BY PAUL JARZEMBOWSKI



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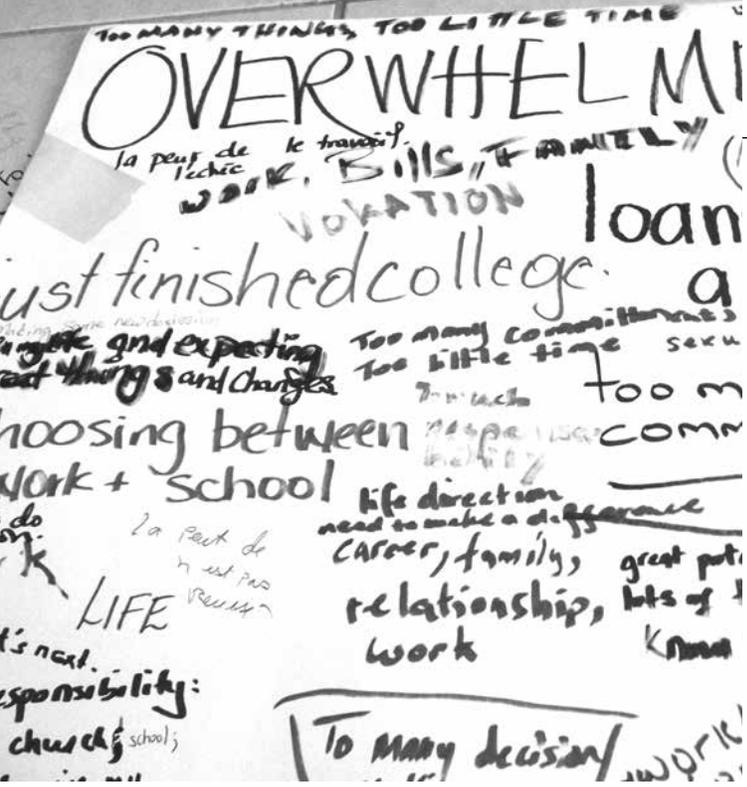


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

The poster above was created by young adults in St. Lucia during a church exercise designed to help them express themselves.

world aside from themselves. But in reality, postmodern young adults are quite a different story.

For one thing they report significant levels of anxiety. According to a report by the American Psychological Association released in 2018, Millennials reported higher stress than any other generation, citing stress about health, safety, finances, relationships, and politics.

In terms of their financial picture, many Generation Xers and Millennials have racked up an overwhelming amount of debt from college loans and credit cards. Additionally, less work is available today for a 20-something than a few decades ago. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), “more than half (50.9%) of the nation’s nearly 8 million unemployed people are between the ages of 16 and 34 – even though that group makes up just over a third of the civilian labor force.”

With Baby Boomers retiring later, fewer jobs are now available to recent college graduates, who often have to move back in with their parents, seek temporary jobs, or enroll in graduate study programs, further adding to their educational debt.

Economically, there is instability among young adults, as a growing number of those in their 20s are falling well below the poverty line. A 2016 Pew Research Center study found that 31 percent of households headed by a young adult under the age of 35 were living in poverty. (As a point of comparison, when Baby Boomers were young adults, this figure was only 12 percent). Additionally, the U.S. Census reported that the net worth

of young adults decreased 37 percent between 2005 and 2010, while older generations took a 13 percent hit in the same time period. “The wealth gap between younger and older Americans now stands as the widest on record,” said Joel Kotkin, a columnist for Newsweek. “Quick prospects for improvement are dismal for the youngest generation.”

The only way for many working young adults to receive a salary increase is to move from job to job, hoping that the next one will pay more than the last. Young adults will have about seven to eight jobs before the age of 35—some of which will require significant geographical moves from one housing market to another, potentially adding further debt and anxiety to the situation. Young adults are constantly moving—transitioning from job to job, task to task, city to city. If they aren’t learning a new skill or career at this moment, they may be polishing their resume as they plan to exit their current job. The ongoing cycle goes by quickly with short periods between transitions, leaving little time for friends, family, or establishing a community.

One might argue that access to technology could and should make life a little easier, but in reality, it has made things more complicated. All generations, including young adults who have greater connectivity to mobile devices, are finding it increasingly difficult to “unplug” from the technology readily available to them in the workplace. “Welcome to the world of work, where 5:30 p.m. is far from the end of the day,” quip the editors at Knowledge@Wharton, the online business journal for The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. “Not only do we have difficulty maintaining personal boundaries with work because our lives and jobs are so enmeshed with technology, but we also feel intense pressure from our organizations to be ‘always on’ and immediately responsive to calls and e-mails outside of normal working hours.” Knowing that employees, especially younger generations, are accessible by e-mail or text at any hour of the day, supervisors are expecting much more from the workforce. There is also a pressure on young adults to go faster because their technology is equally as quick. And even if a supervisor isn’t setting such high standards, young adults will often impose a pressure on themselves to check their e-mails and work from home—just so that they can get ahead of their workload or climb the ladder of success more quickly.

Even young church workers are not exempt from this experience. In a study conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, researchers found that 39 percent of Catholic

lay ecclesial ministers under age 30 consider themselves “very much overworked” and have little to no time for family, friends, personal hobbies and interests and even prayer.

Regardless of whether they are young professionals, church workers, or un- and under-employed, today’s young adults are running on fumes with no gas station in sight (added to this, the amount of bills, in particular debt from college and credit cards, that young adults acquire so quickly today is yet another source of frustration). They are simply overwhelmed by life.

Pope Francis acknowledged this reality in *Christus Vivit*, (Christ Lives) his 2019 apostolic exhortation on young people: “In a rapidly changing world, many [young peoples’] lives are exposed to suffering and manipulation... As a church, may we never fail to weep before these tragedies of our young” (71, 75). In the seemingly comfortable United States, many young adults are paralyzed or beaten down by the societal pressures of a fast-paced, image-conscious, and success-driven culture like our own.

So what is it that young adults seek? Help, hope, and comfort. Conversely, what is it that they are not seeking? Anyone telling them that they are not trying hard enough, that they’re not good enough, or that their mistakes will condemn them to God knows where. Which of these will they find if they enter our churches?

Drifting away

Many of us have heard the depressing numbers of active young adult churchgoers: only 15 to 17 percent of self-identified Roman Catholic Gen Xers and Millennials attend Mass on a weekly basis, while around one third of all Americans under age 30 have no religious affiliation whatsoever. We see the reality each Sunday, as our pews grow empty and our assemblies become grayer. Consequently, fewer young adults are entering church leadership and answering the vocational call to priesthood, religious life, or lay ecclesial ministry.

The origins of these statistics generally don’t always lie in a rejection of Catholic doctrine or dogma (although, to be fair, there are those who do object to Catholic positions on various teachings). Some of what drives young adults away is a failure of church leaders to tend to the relevant needs.

Young adults report they simply “drifted away” from the practice of the faith, usually because no one seemed to really care (and no one bothered to stop them during their exit from the pews either). Others left because life

Tips for ministry with the overwhelmed

SEEK. The young adults who most need Christ the Healer in their lives can also be the ones who aren’t coming to church regularly. Part of the church’s work is to seek out and find those men and women. Work with campus and young adult ministers in doing this.

LISTEN. Too often, when stressed-out people do come to us, we can be tempted to fix them or share all the opportunities the church offers them. Instead, let us take a moment to simply listen to them. Sometimes, a kind ear is all that is needed.

ADVOCATE. Within a parish, community or diocese, advocate for the young adults who don’t have the time or energy to push for their own ministry. Encourage other ministry leaders and church authorities to minister to the stressed and broken young people.

USE YOUR CHARISM. Reflect on your own community’s charism, and see if there are ways that those gifts can help you and others respond to young adults’ feelings of being overwhelmed and overburdened.

SUPPORT OR CREATE. If there are support groups and programs in place at local parishes or across the diocese for young adults, tap into them. However, if nothing exists, consider creating something new to help out the overwhelmed young adults in your area.

got busy and overwhelming (as already outlined), and there wasn’t a support system in place at their church to help them. Still others were simply in need of rest, and there was no compelling reason to roll out of bed and connect with a parish community that probably didn’t even know their names.

Whatever the reason, something has “eclipsed” their connection to a faith community, a concept that renowned young adult minister Mike Hayes introduced in his book, *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in Their 20s and 30s*. “There is no time for church or an intentional faith experience,” he contends, “because of the demands of a busy culture and the irrelevance of religious institutions.” Something more pressing than Sunday Mass has captured their attention, eclipsing any connection the church might have in their lives. Life simply got in the way.



Are religious communities listening to what young people are saying about their needs?

When this happens, young adults will find help, hope, and comfort wherever they can find it, and often that does not include religious communities. A 2015 study by the Pew Research Center said that 35 percent of Millennials identify religiously as “none.”

Where is hope, help, comfort?

So where do they find help, hope, and comfort? A few may turn to unhealthy patterns of drugs or other temptations, but the majority becomes spiritually self-reliant. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls them “spiritual tinkerers” for their ability to construct a worldview from culture and the arts, their family and friends, life experiences and a sprinkling of elements from religious traditions. Yet in all this, there is no spiritual community they can call “home,” no outside perspective to give them spiritual direction, and no real sense of an intentional vocation. Many will continue to wander through life, wondering what God has planned for them in the chaos of transition and being overwhelmed by work, relationships, and life in general—but without a community with which to make that spiritual journey.

The call of missionary discipleship implores that we respond to this reality. It challenges active Catholics to reconnect those who have fallen from the practice of their faith for whatever reason: anger, frustration, or being eclipsed and overwhelmed by life.

When confronted with the challenge to evangelize, many people are lost and confused as to what they can

or should do. How can we preach Christ to someone who knows him, but who simply doesn’t have the time, energy, or concern to do anything about it? How can we re-introduce the faith to those who have not experienced the help, hope, and comfort offered by the church or those who profess its creed?

It seems the surest route to engaging in the work of evangelization is to witness to a faith that says to the overwhelmed, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will

find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and burden light” (Matthew 11:28-30). To be successful missionary disciples we must boldly proclaim the help, hope, and comfort that Christ invites his church to emulate.

What is most needed by young adults today is a faith community that exemplifies Christ as the one who provides rest and compassion for the weary, that takes off their yoke of anxiety and replaces it with one of help, hope, and comfort. If we seek to bring back the 85 percent of young adults not engaged with the faith, we must be more about tending the wounds of an overwhelmed generation rather than proclaiming our own righteousness or trying to fix the people who come seeking Christ.

For young adults whose lives are constantly on-the-go, who barely have enough time to sit and enjoy a coffee or a few extra minutes of sleep in the morning, it can be hard to find a moment to journey deep within the heart and mind—and rediscover God’s call. Without contemplative moments, many young adults will continue to jump from career to career and place to place, not for the money, but because they don’t know where they truly belong. Without being able to plant roots in any one job or career, some aren’t certain if the soil on which they stand is really the place they want or need to be. And without that knowledge, a young adult could stay in a state of transition for the rest of his or her life.

People in their 20s and 30s, and perhaps those of any generation, can become overwhelmed simply because they never had a chance to stop for a moment to look inward. This overwhelming feeling can lead to detachment from happiness, from achieving purpose and from

a faith community—especially if religious institutions are not helping them in any way.

Vocation ministers: essential evangelists

Those engaged in vocations work, then, have a pivotal role in evangelization. Not only do they offer much-needed spiritual practices and opportunities for overwhelmed young adults; they also help these men and women find rest with a community and lifestyle that allows them to more fully live out their purpose, all for the greater glory of God. And in that community, whether it is a place where young adults simply visit or choose to make their home, they find a safe place for sacred silence, mentorship and pastoral support, and a chance to integrate deeper meaning and spirituality into their everyday lives.

Vocation leaders should be encouraging young men and women to slow down, take a rest and to listen for God's voice—exactly what the overstressed and overburdened young adults could really use in their stressed out, chaotic existence. Within that rest and silence, vocation ministers can help people to achieve clarity of purpose, a sense of direction, and a deeper understanding and meaning behind all the craziness of life. These are things religious have been doing for years.

With this in mind, Pope Francis recently wrote, “May all young people who are suffering feel the closeness of a Christian community... by its actions, its embrace, and its concrete help” (*Christus Vivit*, 77). He goes on to say that “the community has an important role to play in the accompaniment of young people; it should feel collectively responsible for accepting, motivating, encouraging, and challenging them” (243). Through this most recent exhortation, the Holy Father has asked pastoral and vocational church leaders to join him in offering paschal hope to the young and to walk alongside them as mentors and fellow travelers in the midst of their struggles along the way.

Religious communities have a long history of answering the cry of the overwhelmed. In early 17th-century Peru, Dominican St. Martin de Porres cared for those overwhelmed by sickness, disease, slavery and the cruel racial prejudices of his day. To those who were marginalized and overrun, de Porres exemplified the image of Christ who said, “come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened,” even when it wasn't readily accepted by the culture or by his religious community.

In the late nineteenth century, Frances Xavier Cabrini, foundress of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred

Heart, came to the U.S. from Europe upon the urging of Pope Leo XIII to minister to Italian immigrants. She founded 67 institutions in her lifetime to assist the immigrant population who were abandoned, uneducated and overwhelmed by prejudice and poverty. Mother Cabrini serves as yet another example for us today in seeking out those who are lost in a sea of confusion and isolation, beckoning them, “come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened” and we will give you rest.

In the postmodern world, we still have the poor, the immigrant, the sick, and the dying to tend to—but the church has another group to add to that list: the overwhelmed. In tying together the beatitudes of St. Matthew and St. Luke, we are called to minister not just to the “poor” but also the “poor in spirit.” In today's context, these are the men and women, many of whom are in their 20s and 30s, who are overwhelmed with anxiety, fear, pressure, depression, and insurmountable stress. St. Martin de Porres and Mother Cabrini are just two examples of religious men and women coming to the aid of the forgotten and lost, bringing them closer to the love of Christ and the church.

This same charge faces us in the 21st century: to be the compassionate face of Christ to those whom others, including other religious leaders, have passed by on the roadside, thinking that overwhelmed young adults (who are also quite secularized and detached from their faith) can take care of themselves.

Ministering to overwhelmed young adults today can be messy. It doesn't always fit in vocation programs, parish ministerial flowcharts, or diocesan strategic plans, but this kind of outreach is exactly what the church is equipped and charged to do. St. Martin de Porres' outreach was messy, too, because the people in need of care were messy. Yet, as he once said to a fellow Dominican, “Compassion, my dear brother, is preferable to cleanliness.” Compassion truly is preferable to all else.

Joining hands

We do not walk this road alone. Priests and religious communities can work alongside young adult ministers

Not only do vocation ministers offer much-needed spiritual practices; they also help these men and women find rest with a community and lifestyle that allows them to more fully live their purpose.

IDEAS FOR REST AND REFRESHMENT

The Stress-Free Zone If your community or parish is located in a convenient place, offer your place as a “stress free zone” at certain times of the day (after work, on weekends, etc.) where young adults can come in for moments of relaxation, prayer or fun. A beautiful garden or a peaceful room could be welcome settings. Nothing needs to be programmed, but letting young adults in the area know that your place is an oasis for the overwhelmed can be a wonderful sign to them that you care. While not required, having food available might be a great addition to the “zone.”

Stressed Out Support Group Bring together young adults weekly or monthly to talk about the notion of “being stressed out.” Each month can revolve around a different type of stress: family, work, relationships, home, health, and so forth. The sessions could include a prayer experience to refresh them, a time for listening, and some insight into how the church or one’s religious community can offer them support.

Everyday Prayer for Everyday People Host a regular prayer night, but promote it as something for “everyday people” (since some young adults may see prayer programs as an activity for super-religious folks). Offer prayer experiences that don’t involve much detail, allowing young adults the chance to unwind and renew themselves in quiet, simple, and restful moments with God.

Spiritual Direction for the Stressed Promote spiritual direction opportunities, but advertise them as a way to help those who are overwhelmed or stressed to find some clarity and hope in their chaotic lives. Many young adults don’t know what a “spiritual director” is, so promoting it in this way might bring in some new faces.

Digital Direction For those too busy for activities and gatherings (hence the reason for their feelings of being overwhelmed), be a spiritual presence online via social media or your website. On Facebook, keep an eye out for young adults who express stress or frustration and, on those occasions, comment or send a private note of encouragement. On your website, consider offering a place where people can click “Help Me!” and interact with a sister, brother, priest, or supportive minister during challenging times.

and evangelists already engaged with this population, as well as the 15 percent of those in their 20s and 30s who are active in the practice of their faith—all in service to the other 85 percent. Vocation leaders can equip active young adults with the tools they will need to offer support and compassion to their overburdened peers.

Religious orders and vocation offices could potentially be the training ground for new evangelists (and this can also be an excellent way to introduce the vocation of church leadership to these young men and women, who may want to move onto other ways of serving the church). Additionally, young adults can help those religious communities to better understand the reality of being a young adult, a helpful thing for congregations seeking to be more inter-generational and attract younger members. The possibilities of this synergy are endless, but such collaboration needs to begin without delay.

Regardless of how this work is done, it is important to remember that this type of evangelization is not about how the church has come to save the souls of the inactive Catholics, but how the church can help lift the burdens which weigh them down. In our zeal for increasing the number of people in the pews and in our vocations, we can easily forget that we are meant to serve and not be served.

Young adults need the help, hope, and comfort of their faith. Many are overrun with the pressures that life has put upon them. They have little time to find a way out, and if they do, they do so without the support of a spiritual community of faith. And they just don’t see how the church can possibly help them out. Yet our God and our Catholic Church can provide these young adults with the rest, refreshment, and compassion they need, if only someone would point the way toward the One who says “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.” ■

Related articles

Apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, (Christ Lives) April 2019.

Young adult input for the October 2018 synod on “Youth, faith, and vocational discernment.” Visit synod2018.va.

Feed your spirit

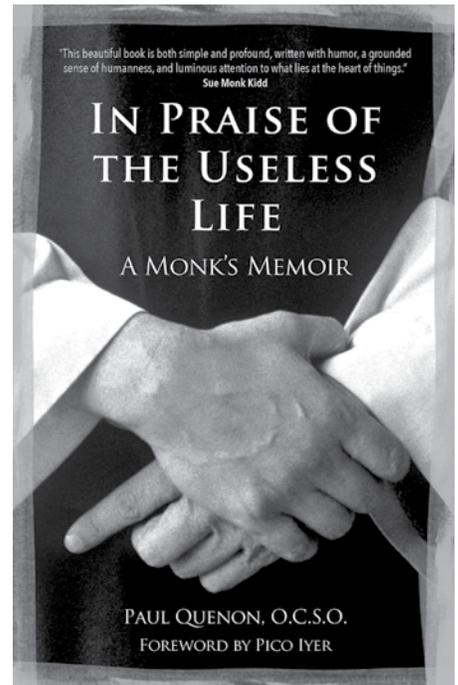
GOD lights up stars
to help us keep walking:

“The stars shine in their watches;
he calls them and they are glad” (Bar. 3:34-35).

Christ himself is our great light of hope
and our guide in the night,
for he is the “bright morning star”
(Rev. 22:16).

—Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit* (33)

Published in 2018 by Ave Maria Press



Monastic life up close and personal

BY SISTER GABRIEL DAVISON, O.S.C.



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

Arundel, UK. She is also a councillor for the Federation of Poor Clares in Great Britain. Additionally Sister Gabriel works in vocation discernment and spiritual accompaniment and enjoys cooking and gardening in her community.

IN *PRAISE OF THE USELESS LIFE* is the memoir of Father Paul Quenon O.C.S.O., a Cistercian monk of Gethsemane Abbey, Kentucky. Since a memoir is a personal reflection of one's life, not the whole of it but a look at important things, before I ever opened the pages of this book, I decided it deserved to be read with respect and attentiveness, with a deeply compassionate heart.

It must take a great deal of courage to write one's memoirs and to decide what must be included and what can easily be left out. Quenon has certainly given us a taste of what it is like to live one's life fully present to God, to be held in love, and to live for love, during the whole of life.

As I opened the book the first words I read were "I AM on permanent vacation." I thought immediately of the I AM of God in Exodus and Jesus' sevenfold names for himself in the gospels, which reveal to us that Jesus is the Son of God. When Quenon writes "I AM," he is revealing something of himself, who and what he essentially is. He explains that the monastic life is essentially a "vacating," an emptying out of clutter to make room for God. Throughout this book one certainly senses that here is a man who loves his vocation and has found peace within himself.

The monastic life is a quirky life, a "bit odd," but if God calls one to live it, it's a privileged life because the essential element of "vacating" as Quenon calls it, is the emptying of one's hands in order to more fully receive.

Quenon shares with readers something of his humanity, through his humor, his community, and the people he has had the good fortune to have met and been formed by. Through this memoir he allows the door of his heart to be opened, just a fraction, so that we can see and experience a creator who is so generous in love and mercy, that God wishes to shower us with every good gift.

As we begin this holiday with Quenon, however, we learn that the monastic life requires teamwork, and the three essential elements of this are prayer, work, and reading. The paradox of being on a monastic “vacation” is that it requires a clear structure, boundaries, and an obedient heart! With a touch of humor Quenon compares monastic life to a ball game. Not unlike St. Paul in his analogy to the body, Quenon says all the players have to work in harmony with one another in order to reach the goal. He tantalizingly says if monastics are too wild or too rigid, the game can be spoiled, but “if you flow with the rules,” you can have a great game.

It was here, I think, that I had hoped for an unpacking of the complexities of human nature, but I was frustratingly left at the top of a precipice. How instructive it could have been if Quenon had shared with us the way he learned to become a team player in the monastery, the rules of the game, or, better still, how he learned to tame his “wild card” and how he became more flexible with the rules. We each desire tools in order to “throw oneself into the freedom and play” of the game in order to reach that place of “inner poverty and emptiness” from which flows forth “wisdom and great joy.”

One’s life can become a psalm

The book continues with some very perceptive one liners about the monastic life, exploring why one should pray, wrestling or dancing with God, and through that experience, discovering one’s identity in God. Tasko help us understand what has sustained him on his journey, Quenon gives us the insights of Thomas Merton, his onetime novice master, and the beautiful poetry of Emily Dickinson. However readers never quite feel they have reached a depth of experience or been privy to completely honest wrestling within. As we read, we wonder if what echoes in our own hearts is anything but an ache for something unattainable.

Carrying my own inner expectations, I moved forward and was comforted by the fact that this holy

The monastic life is a quirky life, a “bit odd,” but if God calls one to live it, it’s a privileged life.

monk could, whilst praying the psalms, have the experience of “an entire psalm might slip by ignored” or that “I take them for granted and sometimes fail to hear them.” It was here I felt that I had begun to meet a more vulnerable person, through his honesty, struggle, and also delight in praying the psalms. How purifying to experience the annihilation of oneself so that one’s life can become a psalm, that, one with the community, the voice of humanity can echo through time and eternity to become a praise of God. It is here that Quenon brings together childhood memories, into the present suffering of humanity, which are all taken up into eternity, where coming full circle one is faced again with one’s humanity.

Through his love of music Quenon reveals the sensitivity of a man who experiences God through many different mediums for the sheer “joy of doing something beautiful in the presence of God.”

It is clear that Thomas Merton was an important person in Quenon’s life, and the chapter about his initial formation is dominated by this larger than life figure. How interesting it would have been to read more about Quenon’s initial formation, having been influenced by Merton, rather than more information about Merton himself. However, from his junior master, Father John Eudes, O.C.S.O. we learn that “nothing can be authentic unless it comes from openness to the moment” and that what Quenon knows of freedom comes from “living in the spirit with confidence in God’s largeness of heart and mercy.” Frustratingly, though, Quenon doesn’t give us his ABC of how to do that. When he writes about his family, especially his sister, Carolyn, readers feel he touches on a deep human love and a spiritual awakening that is beautifully placed just before he takes vows. He can then with confidence say that his life has “gradually emerged from the hand of God.” How challenging for readers to ask that same question—of themselves!

Patience as the mystery unfolds

We learn from the chapter on nature that life must be a “choice made,” using nouns such as *submission*, *confidence*, *resolution*, and a *taste* for joy. He elucidates beautifully on how we can seek the face of God through the nature that surrounds us. Year on year, the seasons come and go, and nature reveals the patterns of life and death, as the monastic rhythm does the same. It appears nothing is happening at all, and yet in the “ordinariness”

of each day, if we have the patience to believe it, a much greater mystery unfolds. The underlying message is: be patient and wait as the who and what you are is still in the making!

In another chapter we spend a week with Quenon in Thomas Merton's hermitage, wanting nothing but to be stayed interiorly within what stays you. He seeks an alternative rhythm in order to experience God in new and dynamic ways, be that through walking, dancing, sitting still in nature or writing poetry. What becomes clear is that Quenon is an uninhibited seeker who uses all of his

“Within every moment present there is a Presence.” How simply Quenon puts it, and yet how challenging it is, to be fully present to each moment.

sensory powers to experience a union with God that is liberating. He describes it as a “dwelling quietly on the horizon of the absolute”, so that nourished by the solitude he can more readily take up again the rigors of community living. Several of his brothers enjoyed times of living as hermits, and it was a delight to meet some of the characters of the community and how the spaces

they inhabited reflected something of their personalities.

Quenon is a poet, and he uses this gift to articulate, understand, and make present his own prayer life. He shares with us some of his Haiku poetry, which enables him to have “a precise, open moment of awareness” as he calls it. This is a sacred chapter because he shares of his own prayer, and one can feel the energy and intensity of the experience. Through different ways of praying —contemplative prayer, community prayer, poetic writing, or prayer experienced through nature: “within every moment present there is a Presence.” How simply Quenon puts it, and yet how challenging it is to be fully present to each moment.

My favorite chapter is the one about a battle of wills between Quenon and the birds! It reminded me of St. Francis preaching to the birds and his taming of the wolf of Gubbio. Interesting how what one perceives as one's “enemy” can become a friend, and we not only can learn to co-habit and tolerate each other but, further still, enter into a relationship with our furred and feathered friends and call them brothers and sisters. Another hobby of Quenon's is taking pictures, and he uses the camera lens, as a way to look with eyes of faith in order to “gaze” at God in creation. He looks with “simplicity and sees

beauty” because his mind and heart are attuned to being attentive to the moment. What a description of prayer!

Later we read about the impact of Merton's death on Quenon and the gap left behind by someone who was obviously a big character in the community. Every monk or nun is marked, for good or ill, by their initial formators, and Merton has certainly left his mark on Quenon's life. The danger, as I see it, is that we can live in the shadow of great masters and never fully inhabit our own giftedness until much later in life.

Near the end of the book we are introduced to some of Quenon's friends. The poetry of Emily Dickinson has left a lasting mark upon his soul, as it would upon anyone who has immersed themselves in her works; she was a mystic and seeker of the face of God. Quenon, too, has had the good fortune to meet several famous people who have visited the monastery, and I hope that they in turn were moved by their encounter with him and not just the memory or the visit to the hermitage of Merton.

Finally we come to the end, and yet it seems we are back at the beginning, as we come full circle and read once more about the essentials of a life handed over to God. I am pleased to have read this memoir which evoked not a few emotions, posed some challenges, and instilled in me a deep desire to continue on my own journey. It is a book that leaves you hungry for more, hungry to understand more deeply the spiritual journey or, better still, to be more fervent in your own spiritual life. I finished just a little disappointed that I hadn't read more about the process of Quenon's own inner journey, or even something of the pain and suffering that inevitably purify us as we seek holiness and communion with God. I was hooked for most of the book, though I lost my way a little toward the end.

Anyone in vocations ministry would do well to read this book, as a sample of the monastic life, as an aid to understanding the life better. However nothing beats experience, so if Quenon's book encourages anyone to visit a monastery, all well and good. However if it does nothing more than tempt readers to explore the spiritual life in their own circumstances, it will be worth the read. ■

Related reading

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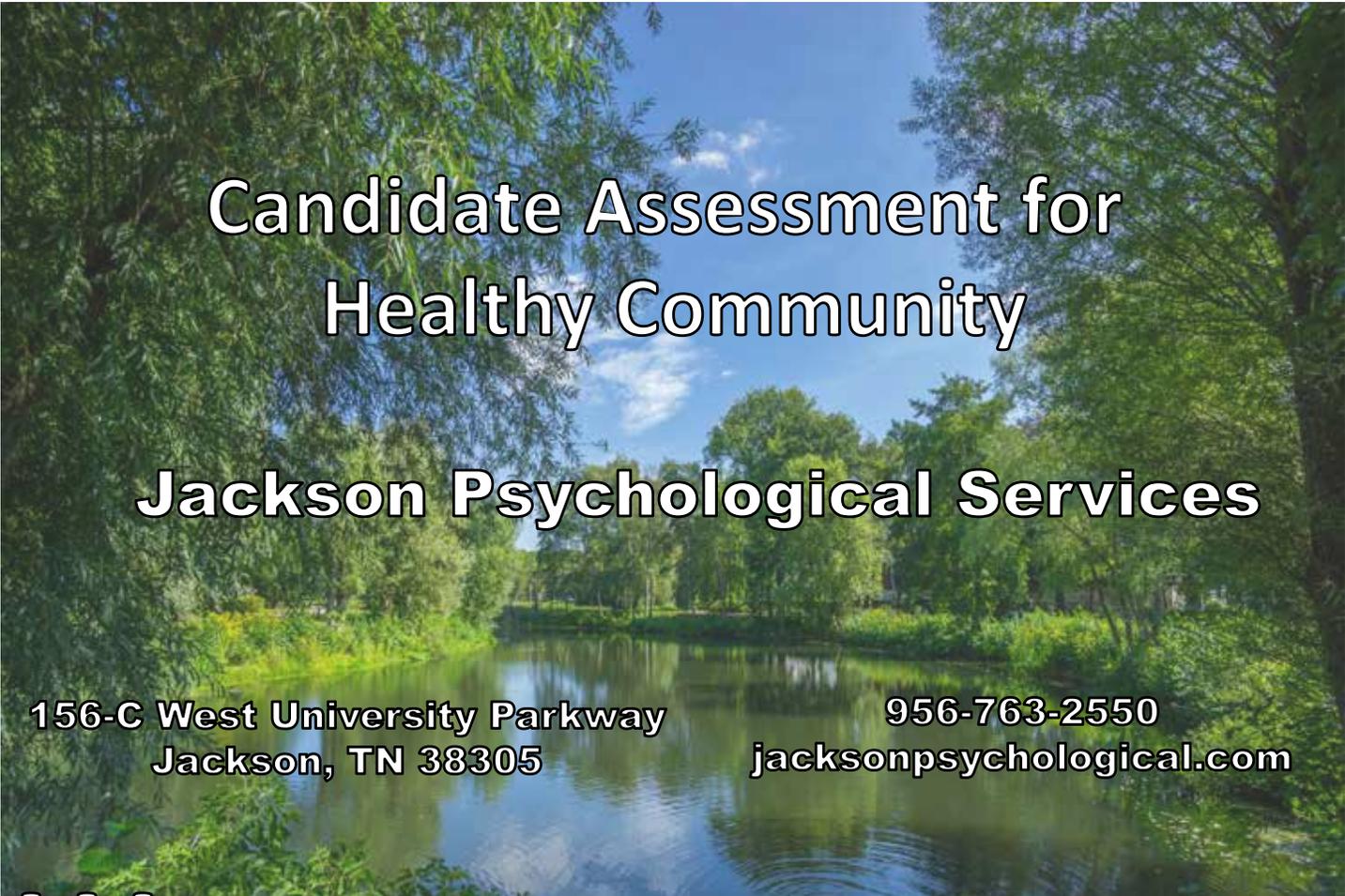
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