

# HORIZON



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

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## VOCATION MINISTRY & NEW EVANGELIZATION

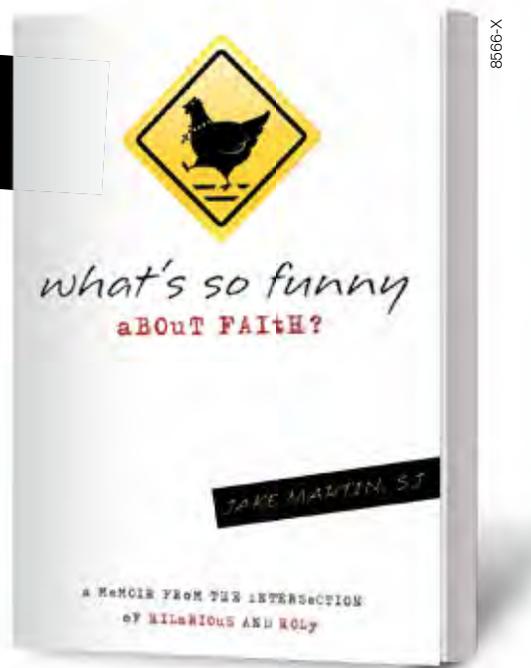
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# HORIZON

*HORIZON* began as a vocation journal in 1975. Today, as a quarterly publication, it serves a readership of more than 2000 in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries.

*HORIZON* serves as a resource:

- To assist vocation directors in their professional and personal growth as ministers;
- To educate and engage educators, directors of retreat centers, formation personnel, community leadership, bishops, campus ministers, librarians, priests, religious, laity and anyone interested in vocations and their role in vocation ministry.

*HORIZON* has a threefold purpose:

- To provide timely and contemporary articles relative to vocation ministry;
- To provide an opportunity for the exchange of ideas on pertinent issues in the field of vocations;
- To highlight some of the current resources available.

*HORIZON* is published by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The NRVC is an organization of men and women committed to the fostering and discernment of vocations. It provides services for professional vocation directors and others who are interested and involved in vocation ministry. It proclaims the viability of religious life and serves as a prophetic, creative, life-giving force in today's church.

To accomplish this, NRVC provides opportunities for professional growth and personal support of vocation ministers; facilitates regional, area and national meetings for its members; sponsors workshops, seminars, conferences and days of prayer; publishes materials related to vocations for a wide variety of audiences; engages in research, study and exchange on issues of current concern; publishes a quarterly professional journal, *HORIZON*; maintains a Web site; and cooperates with other national groups essential to the fostering of vocations. For further information, contact: NRVC, 5401 S. Cornell Ave., Suite 207, Chicago, IL 60615-5698. E-mail: [nrvc@nrvc.net](mailto:nrvc@nrvc.net). Web:

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

## A pope from the ranks of religious life

**A** religious pope! A Jesuit! As when a gust lifts the hat off my head and puts it down a block away, I am caught completely by surprise, and I'm running to catch up. For religious, it is no small thing that one of their own has been chosen to lead. On page 6, Pat Morrison goes into more depth about why a religious life background brings the church fresh and much needed perspective. For consecrated men and women, it is heartening that the man at the helm has discerned a vocation to religious life, has gone through formation, has lived community life, has understood the significance of the lives and labors of religious communities.

For those in the affluent West, a pope who has ridden the bus with the poor of Buenos Aires may well challenge our way of life and our commitments (or lack thereof) to be in solidarity with the least of our sisters and brothers.

Pope Francis can never be all things to all people, but his new approach may be wind in the sails of the new evangelization. In this Year of Faith, vocation ministers are uniquely positioned to bring the Good News to what surprisingly has turned out to be "prime mission territory"—the young adults all around us. Sister Theresa Rickard, OP, a former vocation minister and now executive director of Renew International,

explains how seamless the relationship is between new evangelization and vocation ministry (page 8). Paul Jarzembowski, a young adult ministry expert, illuminates the pressures young people experience today and gives practical ideas for both evangelizing and bringing vocation awareness to this population (page 13).

Our other three features in this edition tackle the topic of internal communal concerns within and among religious communities. By paying attention to mission and identity, religious communities can be ready to offer something to those attracted to religious life.

Furthermore a new department in HORIZON, "Feed Your Spirit," (page 36) ensures that with each edition we step back to tend to our inner lives. We're just cardboard cutouts huckstering for vocations if we don't renew our love for the Lord. All of us who help produce HORIZON hope this feature provides a moment of contemplation, and we welcome contributions to it.

As the days grow longer and the warmth intensifies, let us be ready for the challenges ahead—even if they mean chasing our metaphorical hats down the street.



—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor, [cscheiber@nrvc.net](mailto:cscheiber@nrvc.net)

# UPDATES

## News from the vocation world



### World Youth Day to have vocation presence

National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) and VISION Vocation Network will partner with Holy Cross Family Ministries, the Knights of Columbus, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Canadian Salt and Light TV, and the Pontifical Society for Mission in sponsoring the international English-speaking pavilion at World Youth Day (WYD) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil July 24 - 26.

All NRVC members are welcome to participate in the “vocation café,” where pilgrims may speak informally with religious regarding their future, their faith, or religious life. Although members of National Religious Vocation Conference will be responsible for their own transportation, lodging and WYD registration, as a service to membership, no fee will be required to participate in the vocation café. For communities unable to have their own vocation booth, this is a more affordable way to be present to the world’s youth. These plans are still preliminary; further information will be posted at [www.nrvc.net](http://www.nrvc.net).

### NRVC offering four summer workshops

The National Religious Vocation Conference is offering four workshops at its Summer Institute in downtown Chicago. Online registration is now available at [nrvc.net](http://nrvc.net) for the following professional development opportunities:

#### **THE HEART OF MULTICULTURALISM IN VOCATION MINISTRY**

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### Sisters to complete gatherings soon

Sisters from dozens of religious communities have come together to learn, reflect and begin to strategize about new membership at three of four gatherings of “Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope.” One hundred sixty-four sisters have taken part so far in the event, which has occurred in Chicago, Burlingame, CA and Latham, NY. A final session is scheduled for Chicago May 28-30.

At each gathering keynoter Sister Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, a sociologist, has presented an overview of generational, cultural and ethnic realities for Catholic women and new members. Participants have taken part in table discussions, prayer, liturgy and reflection. After the final event in May, NRVC will publish a document

about the gatherings prepared by “listeners” Sisters Lorraine Reaume, OP and Anne Walsh, ASCJ. This series of gatherings has been made possible thanks to a grant from the GHR Foundation.

## Study on multicultural issues underway

Dr. Mary Gautier, senior research associate at Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), facilitated a working group meeting March 22 in Washington, DC to assist her in developing a new NRVC-CARA study entitled “Study on the Integration of Multicultural and Multi-ethnic Candidates into Religious Life.”

The goal of this research is to identify promising practices and resources to help religious institutes in welcoming and retaining candidates not of European descent. After conducting focus groups of newer entrants of various ethnicities, CARA will send a survey to religious institutes by early fall 2013. The study will be completed in the winter of 2014.

## Group working on educational debt issue

As a follow-up to the NRVC-CARA Study on Educational Debt, a task force was convened in February 2013 to develop a proposal for a fund for educational debt relief for candidates to religious life. The group discussed the purposes, principles and financial structure of the proposed fund.

The 2012 study showed that approximately one third of religious institutes in the U.S. report that they have had formal applicants discontinue entering their community due to educational debt. These are people who have explored religious life but have not completed the application process because they need to continue paying student loans. The average debt of a new college graduate in the U.S. today is \$26,600.



## Vatican office for religious life gets new secretary

In April the Vatican announced the appointment of Father José Rodríguez Carballo as secretary for the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The new secretary is a Spaniard, and had served as the elected head of the Union of Superiors General, an organization of men religious. Father Rodríguez's job will be to assist the head of the Congregation, Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, in overseeing the approximately 900,000 religious institutes around the world. The position of secretary was held by Archbishop Joseph Tobin, CSSR from 2010 until 2012 when he was named Archbishop of Indianapolis, IN.



## Fact sheet on vocations to religious life

Religious communities, journalists and the general public are encouraged to download a free fact sheet about vocations to religious life developed by the National Religious Vocation Conference. The sheet

provides a basic overview of numbers, demographic facts, challenges and positive signs regarding new membership in U.S. religious communities today. Find it at [www.nrvc.net](http://www.nrvc.net); go to publications / public documents / vocation facts / resources.

## Pope's first homily touches on vocation

Pope Francis touched on a vocation theme during his inaugural Mass, which took place on the solemnity of St. Joseph in March. He exhorted listeners to protect the environment and one another: “Joseph is a ‘protector’ because he is able to hear God’s voice and be guided by his will; and for this reason he is all the more sensitive to the persons entrusted to his safekeeping. He can look at things realistically, he is in touch with his surroundings, he can make truly wise decisions. In him, dear friends, we learn how to respond to God’s call, readily and willingly, but we also see the core of the Christian vocation, which is Christ! Let us protect Christ in our lives, so that we can protect others, so that we can protect creation!”

Only 34 popes have ever been members of religious orders. Pope Francis has already attracted the world's attention with his distinct style, one profoundly formed by belonging to a religious institute.

# Religious life makes Pope Francis tick

BY PAT MORRISON

**W**HILE THE PRESS HAS REPORTED, of course, that Jorge Bergoglio is a Jesuit, I haven't yet seen much coverage on what it means that Pope Francis is a member of a religious order, not a diocesan priest. This is a contributing factor, maybe a major one, in his leadership style—and one that bears watching. It's key to understanding this pope and what “makes him tick.”

His being a Jesuit is also another historic element in this papacy: The last time the Catholic Church had a pope who came from a religious order was over 150 years ago. (Hardly a front-runner, a monk from the Camaldolese hermit order was finally elected after a 64-day conclave and took the name Pope Gregory XVI. [Pope Gregory XVI is grouped with “Benedictines” in the graphic on page 7.]

Many people, Catholics included, don't know there's a difference between diocesan clergy and religious order clergy. Once he became a bishop, according to church law, Francis was no longer bound by the rules of the Jesuits. But his training and years of living the vows, or evangelical counsels, will certainly influence his style as pope. And this can help explain his “operating system.”

Religious order clergy take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, are committed to community living and sharing life and goods in common, and normally operate in a collaborative, collegial model. Even though one may be a superior, they are all brothers, a society of equals in every way

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*Pat Morrison is editorial director for ICS Publications, the publishing ministry of the Discalced Carmelite Friars. She previously was director of communications for the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Dayton, OH. Pat has been editor/general manager of several Catholic newspapers and publications in the U.S. and internationally.*



except the fact that one is elected superior/minister/provincial—whatever each order names its leadership.

Pope Francis' attraction to simple living—even in something as minor as sticking with his plain black shoes over red Pradas—doubtless comes from his training in religious-order poverty, and having a firsthand knowledge of real poverty among many of his own Argentine people.

Religious also tend to be in ministries that are more global in breadth and focus. A man may serve in Dayton, but know that he could be assigned or missioned to Kalamazoo or Kyoto if his religious congregation has a ministry there (or sends him there to start one.) This mobility in ministry keeps a man flexible and open (at least in theory) to a variety of socio-economic realities.

This is very different—different, not better—from diocesan priesthood, in which men are ordained for the service of the local church. Parish priests may live in a small group and have good networking among themselves, but in these days of “the clergy crunch,” many also live alone.

Often when a parish priest buys a car or a condo, you'll hear, “Whoa! I thought he had a vow of poverty!” Nope. Diocesan clergy may own property, dispose of their own money, have investments. Priests, in the model of Jesus, are encouraged to live simply, but they don't make a vow to do so. They make a promise of celibacy and obedience—not a vow—to obey their local bishop and his successors.

As a religious order priest, this pope will have had hands-on experience that there's wisdom in the group around the table—both the meeting table and the table of the Eucharistic meal. Hopefully this will lead him to encourage dialogue. He'll know something about collegiality—that he doesn't need to have all the answers himself, but can listen to the Spirit at work in all God's people (perhaps women as well as men!).

Coming from a religious order tradition, Pope Francis will be steeped in a tradition of prayer, communal as well as personal. As a Jesuit he'll know much about discernment and listening to the Lord in his life and choices.



Photo: presidencia.gov.ar

Pope Francis' attraction to simple living—even in something as minor as sticking with his plain black shoes over red Pradas—doubtless comes from his training in religious-order poverty.

Some pluses for Pope Francis: He's not a curia "insider." And he obviously eschews pomp and monarchical trappings. Many are hoping Francis, like his namesake, will be the one who heeds Christ's call to "rebuild my church," with an energetic reform of the church's cumbersome bureaucratic structure—and more importantly, aggressively addressing the scandals of sexual abuse, questionable financial dealings, and problematic structures.

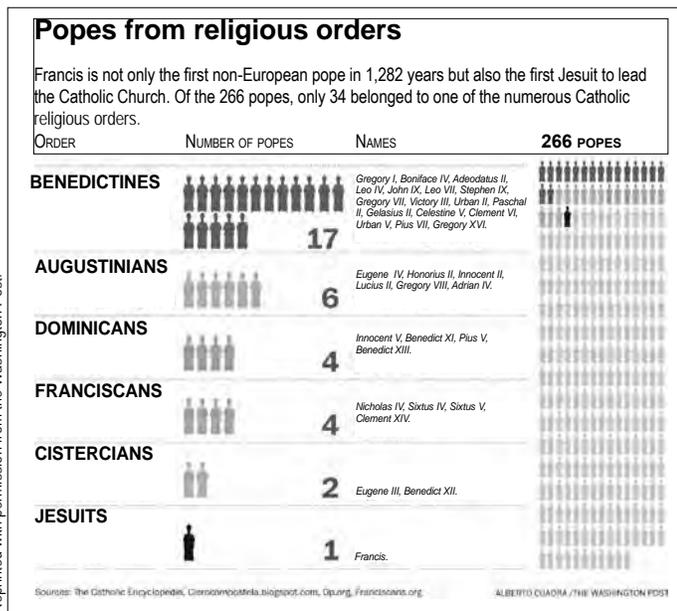
Not every priest who's in a religious order is necessarily a sage or a saint, of course; 1,500 years have produced a share of scoundrels among them, too. But a religious order man has committed his life to personal poverty (so he can relate better to the world's poor); to community (so he doesn't have to be the Lone Ranger in ministry), to healthy celibate living (and so can cultivate real and warm friendships with women and

men alike), and obedience (listening to the voice of God in his own life and in the church). A pope with this background has a definite advantage when it comes to knowing how the Catholic Church as institution can be more effective, more poor and more in touch with people in its mission in the world.

We don't know a lot about Pope Francis yet. Much remains to be seen in how he will articulate church teaching and focus on the pressing issues of our day. How will he address the world's growing secularism, materialism, grinding poverty, violence, global warming? How will he engage and listen to men and women of other religious traditions, especially Islam and Judaism, as well as non-believers and the many who self-define as "spiritual but not religious?" Within the Catholic Church, how will he respond to, among other issues, the scandals of sexual abuse and cover-up, financial mismanagement, excessive centralization in the Vatican, the role of women, the vocation shortage, the needs of families.. Not everyone will be, or is, enamored of his stances. The honeymoon will likely be over the minute Francis speaks to maintaining Catholic teaching that some disagree with, especially on the "hot button" issues that make the news.

But if anyone has the background and lived experience to be able to energetically tackle the internal reforms the Catholic Church needs and present a witness of a lively, loving Christian witness, it's a man from religious-order life.

As a Catholic, I think the future under Francis will be interesting. Even when the media coverage fades ... I think a lot of people will want to stay tuned. ■



Reprinted with permission from the Washington Post.

The new evangelization is about doing what vocation directors already do: helping the baptized (inquirers and others) to encounter Christ in a more profound way. Growth in faith is the path to understanding one's calling, and it is the path urged for all believers.

# The new evangelization is interwoven with vocation ministry

HORIZON INTERVIEWS SISTER THERESA RICKARD, OP

**T**he connection between new evangelization and vocation ministry is not mysterious at all to Sister Theresa Rickard, OP. Inviting people to consider religious life and inviting people to a deeper commitment to Christ and Gospel service are one and the same, she says.

Sister Terry has walked the talk: she served as vocation minister for her congregation, the Dominican Sisters of Blauvelt, from 1994 to 2002. She began ministering at RENEW International in 2002 and has been President & Executive Director since 2006. RENEW International's mission is to be a catalyst for spiritual renewal in the Catholic Church by building dynamic communities of hope and Gospel action through the formation of small faith communities. See Sister Terry's blog at [blog.renewintl.org](http://blog.renewintl.org). Contact her at [terryr@renewintl.org](mailto:terryr@renewintl.org).

## What is the new evangelization?

The new evangelization is about moving Catholics to become committed disciples of Jesus Christ—moving them to a deeper encounter with the risen Jesus—not just creating converts out of non-believers, although that is still a valid goal too. In other words, it's about ongoing conversion—to draw people into a deeper encounter with Christ that moves them into community, worship, full participation in the sacramental life of the church, and service to the world: charitable works and just acts.

The new evangelization gives us a fresh and compelling vision for preaching the Gospel in our time and society, bringing the Gospel to bear on our society, culture, economics, political life and religion.

## Where did the concept of “new evangelization” come from?

It's easiest to understand new evangelization by comparing it with classic evangelization. Classic evangelization involves reaching out to non-Christians, non-believers. Thirty or 40 years ago, the idea was that European or American missionaries (usually priests or sisters) would do this by going to Africa or another a far-off country where Christ was never preached. The new evangelization is for people who have heard the Gospel but are in need of encountering Christ anew. The seeds of the new evangelization are found in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the 1975 encyclical of Pope Paul VI, promulgated 10 years after the close of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Paul VI stated that the church “exists in order to evangelize.” In this encyclical the Pope recognized the call of the Gospel to preach Christ to all people, but he also recognized the need for the evangelization of the baptized who no longer practice the faith. Since the 1970s there has been a shift, with Christianity growing and maturing in the global South and beginning to decline in the West, with secularization replacing religion. Pope John Paul II in 1983 addressed the bishops of Latin America in Haiti and called for a new evangelization—this was the first time he used this phrase. He called for an evangelization new in ardor, methods and agents. He called the church to focus on deepening and renewing the faith of those already baptized.

## Why is this evangelization important now?

Today the need is urgent. According to a Pew Research Center analysis (“Strong Catholic Identity at a Four Decade Low in



*Sister Theresa Rickard, OP addresses a group in Venezuela.*

U.S.” March 2013) only 24 percent of Catholics attend Mass regularly. The Pew Research Center also reported that about a third of respondents checked off that they were raised Catholic but no longer consider themselves members of the church. That means that roughly ten percent of all Americans are former Catholics. These statistics have a tremendous negative effect on vocations—really all ministerial vocations, including lay ecclesial ministers.

It is also interesting to note that according to a study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the peak level of Mass attendance was 74 percent attendance in 1957-58. This was also a period when we had the greatest number of young people entering religious life—there has to be a correlation. Numbers like these can shake us from conducting business as usual and ignite in us a sense of urgency about moving from maintenance ministry to a new, evangelizing ministry. Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI begins an essay on creating an evangelizing spirituality by focusing on the problem that the Pew research put into numbers—he says that we are having trouble passing the faith on to our own children. Our churches are graying and emptying. Many of the children of our faithful parishioners are no longer walking the path of faith—at least, not public or ecclesial faith. The most difficult mission field in the world today is in secular Western culture—in which our children live, work and play. This is the world into which we are inviting young women and men to discern a vocation to religious life and priesthood.

**Vocation ministers already have a lot on their plate. Isn't this just an add on?**

Not at all. Vocation ministry is all about meeting discerners where they are and helping them become better disciples—deepening their relationship with Christ and growing in their desire to serve. As people begin discerning life choices with a vocation minister, that process is another step along the movement to deepen their relationship with Christ and their commitment to God and the church. The hope is that through discernment—or through the retreats or service programs or evenings of prayer that vocation ministers sponsor—these Catholics will mature in their faith.

### **But aren't vocation ministers dealing with people who are already committed Catholics?**

Well, in my experience, those who inquire about religious life are all over the place. Let me give an example. When I was a vocation minister, I worked with a really lovely woman who was in grad school and was in the last stages of discernment with my congregation. I asked her if she was involved in campus ministry. And she says, “Well the only day of the week I get to sleep in is Sunday. The campus ministry parish is pretty far away. So I've been going to the church across the street from me on Sunday mornings. The music there is really great.” As she's describing this church and the service, it's becoming clearer and clearer to me that this is not even a Catholic Church.

She's in the final stages of discernment with me to enter a

---

Catholic religious order, and she's not even attending a Catholic church and she's not even aware of that! Now, it's not that she didn't have a commitment to her faith. But obviously she needed to move along the continuum of faith commitment. As a vocation minister, I also had the experience of meeting women interested in religious life who had an encounter with Christ but did not fully see the connection with living that out through service and justice work.

## **Tell us more about that continuum of faith commitment.**

Wherever we are on our faith journey, we are always engaged in the lifelong process of conversion. The faith journey is never a straight line but a spiral one with fits and starts. The goal is to stay on the way. Early in my religious life a priest friend told me something I will never forget, "Terry, you are either on the way or in the way." I find it helpful to talk about this journey toward committed discipleship in three movements based on a study done by the Willow Creek Church:

- 1) Exploring Christ. These are seekers who have a relationship with God but have not necessarily had an encounter with Christ. They are seeking meaning and belonging and are trying to find their way.
- 2) Growing in Christ. These people have had a personal encounter with Christ and are beginning to grow in their knowledge of God and our Catholic faith.
- 3) Close to Christ. These are people who are praying every day and are working at trying to seek God's will.
- 4) Committed disciples. At this level everything you do, every decision you make is Christ centered. Committed disciples get it that this means your life is about loving God and loving neighbor. It means continuing to develop a mature conscience and integrating one's faith into all aspects of one's life. In the Catholic context this person fully participates in the sacramental life of the church and service in the church and wider community.

## **So where do the people exploring religious life fit into this continuum of faith?**

In my experience in vocation ministry there were women interested in my community who fell into all four of these faith levels. And as a vocation minister, I was there to help them

move to a deeper faith commitment to Christ in the church in service to others, especially the poor. Some of the sisters in my community have said to me, "Terry, I didn't know the full meaning of what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus Christ when I entered. I just wanted to serve God by being a teacher."

It was always my hope that when someone in our discernment process decided they weren't called to Dominican religious life, they would leave the process more committed to Christ—a deeper prayer life and a greater commitment to faith based service. They might enter a different community or not enter any community. But if they had their faith awakened and deepened, they would be better hearers and doers of God's word for the sake of the church and world—in whatever profession or life choice they ultimately decided upon.

## **How does the new evangelization make disciples?**

There are three marks of the new evangelization:

- New ardor, a new zeal, meaning that all disciples get fired up about their faith.
- New methods, new ways of reaching out to both the active and inactive Catholics, especially young adults. This means, for instance, using social media.
- New agents, new partners. In the old days it was the missionaries who took responsibility for evangelizing, but now all of the faithful are called to evangelize through their baptismal commitment.

## **Can you connect these concepts to vocation ministry?**

The three marks of the new evangelization are completely connected to vocation ministry because they are the three ways that religious life is going to move into the future. Religious communities need new ardor, new methods and new agents. It's very parallel. We need new ardor, new zeal in our relationship with God, and for religious life. We need new agents, such as lay people, diocesan priests, youth ministers who can be vocation promoters. We can't do it alone; we need a lot of different people to be part of our vocation team. And we need new methods such as World Youth Day, weekends of prayer, college retreats and so on. We need to invest in new media. No one thing is the silver bullet. You need a variety of strategies to invite people to an encounter with Christ and to the fullness of our Catholic community. If new evangelization is successful, we'll see a growth in vocations to religious life.



*A Celtic Tea was a new method of vocation outreach and evangelization for the Dominican Sisters of Blauvelt. Sister Theresa Rickard, OP, back right, and others helped serve.*

## Can you name an example of connecting new evangelization with vocation ministry?

One new method or fresh way to get out the good news of religious life is the Internet ministry “A Nun’s Life,” [www.anunslife.org](http://www.anunslife.org). Busted Halo, [www.bustedhalo.org](http://www.bustedhalo.org), is another popular site for young adults to connect with God and the church. Every community should have a social media presence (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.) to connect with people, especially young adults.

Communities can latch onto the concept of awakening and deepening faith, and every community can do it through its own charism. Here’s just a small example of something my Blauvelt Dominican congregation did recently. As Dominicans we continue to reclaim our charism of preaching. We have a preaching team, and our vocation director, Kathy O’Hanlon, is a member. In fact it was her idea to have a high tea with one of our sisters as preacher. Sister Diane shared her reflections on Celtic spirituality. Many of our Sisters are Irish Americans and invited family members and friends from their parishes and ministries. More than 160 women came to the darn thing! You couldn’t fit any more people into the room. We served our guests tea (I was one of the servers), a young female Irish band entertained us (in lieu of pay they asked for a letter for service credit), people got to meet the sisters—it was wonderful. Now, after sharing this time together, these women who attended the Celtic Tea are advocates for our sisters. They see that the sisters are alive and active, and they tell that to their

daughters and friends and nieces and grandchildren.

Religious communities need to try new things—they need new methods, new partners. As Henry Ford used to tell his workers, “If you always do what you have always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.”

## What about being involved in events that are already happening, such as national youth conferences, World Youth Day and diocesan youth events?

Religious should be at these events. We need to be present. Sometimes people critique the theology of a given event—and there are valid differences among good Catholics—but rather than abstain because you don’t agree with all the theology, why not be present? Why not use it as an opportunity to connect with young people and share our life and faith?

## What holds back vocation directors from really running with these ideas of new evangelization which are part and parcel of their ministry?

People don’t make the connections: we need a broader vision of vocation ministry. Whatever ministry we are in, it is about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ and inviting people to deeper Gospel living. The communications directors and the development directors should be meeting regularly with the vocation directors so that all of them are working collaboratively. All three ministries are about communicating the Gospel. All three ministries—communications, development and vocations—want people to know about the congregation and the good work it’s doing in order to attract donors, members, associates and other partners in ministry.

If we were able to reach out to just 1 percent of U.S. Catholics and help bring them to “fully committed discipleship,” that would be nearly another million Catholics in the world on fire for love of God and their neighbor. Think of the impact on the church and world and our religious congregations! ■

Communities need to try new things—they need new methods, new partners. As Henry Ford used to tell his workers, “If you always do what you have always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.”

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The Year of Faith asks us to reach out to those on the margins of the church, including young adults who are in need of hope, help and comfort.

# Invite overwhelmed young adults to come, rest in Christ

BY PAUL JARZEMBOWSKI

**A**T SOME OF THE MINISTRY training workshops that the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association (NCYAMA) offers, the training team often leads a word-choice exercise for participating young adults. The exercise invites men and women in their 20s and 30s to self-identify with words that sociologists and young adult ministers often use to describe younger generations.

Here's how it typically works. After putting up posters around the room featuring words like *transitional*, *digital*, *communal*, *prophetic* and *global*,—all of which (to some degree) define those under 40 today—we ask participants to move to

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Photo by Boofoalo Bliss

*The opportunity to unplug, to rest in Christ, is what the faith community can offer stressed young adults.*

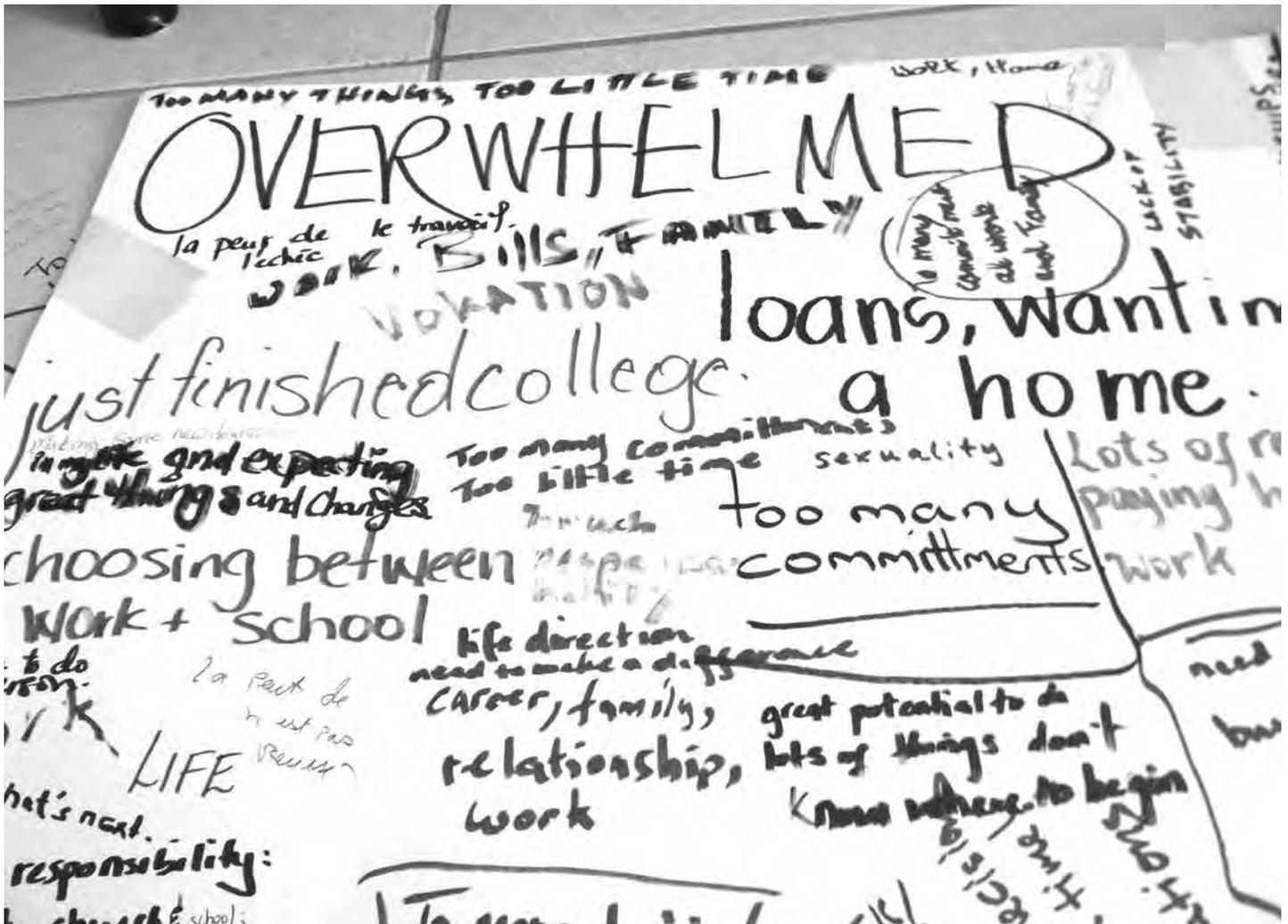
the poster that best describes life as a young adult at this moment. Once there, they can write one or two additional words or phrases that give more insight into their own experiences.

Each time we do this exercise, the same thing happens: young adults gravitate in massive numbers to the poster marked “overwhelmed.” Usually the space is so crowded that we have to add additional posters so everyone can jot down their contribution.

Even when we did this in the supposedly restful islands of the Caribbean, the results mirrored what we see across the United States: 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 the new evangelization.

## Young and not-so carefree

Some might scoff at this suggestion, thinking that most young adults are doing just fine: they are enjoying the good life on



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

credit in a consumer society, and they don't have a care in the world aside from themselves. But in reality, postmodern young adults are quite a different story.

Recent studies, including a February 2012 Pew Research Center report, indicate that "large majorities of the public say it's harder for young adults to reach many of the basic financial goals their parents may have taken for granted." According to the study, 82 percent of Americans of all ages believe that those in their 20s and 30s today are struggling more than previous generations when it comes to employment issues, and 75 percent believe that young adults will not be able to save for their future plans.

For good reason: many Generation Xers and Millennials have racked up an overwhelming amount of debt from college loans, credit cards and plummeting home values. Additionally, less work is available today for a 20-something than a few

decades ago. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics noted that, since 2008, the number of young adults in the workforce has dipped 13.2 percent while those over age 55 has risen 7.6 percent. Unemployment among young adults is more than twice the national average (16.3 percent for those in their 20s and 30s compared to 8 percent for all adults). In fact, the Pew Research Center discovered the gap between the unemployment rates of young adults and older adults is the widest in recorded history.

### Money woes

And with fewer Baby Boomers retiring, 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.

## *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 our 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.

Economically, there is instability among young adults, as a growing number of those in their 20s are falling well below the poverty line. A 2011 Pew Research Center study found that over 22 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, from task to task, from 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@

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.

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 recent 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 (and speaking of which, the amount of bills that young adults acquire so quickly today is yet another source of frustration). They are simply overwhelmed by life.

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?

## New evangelization

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 up to 32 percent 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 staggering statistics generally don’t lie in a rejection of Catholic doctrine or dogma (in full disclosure, though, there are those who object to Catholic positions on homosexuality and contraception). For the most part,

## *Program ideas for rest & 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.

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what drives many young adults away is a failure of the church to tend to the relevant needs of their lived experience. Most 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 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 2008 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.

When this happens, young adults will find help, hope and comfort wherever they can find it, and often that does not include religious communities. The most recent study of religious affiliation from the Pew Research Center said that one third of young adults under 30 now have no religious affiliation whatsoever, a number that rises with each successive study.

## 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 where 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 new evangelization that the Catholic Church is highlighting in “The Year of Faith” calls us to 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 in this new way, 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 the new 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 new evangelists 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, this new evangelization must be more about tending the wounds of an overwhelmed generation rather than proclaiming its 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 at Starbucks 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 or remain miserable in one place simply because no other opportunities exist (and many aren’t certain what to even look for).

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

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the new 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—as they have been for years.

Religious communities have a long history of answering the cry of the overwhelmed. In early 17th-century Peru, Dominican brother 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 United States 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 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 we have another group of people to add to that list: the overwhelmed. In tying together the beatitudes of St. Matthew and St. Luke, we are now 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. Martin de Porres and Mother Cabrini are just two wonderful 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 often 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. 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 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 soon.

Regardless of how this work is done, it is important to remember that this type of new 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 our help, hope and comfort. They are overrun with the pressures that life has dumped 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.” ■



*Two sisters show their positive attitude at a “Moving Forward” gathering.*

The Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope project has held gatherings in four cities to bring together a variety of sisters. Together they have bridged differences, gained new insights and developed momentum for their vocation efforts.

## We’re moving forward

### Could religious women heal a polarized nation?

BY SISTER KRISTA VON BORSTEL, SSMO

**I** SPENT THREE DAYS on the campus of the Mercy Sisters in Burlingame, CA in January, where religious leaders and vocation directors from 55 religious communities around the country gathered to talk about religious life. The event was planned and carried out by the National Religious Vocation Conference.

I was not expecting the “touched to the core” experience I came away with after spending a few days working together, listening, sharing, experiencing, visiting, praying. We celebrated the Eucharist, prayed morning and evening prayer, and together looked at the future of religious life. I know that the entire group was moved by the experience and we recognized

that we have some work ahead of us to prepare the way for the future of religious life.

Why was I touched to the core?

I have found that religious communities are not exempt from the bitterly negative political culture we now find our country experiencing. Whether meeting with individuals on the left or on the right, our strong opinions do more to polarize us than bring us together.

What set this religious gathering apart from others I have attended? Why did it turn out to be an experience that lit my enthusiasm? The most diverse group of religious women I have ever been around in the same setting, were assembled to work together, learn from one another and explore the realities of vocation work today.

Our group included women in full-length habits, modified habits with veils, no veils, blue jeans, tennis shoes and earrings! Present in the room were tolerance and respect.

Only one time the entire three days did I hear a negative

political remark, and it was quickly addressed by one of the leaders who told the person it made her feel uncomfortable to hear a remark that puts another group in a box! It astounded me to see the leader of the group deal with the issue so quickly and politely. It gave me hope!

This climate contributed to a very productive, life-giving workshop where participants felt free to share, articulate feelings, ask questions, pray, offer ideas, work with one another, affirm and be affirmed.

Through the experience, I imagined the possibility that religious women could lead the way in healing a polarized nation, beginning with ourselves.

I am committing myself to make the changes necessary in me to make my community a more welcoming place for people of all walks of life. I would like to challenge you to do the same. Interestingly, one of the facts we learned through this conference is that the Millennial generation—today and tomorrow's vocations—detest the polarization of our country. They are turning religious life, youth ministry and Catholic education upside down as they inspire us to reconnect with the Gospel values we learned as youth!

As we work in our individual religious communities to make ourselves more attractive to the youth of today, our young Catholics and tomorrow's religious, we will undoubtedly make changes that shake us to the core of our communities. This is an essential move for religious organizations hoping to continue on into the next several decades.

While it would be impossible for me to infuse you with the deep feelings, experiences, joy and hope I experienced during these days, I am happy to share that it was an exciting experience for us and one that I believe will be life changing for all of the communities involved.

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*Sister Krista von Borstel, SSMO belongs to the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon and is executive director of the CYO/Camp Howard in Portland, OR.*



## Rejuvenated, recommitted to inviting the younger generation

BY SISTER GINNY HELDORFER, OSF

**A**s an early spring snow is falling in Iowa, I am recalling the fall gathering of “Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope” conference I attended in Chicago.

Three components of the workshop stand out for me: the presentation by Sister Mary Johnson, SNDdeN; the even mix of leadership team members and vocation ministers at each table; and the closing liturgy.

Mary Johnson presented us with many statistics about the Millennial generation. We looked at the changing demographics in the U.S. Catholic Church. I think it was during the second breakout session when the discussion at our table became very honest and vulnerable. There was heart-to-heart sharing about the younger generations' actions, behaviors and values. We focused on the Eucharist. We discussed the attraction that young adults have to service.

Table conversations with both LCWR and CMSWR members challenged us to reflect on our common values as we gained insights from each other on vocation ministry and inter-congregational collaboration. Our table discussed the dedication and commitment that the young generation demonstrates in its service experiences.

In the four years that I have been in vocation ministry, this was the first conference for leadership and vocation ministers to participate in together. Sister Carol Besch, OSF and I were given time to dream and plan together ways that we might invite the larger community into outreach with young people. We realized that the efforts and financial resources that we have invested in volunteer programs that attract young people have provided a door into their world. These service opportunities in poor places in the U.S., Haiti and Zambia are a wonderful way to invite the Millennial generation into our world, as well for us to move into their world. (Check out our service opportunities on our website at [www.osfdbq.org/venture\\_volunteer.php](http://www.osfdbq.org/venture_volunteer.php).) One of our dreams is to provide a Common Venture volunteer week with women who are seriously discerning a religious vocation. It is a dream that hopefully will be fulfilled within a year.

And lastly but not least, the closing prayer service included an opportunity to renew our commitment to the Body of Christ by blessing each other with the waters of baptism. The beautiful harp, flute and piano music was the best! Our lit candles were a public sign of our commitment to support and encourage each other in our ministries.

It was a simple but profound prayer that sent me forth recommitted and dedicated to assisting women as they discern God's desires for them in the future.

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*Sister Ginny Heldorfer, OSF is vocation director for her community, the Sisters of St. Francis of Dubuque, IA.*



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## Experiencing love in the heart of the church

BY MOTHER KATHERINE CALDWELL, TOR

“**T**he joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” I love these opening words from *Gaudium et Spes*, the “Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World,” for they set the tone of loving solidarity so essential for the followers of Christ. I experienced this loving communion in a profound way through the interactions and prayers we shared during the conference, “Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope.”

For many of the religious sisters gathered, the vocation crisis in our country has had a tremendous impact on their religious life and mission, and possibly their future. Other religious present had different challenges that were affecting them; yet, even among our differences, we were there for one another listening with loving care. I also experienced that when a sister described the courage her community had in facing challenges and the fruitfulness this bore, it sparked courage and hope in the rest of us. I could feel the mutual bonds of love and respect strengthening us to face the tasks that lie ahead in serving our communities in the midst of challenging and transitional times.

Since the conference, and at every available opportunity, I have found myself sharing about the positive experience I had. While I have had many wonderful experiences with diverse religious communities, there was something extra special about this experience. I think this workshop was different in part because it not only gave an opportunity to share about our challenges, but it also gave us informational data related to the vocation crisis and practical ideas to discern as possible avenues toward solutions. Further, experiencing the courage and hope, love and respect that we shared has renewed and deepened the fervor with which I embrace my own community’s commitment to pray and fast for religious life. I believe I have passed this hope and renewed spark to my sisters at home.

I also bring home to my community a clearer understanding of what the new generation of young people are looking for in religious life. For our community the information presented was an encouragement to continue in the basic direction that we began 25 years ago, while at the same time being attentive to the natural transition that is beginning to happen as we continue to increase in number and mature in age. Now

that our community is in its 25th year, we have experienced generational differences. The conference helped me realize that creating an environment where generational differences are understood and accepted will not only help us to continue to attract new members, but will also help us to maintain unity of heart and mind in the midst of diversity.

From the conference I also gained an awareness of the demographic shifts happening with the Catholic population in the United States. This information has made me aware that we need to understand more fully the culture and needs of our people of color in the United States. It also made me aware of the areas in the south and west in which the Catholic population is growing. This is helpful information for vocational outreach, as well as for our future development as we continue to discern where our religious presence is most needed in our country.

In closing, as I reflect upon the conference I was inspired by the collective experience of being and praying with religious women who desire, like beloved St. Therese, “...to be love in the heart of the Church.” As someone from a relatively new

community, I want to thank all those religious communities who have gone before us. Your lives of love and perseverance have helped to make our religious life possible. The vocation crisis in our country is a concern that affects the whole Body of Christ. At the conference, I felt we were united in our love for religious life, in working toward it flourishing again in our country, and in our love and care for one another. I want to thank all who were instrumental in planning “Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope” and setting the tone of loving communion. ■

As someone from a relatively new community, I want to thank all those religious communities who have gone before us. Your lives of love and perseverance have helped to make our religious life possible.

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Mother Katherine Caldwell, TOR is a founding sister of the Franciscan Sisters Third Order Regular of Penance of the Sorrowful Mother. She currently serves as Reverend Mother.



For a community to live on into the future, it must ask—and respond to—some hard questions. It must have a strong identity and clear boundaries. It has to address and resolve conflict. And it has to be relevant to new generations.

# Questions we must ask to build strong communities

By SISTER PATRICIA WITTBERG, SC

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**W**E MUST REGULARLY EVALUATE the health of our church communities. As writer Ted Dunn puts it, “Communal discernment enables you to reflect, both personally and collectively, upon where your community seems to be heading, what your vision of the future is, what your communal needs are, and what individual and collective gifts you possess to work with.” Four key areas for this evaluation are how well the community builds bonds between its members, establishes its boundaries, faces and redeems its conflicts, and attracts and incorporates the next generation.

Just as with individual health, we need to assess how well our church communities are fulfilling the prerequisites for their communal health and, for those areas which are not working well, why that is so. Only then can we make recom-

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*Sister Patricia Wittberg, SC belongs to the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, and she is a professor of sociology at Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis. Excerpt reprinted from Chapter 9, Building Strong Church Communities: a Sociological Overview, copyright 2012 by Patricia Wittberg, SC. Paulist Press, Inc., New York/Mahwah, NJ. Reprinted by permission of Paulist Press, Inc. [www.paulistpress.com](http://www.paulistpress.com).*



mendations of how these weak areas might be fixed. And, of course, we will need to update our evaluations periodically to see whether they are still accurate.

## IDENTITY QUESTIONS

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The first and most important question we must ask is whether our community has an identity that joins its members together and distinguishes them from other, similar communities. As one recent study of Protestant congregations emphasized:

Congregations must have an identity and a clear sense of themselves. This clarity is attractive to outsiders and compelling for insiders. One can choose to commit to something only if the person knows what they are committing to. In a capitalist world of niche marketing, a clear and easily communicated purpose is essential. [*Beyond Megachurch Myths: What we Can Learn From America's Largest Churches*, by Scott Thumma and Dave Travis]

Without a clear identity, a community will be weak and will ultimately dissipate. Therefore, we must first define this identity. How does our religious order, the Sisters of X, differ from the Sisters of Y? How is our parish, St. A's, different from St. B's down the road? Is it simply that the Sisters of X used to run X High School, while the Sisters of Y used to run Y High School, or that St. A's serves one neighborhood while St. B's serves another? A minimal identity like this may not

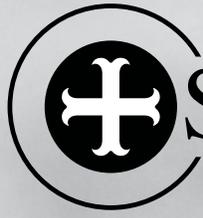


*Questions about identity and the next generation were part of the discussion when the Conventual Franciscans gathered for the “Keys to the Future” process. The “Keys” process, created by the National Religious Vocation Conference and adapted by individual communities, is one way congregations are talking about core concerns affecting their future.*

be enough, especially if the Sisters of X no longer teach at X High School or if, in today’s mobile culture, more of St. A’s parishioners live outside neighborhood A than live inside it. It is absolutely necessary that a community have a strong, clear identity—one that is obvious, visible and compelling both to members and to outsiders. Furthermore, this identity cannot simply be based on the existing personal friendships among members of the parish or religious order—such a group would merely be a clique or a communion, not a community, and it would not be attractive to new members. Instead, this identity must be based on an overarching world-view that defines the community’s basic goal and purpose for existing. It must be compelling enough to motivate new recruits to join and existing members to devote their time and energies to maintain it. The first and most essential question, therefore, is to ask ourselves “Who are we, really?” “What binds or draws us together?” and “Why does our community exist?”

A second identity-related question is whether present-day societal conditions are favorable to this communal identity or not. The surrounding area may have changed: a territorially based parish in an inner-city neighborhood with few remain-

ing Catholics (or, in some really devastated areas, with few remaining people at all) will find that an identity based simply on its geographical boundaries is no longer sufficient to attract an adequate number of parishioners. New generations may have different desires or priorities: an ethnic parish drawing (for example) elderly Polish immigrants from the entire city to celebrate liturgies in Polish may not be as attractive to the children and grandchildren of these immigrants. Religious orders focused on a particular ministry will be affected when that ministry changes: for example, an order founded in the 19th century to run hospitals for poor and dying diphtheria victims may find it harder to articulate why administering a huge national health care system should be its defining activity in the 21st century. Large-scale societal trends may have altered religious preferences: recent surveys show that Millennials are harried and pressured and that young Catholics are often paralyzed by a surfeit of professional career choices. As a result, they are more attracted to religious orders and ecclesial movements whose identities are centered around contemplation, common prayer and communal lifestyles, and less attracted to orders with identities centered around individual-



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ized ministries—which they can and do engage in without entering a religious order.

The third question, therefore, is whether it might be necessary or desirable for a community to change some elements of its basic identity in order to adapt to these changed conditions. Should a decaying inner-city parish reconstitute itself around some alternative liturgical style that will draw new parishioners from the entire city? If so, which one—the Tridentine Mass, Charismatic praise, or meditative quiet and Taize-like mantras? When and how should a parish with a growing Latino population change its basic identity from an ethnic Italian to an ethnic Hispanic one? Should our religious order reemphasize our founder’s devotion to Eucharistic Adoration and common prayer and deemphasize service in its college and hospitals? What are the implications of identity changes like this for longtime members? For the recruitment of new members? Conversely, the community’s identity may have already changed, gradually and over time, without its members noticing it. As one original member of a 1970s-vintage ecological commune put it, “We have created an organic culture that has a life of its own. But then one fine morning we wake up to find that we are in our 50s, our community is aging, often tired and worn.” The aging Baby Boomers in a formerly avant-garde parish may not realize that youth and the cutting edge have moved elsewhere and that their parish community’s identity has now taken on a decidedly *passee* flavor. No community remains static; each needs to examine how it has changed in the past 10, 30 or 50 years. Is our identity still what we said it was back then?

## Does your identity story inspire others?

Communities en flesh their identity in the stories their members tell themselves and one another. They tell these stories not only in words, but in their rituals and celebrations, in their unspoken assumptions and instinctive dismissals (“We’ve never done it that way”), in who they instinctively defer to as their “natural” leaders, and even in the stories they do not tell. The various elements of this identity story will not have the same resonance for all the members: “Grade school religion class” evokes one image in older parishioners who used to sit in fixed rows to be drilled in catechism answers by a stern and habited “Sister,” but a totally different image to Generation X parents who remember lying on the floor, drawing rainbows and receiving very little doctrinal input at all. A novitiate in most of today’s religious orders is a very different experience from a novitiate 50 years ago, and “ministry” meant something very different to religious who all taught in the same school from what it does to younger members work-

ing in secular settings. Latinos attending the Spanish-language Mass may have a very different experience of the parish than the parishioners at English-speaking Masses. A parish may seem warm and friendly to young married parishioners with children in its grade school but impersonal and alienating to their age peers who are single adults. Community members need to examine the identity story they are telling, in all of its manifold aspects, and ask whether it resonates similarly in the old as in the young, with Anglos as with Latinos, with married couples as with divorced parents or singles. How well does each subgroup in the community know the alternate narrative versions with which other subgroups build the community’s identity? Is each group able to celebrate and reverence these differences as manifestations of a larger, many-sided whole? What communication channels exist to join newcomers, 20-somethings, divorcees, immigrants, or those with physical and mental handicaps into the common story? Do these channels miss anyone?

In order for a community to remain healthy, therefore, it must have an identity that is distinctive and so compelling that its members are willing to sacrifice at least some of their own personal preferences and activities in order to attend to its needs. In the mid-1990s, I interviewed the leaders and members of 21 newly founded religious orders. One of the first questions I asked them was, “Why did you start a new order when there are already so many existing ones that you could have joined?” I quickly learned to allow a lot of time for the answers to this question. Almost without exception, each respondent filled an entire side of one of my cassette tapes with an enthusiastic account of how their community was different from every other religious order, how absolutely wonderful it was, and all the divine interventions and prophecies that had attended its inception. They were, in other words, telling me their community’s identity story, and it was a story that they were utterly passionate about. How passionate are we about the identity narrative of our own parish community or religious order? Of course, not all communities need to elicit the all-consuming enthusiasm displayed by the members of these newly founded religious orders. But every community must have a clear identity that appropriately engages the commitment of its members. The first essential question we need

It is absolutely necessary that a community have a strong, clear identity—one that is obvious, visible and compelling both to members and to outsiders.

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to ask, therefore, is what our identity as a community is and what we wish it to be.

## BOUNDARY QUESTIONS

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Creating and maintaining a healthy community not only requires us to specify what it is; it also requires us to specify what it is not. All communities must have boundaries, which means that some persons, by definition, will automatically be excluded from membership in them. This idea is deeply antithetical to modern American culture, but it is absolutely necessary nonetheless. As Peter Cock, author of *Communal Societies*, put it, “There need to be real community boundaries that limit the scope of diversity in order to insure community cohesion.” No community can exist without boundaries. The question is where and for what purpose the boundaries are drawn.

All communities must have boundaries, which means that some persons, by definition, will automatically be excluded from membership in them.

Some forms of boundary drawing, of course, are morally reprehensible. We rightly condemn the country club that excludes blacks or Jews in order to preserve the privileges of its WASP members. We blush with shame to remember the time when some dioceses relegated African Americans to a single segregated parish and

school and made them feel unwelcome if they dared to attend Mass or send their children elsewhere. Religious orders are similarly embarrassed to admit that they once refused to accept black, Hispanic, or Native American novices. Such exclusive boundary drawing is correctly seen as a violation, not a reinforcement, of the deepest essence of our Christian identity. A parish community or a religious congregation may survive and even grow in membership by drawing these kinds of exclusionary boundaries, but its professed Catholic (which is to say, “universal”) identity will be a lie.

Boundaries that flow from our church community’s identity as an image of the Trinitarian God of Love are another matter. This identity, and the specific story through which we enfold it in our parish, religious order or ecclesial movement, will automatically exclude only those who are not willing to accept it. Anyone may be welcome to enter our community—Hispanic, Caucasian, or African American, old or young, rich or poor—if they are willing to accept our identity story. If they are not willing to do so, then they may not enter. How-

ever much we may love them, however persistently we may invite them to join us, however kind and decent they may be as individuals, persons who are avowed atheists, polygamists, Ku Klux Klan members, or followers of other religions from Buddhism to Wicca cannot be members of our church communities unless and until they discard these former identities and embrace ours. And we would insult their integrity to say that they could.

## Beware hidden boundaries

The need for community boundaries may seem simple and clear-cut on paper. In real life, however, things become more complicated, and intensive communal discernment is sometimes needed in order to figure out exactly what boundaries we have drawn and against whom. The official identity of our church communities, and the formal boundaries drawn from this identity, may be supplemented by unspoken and unacknowledged—but nevertheless very real—additional boundaries that effectively exclude the very persons we claim to welcome. Take, for example, a gay classical musician attending a gay-friendly parish such as the one Jerome P. Baggett studied in San Francisco. He certainly appreciates the fact that his sexuality is not a barrier to participation in this church community, but as a devotee of Gregorian chant and classical motets by Mozart and Bach, the parish’s informal guitar and piano liturgies leave him unmoved. When he once suggested some of his favorite arrangements of *Ave Verum Corpus* and *Panis Angelicus* to the choir, he was rebuffed. The professed gay-friendly identity of this parish community claims to exclude only those who are homophobic or otherwise actively prejudiced against minority groups. But in reality, it also has unexpressed liturgical boundaries that effectively marginalize some gays.

Just across town, a Tridentine Mass parish attracts a young mother with its sense of mystery and the transcendent, but she is put off by its lack of friendly socialization among parishioners outside of Mass and by the absence of women on the parish council. A religious order may say it welcomes new entrants but expect any who show up to sit through endless reminiscences of pre-Vatican II novitiate life, to support liberal political causes, or to enjoy watching Lawrence Welk reruns in the evening. If our community has hidden identity elements of which we are not aware, we may be drawing additional, invisible boundaries that deter new members from joining us.

A second real-life difficulty is that the members of a community may not agree on whether a boundary is essential or not. This is an especially fraught question, because what is

considered essential by one generation or ethnic group may not be relevant for another and vice versa. Older generations, for example, may be more amenable to accepting parishioners who openly disagree with the pope on some issue or other or who dismiss pronouncements of the bishop. Younger churchgoers may be scandalized by this “disrespect.” Novices from one ethnic group may expect to retain strong connections with their birth families, to the point of lending them money or inviting them to live indefinitely at a community house. Vowed members from another ethnic group may object to this, while the novices, in their turn, are shocked by their elders’ “coldness.” Should a community change its boundaries to accommodate these different preferences? Which boundaries must it retain?

All communities must have and enforce boundaries, because boundaries are essential to defining who they are and who they are not. But these boundaries can be subtle and hard to notice. It is unlikely that the community can successfully invite prospective members to cross a boundary if they do not even realize it is there. The salience of a particular boundary may also increase or decrease over time, yet discarding or strengthening it will change the very identity of the community. The second essential question we need to ask, therefore, is what boundaries our community has drawn, whom these boundaries exclude, and what boundaries we should be drawing.

## CONFLICT QUESTIONS

Questions about boundaries and identity inevitably lead to conflict, because not everyone in the community will agree on the answers. There are other sources of communal conflict as well: one study of local church congregations lists areas such as finances, staff (hiring and job descriptions), buildings (renovation, replacement), worship styles, governance, the role of women and the acceptability of homosexual orientation. Open conflict can be painful, leading members to withdraw from active participation or even leave. But if these conflicts and resentments are not admitted and faced, they can fester and ultimately destroy the community.

Some conflicts have relatively narrow foci: whether to renovate the parish church or an order’s provincialate, for example, whom to choose as pastor or leader, how to allocate funds, or what priority to give to various ministries. These “narrow” types of conflicts can be resolved if the community is trained in and utilizes effective conflict resolution processes. But wider and deeper conflicts over competing versions of the community’s foundational identity story (or over who gets to tell and validate the story) are the most intractable of all and



*Bernardine Franciscan Sisters Cara and Concetta study a Wordle document created during their congregation’s “Keys to the Future” workshop, aimed at engaging in questions crucial to the health of the their community.*

the least responsive to normal conflict resolution processes.

Penny Edgell Becker [in *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*] describes “mixed congregations” with several competing stories, where opposing factions disagreed over the basic identity of the parish and over what symbols, rituals and activities expressed this identity. In these situations, intervention by denominational conflict resolution experts made matters worse. Identity conflicts often became personalized, with some persons seen as being “the problem” in and of themselves. Such individuals were often forced to leave. When the voice of dissidents is too threatening to a congregation’s or an order’s in-group, the latter may prefer that such troublemakers exit. But forcing out those who voice their dissent may deprive the community of the very persons who care about it the most. The remaining, entrenched in-group can then continue in comfortable mediocrity. Thus, avoiding conflict through the exit of dissidents can be as dangerous as engaging in conflict with them. This is especially true if those who exit are the community’s younger members.

## Conflict’s creative potential

What can be done to tap the creative potential of community conflict? Theologians suggest that the answer is to move from seeing difference as a source of division to “recognizing it as an intrinsic value and as a means of communion.” But this begs the questions raised by the necessity of boundary

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"The desert will lead you to your heart where I will speak" Hosea 2,14

to call our community to change, we first need regularly to examine what internal divisions or subgroups exist in our community: age, income, race, ethnicity, gender, marital and/or parental status, liturgical preference, theological stance and so forth. How often, if at all, do members of these subgroups interact? Is this interaction—when it happens—a positive or a negative experience for those involved? Are there pervasive disagreements that are driving these groups farther apart? How are our leaders chosen? From which subgroups of our community do they usually come? What subgroups are over- or under-represented in leadership? Can our leaders effect needed change in policy, or is the real power to do so located somewhere else? What are the implications, positive and negative, of distributing power in this way? There is no single correct answer to these questions; they need to be discerned again and again throughout the life of the community, and in a spirit of love and acceptance of differences between any “sides” that develop. Recently, several useful books have been published that describe techniques to deal with parish conflict.

Conflict is especially likely whenever a new generation of members replaces an older one. Each generation has its blind spots, shadow areas that could be illuminated by viewing them from the perspective of the other generations within the community. This brings us, therefore, to the final set of questions: how the community connects with, invites and integrates subsequent generations of members.

## GENERATIONAL ACCEPTANCE QUESTIONS

Currently, the overall population of the United States contains a larger number of persons between the ages of 15 and 28 than it has ever had. The same, however, cannot be said of most Catholic parishes, religious orders and ecclesial movements. Young Catholics are the least likely of all generational cohorts to participate in any of these Catholic communities. For their health and continued survival, therefore, these communities must raise the essential question of how to invite and welcome new generations of members.

It has been said that Christian life is an exercise in memory. At the most sacred moment of our liturgy, we are told to “Do this in memory of Me.” But since it is impossible personally to remember what happened before one was born—at least not with the same emotional valence possessed by those who lived it—no two generations will have the same “take” on a parish’s, a religious order’s, or an ecclesial movement’s identity. This is not a bad thing; it is the means the Spirit uses to keep God’s message ever fresh and new in our changing

construction: When are our differences too ontologically dissimilar to be permitted in the same community? Who gets to decide this?

Asking conflict questions such as these, therefore, is necessary for the health of any church community. In order for any community to survive,

there needs to be both change and continuity. The challenge is how to engage in these processes in a way that honors the past while being open to the future.... The cause of sustainability is not advanced if the old or the new members opt out of this dialectic. It is vital that we insure old learnings are honored at the same time new possibilities are explored. *To survive and live fully, a community must work directly with the social inevitability, even necessity, of conflict while recognizing that it has to be used creatively to generate new possibilities* [Peter H. Cock, *Communal Societies*].

To determine the scope and dimensions of our essential conflicts, and to discern how the Holy Spirit is using them

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world. But it does take careful discernment of spirits for a community to learn how they are being called to welcome the next generation, with all its newfangled ideas and perspectives, into their midst.

Some elements of this discernment have already been mentioned. Successive generations will valorize different aspects of the community's identity story. Some "outdated" elements they may wish to revive; other, "modern" ones they may cavalierly discard. Both changes will threaten their elders, who may retain unpleasant memories of the former and resent the dismissal of their struggles to achieve the latter. Both generations will need to ask themselves and each other, Which elements of our common identity are essential and which may be changed? What can the old learn from the young, and what can and must they teach them?

The concepts of life cycles and generations do not apply only to individuals. Church communities themselves go through stages of birth, youth, maturity and old age. Some groups die at the end of their life cycle, and some are re-founded or reborn anew. An interesting complication arises when successive generational cohorts experience the community differently—because each experiences it at a different stage of its life cycle. A newly established parish, movement, or religious order is founded and populated in its infancy by young adults. These first members possess all of the strengths and weaknesses of their personal life cycle stage: idealism, flexibility, energy, naivete, inexperience, impatience. Their characteristics make it possible for them to surmount the hazards attendant on the founding of the community and impart a larger-than-life aura to their later reminiscences of that time. The community often grows quite rapidly, just as a small child does, in this early stage of its life cycle.

Twenty or 30 years later, however, the community is in the mature stage of its life cycle, and the founding members are middle-aged or older. Structures have been established, set ways of doing routine tasks have become second nature to them. Policy meetings become "shorter, less tense and less important to the life of the community," because the major decisions have already been made and can be simply repeated year after year. Members feel secure and comfortable. But this creates a new difficulty: generating the community's culture has been so successful that it is taken for granted. This presents a barrier to further innovation. New and younger members may feel stifled in such an environment.

The barriers are not all on the community's side, however. External societal factors also influence the young in their interest in or ability to join a parish or a religious community. Mike Hayes, author of *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s*, labels most Millennial and Gen

X Catholics "eclipsed": "They have no interest in either spiritual or religious matters. They have 'better things to do.'" Many struggle to make ends meet financially and prefer to pick up overtime on Sunday instead of going to Mass. Others are more attracted by the lure of the multiple media outlets available to them, or they simply prefer to sleep in. Some observers predict that these young Catholics will return to religious practice when they get older; Hayes does not think this will be the case. Rather, he says, if these generations do not develop a "core value" of church community participation while in their 20s, they will be unlikely to do so later. Even more ominous is the increased alienation of young Catholic women. How can our parish, religious order, or lay movement contact these people? How can we invite them in and make them welcome?

It is not enough simply to welcome the young, or even to adapt the community's identity narrative to their perspective. The established members must also be willing to grant them real voice in its governance. What opportunities are there for the young to exercise leadership? To effect real change in our church communities?

Finally, a minority of Millennial Catholics have reacted to the uncertainty of the times by adopting a rigidly "evangelistic" and "fundamentalist" version of Catholicism that could be divisive to any parishes or religious orders they choose to join. In this, they mirror the increasing ideological polarization occurring in the larger American society. Their black-and-white stance may alienate the majority of their age cohort, most of whom believe that something might be true "for them" but are unwilling to impose it on anyone else. It will also be off-putting to the older generations of parishioners or religious who are committed to the reforms of Vatican II. How can we embrace the gifts of these "evangelistic" Millennial Catholics (likely the only ones of their cohort who will show up in our parishes and religious orders), while gently challenging them to grow?

Incorporating the next generation into our church communities will inevitably disrupt our comfortable and settled ways, bringing change and conflict that may even be destruc-

It is not enough simply to welcome the young, or even to adapt the community's identity narrative to their perspective. The established members must also be willing to grant them real voice in its governance.

## *Evaluation questions for communities*

### **IDENTITY QUESTIONS**

- How would we define our identity? How does this identity differ from other similar communities?
- Is our environment favorable or hostile to this identity? What niche or population does our identity most appeal to?
- Can or should we change our identity in some way?

Has our identity already changed from what it used to be? In what ways?

- How do we tell the story of our identity? Who tells it? When? To whom?
- What distinct subgroups compose our community?
- What does our community look like from the perspective of each subgroup? Would another subgroup recognize the community from this perspective? Does every subgroup tell the same story? Does everyone like or agree with the story?

### **BOUNDARY QUESTIONS**

- Who, by definition, is not a community member?
- Do we have invisible boundaries we are not aware of? Are we excluding some while claiming to welcome them?

### **CONFLICT QUESTIONS**

- How often do members of the subgroups in our community interact with each other? Is this interac-

tion a positive or a negative experience for those involved? In what ways?

- How are our leaders chosen? From which subgroups of our community do they usually come?
- What subgroups are under-represented in leadership?
- Do our leaders have any power, or is the real power located somewhere else?
- What are the implications, positive and negative, of distributing power in this way?

### **GENERATIONAL ACCEPTANCE QUESTIONS**

- At what stage in its life cycle is our community as a whole? Is it growing or declining? Are the founding members still alive?
- What is the proportion of teens and 20-30-somethings in the area this parish or religious order serves?
- Is the percentage of these age brackets in our parish or religious order similar? Is one category over- or under-represented?
- In what ways does our community connect with younger generations? How well are these working?
- What aspects of our present identity appeal to younger generations?
- What routes to leadership exist for the young?
- Are our present communication channels reaching the young? What channels can we develop that would be better?

tive. But without the next generation of members, our parish or religious order will—equally inevitably—die.

In the box are some of the questions that the members of a parish, a religious order, or an ecclesial movement should periodically ask themselves in order to gauge their community's health. All of the members of a church community must

realize the legitimacy and the necessity of asking these kinds of questions. Asking them regularly, thoroughly and in depth will doubtless lead to other questions not listed here, questions more specific to each particular community. Once we have asked the questions, we must decide what to do about the answers. ■

When mission and identity are front and center for leadership, the foundation is firm for vocation ministry. Administrative tasks can interfere, however, with vision.

## Leadership focus makes the difference for vocations

BY SISTER KELLY CONNORS, PM

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**T**HE RESULTS OF THE 2009 NRVC-CARA study<sup>1</sup> reveal that clear direction of a religious institute, rooted in the essential mission and charism of that institute, creates an environment attractive to individuals considering religious life. My own research on the role of internal governance of religious institutes, and the consistent understanding of the role of the major superior in canon law, has yielded essentially the same result.

While not addressing the “attractiveness” of an institute, an institute that understands and claims the role of its leaders for the essentials of religious life will be healthier and, as a result, more attractive. In the next few pages, I hope to share a small portion of my research to encourage sound models of internal governance of religious institutes and congregational leaders free from excessive administration for animation of the mission of their institutes.

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The role of major superiors and their impact on the life and administration of institutes of consecrated life cannot be overstated. It is demanding yet necessary to discern potential governance models that will liberate them to be about the essential obligations of their office—preserving the unity of the institute, fidelity to the charism, promotion of the mission, and care of the members. They need to attend to these matters while facilitating healthy participation of all the members in decision-making, exercising subsidiarity, preserving the personal authority of the superior for the good of the whole.

The foundation of the office of superior, in general, consists in the duties or rights fundamental to all members. While all in the institute share many of these responsibilities by virtue of membership, the superior, and all the more so the major superior, has a particular responsibility by virtue of the office. The governing function of superiors, the authority over the internal life of the institute, is easily identified as belonging to the major superior. The service to be rendered is that of ordering the life of the community, of organizing the members of the institute, and of caring for and developing its particular mission, all the while fostering the exercise of subsidiarity. In a spirit of collaboration with the local bishop, the superior is to see that the institute be efficiently inserted into ecclesial activity and the life of the local church.

At the same time, no matter of supervision or administration outweighs the priority of animating and inspiring fidelity to the charism and pursuit of the mission proper to the institute.<sup>2</sup> The primary role of the superior is to safeguard the patrimony of the institute and regulate well the processes that

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assist members in living out their vocation and accomplishing the apostolic ends of the institute. Ultimately this is to foster the preservation of the unity of the institute, as they themselves are to be the sign of unity, and promotion of the ends for which it was founded. Not to be neglected is the ever-present challenge to balance the principles of personal authority, consultation, involvement of members, shared responsibility and subsidiarity. A genuine balance of personal authority and shared responsibility makes possible the ideal of ordinary religious governance fulfilling its purpose.

## Major changes

Apostolic religious institutes have gone through major changes over the past 100 years. Many events and movements, both within the church and society influenced the evolution of religious life in the United States. The transformation within religious life was also largely influenced by the adjustments in the apostolic endeavours of the religious institutes—their

In electing leaders, according to the FORUS survey, religious typically choose administrators, not leaders, for their communities. Such members are satisfied with mediation and organization, which is understandable since a prophetic character is not measurable.

institutions and the necessary emergence of a professionalism to be on par with secular institutions. This professionalism facilitated a shift in the model of ordinary internal governance of religious institutes, how members relate to officials of the institute and how these officials relate to the members. Civil incorporation of apostolic institutions also had an impact on the evolution of the role of the major superior, beyond the professionalization of

the exercise of the office. With incorporation, major superiors are now corporate members with all of the civil obligations therein; positions for which most are unprepared.

No structure or management model will perfectly suit every religious institute, and the principle of autonomy of governance expressed in canon law (see c. 586) relieves institutes from any sense of obligation toward uniformity of ordinary governance structures. The selection of the proper structure to be most fruitful for a given institute needs to be done with a great deal of discernment, dialogue and clarity of capacity and expectations. It is my conviction that reclaiming the office of

the major superior and facilitating the exercise of the office as articulated through ecclesial documents and the current law of the church, the prophetic and pressing call for the major superior to be a spiritual beacon and guardian of the particular gift of the Spirit entrusted to each institute, and therefore the church, can yield nothing less than the good of the members of the institute, the church and the people of God.

## Backlashes of professionalism and bureaucracy

The Nygren and Ukeritis FORUS study revealed that the ministerial professionalization of members made it difficult for religious superiors to exercise the kind of authority over members that was assumed in the past, so now they do not even try to do so.<sup>3</sup> The bureaucratization of ministries and the carry-over to the internal processes of governance have beneficial aspects, but must be carefully examined and intentionally implemented.

Again, the FORUS study offers insight: “Many leaders noted that, in attempting to focus the group on a collective action, responsibility to do so is thwarted because of the leader’s lack of authority to act. Thus, opportunities for impact are lost because the group lacks a process for decision making in such realms.”<sup>4</sup> Whether the paralysis is due to too much information and the need for consensus or managerial expectations with too much distance to effect real change, religious institutes are not exempt from the hazards of bureaucracy and may in fact be at a greater risk because of the inherent incompatibility of the models (bureaucratic model versus communitarian model).

If both the superior and the community see the leader’s task as providing only mediation, prophecy and organization then the result could be structural paralysis. In electing leaders, according to the FORUS survey, religious typically choose *administrators*, not *leaders*, for their communities. Such members are satisfied with mediation and organization, which is understandable since a prophetic character is not measurable.<sup>5</sup> These administrators lack a clear image of the identity and mission of their institute and emphasize maintenance concerns. Any expression of values is general and gives no practical direction for the future of the institute.

Religious institutes are in a place to find balance between bureaucracy and communitarian organizational forms. The expectation to find this balance and live an expression of it falls to those elected or appointed to office. Fear of returning to an overly centralized style of the past and the paralysis of an overly bureaucratic system can lock an institute into settling for sufficient administration. Sociologist Sister Patricia

Wittberg, SC observes, “Congregations which refrain from addressing the ambiguous roles of the leadership may miss discovering creative and psychologically healthy new ways of filling them. ... As long as religious congregations combine elements of both bureaucracies and intentional communities, a certain amount of tension will exist in the contradictory expectations which each of these models places on both the leadership and the average members.”<sup>6</sup>

## Balanced approach keeps some edge

As always, leadership is a quality not reserved to those who hold office. Spiritual leadership can be exercised by any member and is surely not the responsibility of only those in office (but, of course, is the particular duty of the superior according to c. 619). Pasquier sees the role of the spiritual leader as central to the life of the institute. To elect a spiritual leader to office expresses the priority of the life of the Spirit over structure, organization or efficiency. Perhaps the prophetic aspect of the earlier triad (of mediation, prophecy and organization), the spiritual leader, like the Spirit itself, must be a source of unity, reconciliation and healing.<sup>7</sup>

Again, this must be part of a whole—that balance between the communitarian and bureaucratic existence, being prophetic and announcing the kingdom while being efficient stewards of communal resources. Much falls to those who hold office within the governance structure of a religious institute. The basic leadership styles belie the unique characteristics each person brings to the office he or she holds. The best leader for a religious institute is the one who has the right gifts for that particular time in history. In our church we have a long line of charismatic and prophetic leaders, agents of change, who were supposed to be leaders of no consequence—Archbishop Óscar Romero and Pope John XXIII—just to name two. Do religious today want, need, leaders, or is administration enough? Arbuckle answers for himself, “I am personally convinced that many religious today are yearning to be led and to be spiritually challenged. All we need is a little courage, humility and trust in God.”<sup>8</sup>

For those in office to be able to meet the needs of members, they need to know the expectations. This is the demanding piece of defining a structure, because it is not the structure at all that is being defined, it is the values and priorities of the members and what they need and desire from those who have the ministry of authority. Once a group can articulate these values and priorities in a climate of co-responsibility and be heard, then what the structure looks like does not matter nearly as much. Whatever the vision is for the inter-relationship between members and leaders, it must be arrived at by

## *Buried in administration*

Leaders do this:

- Plan, attend, chair meetings of boards of directors, trustees, and corporations;
- Assess, purchase, sell, renovate properties;
- Fundraise for the needs of the corporations, assessments or renovations;
- Deal with personnel issues—staffing, credentials, insurance, benefits packages;
- Have meetings to plan meetings; meet to have a committee that takes care of committees.

Then, they don't have time for this:

- Meet with the members individually, both casually and officially;
- Enrich and animate the spiritual life of the community;
- Foster and mentor (newer) members to develop their gifts for the mission;
- Challenge members to engage in mature and mutually responsible decision-making;
- Be the spiritual leader and symbol of unity of the community in and through the charisma and mission.

the whole group, and the group, as a whole, must accept this vision. This of course will require a lengthy process to arrive at such clarity and maturity and to allow individuals to think through the matter themselves, but education for leadership requires not only the education of the leaders but the education of the whole group.<sup>9</sup>

Through such action and commitment, the levelling out of leadership roles and dynamics of co-responsibility can be embraced while still fulfilling the underlying desire to be led. R. Harvanek puts such a relationship in ideal terms.

Mature persons will respond to leadership and authority as a principle of unity among equals. With ease

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and confidence in themselves, they accept the competencies and roles of others in community as good order in a rational society with no implications of inferiority for anyone. Though fully capable of making their own decisions, they will as a matter of fact be more obedient and more faithful in following the leaders of the community than those who are not so able. Furthermore, they will accept the role of sharing in the leadership and participating in the common processes of the community with freedom and a sense of responsibility. In this, perhaps ideal, situation, fellowship and “followship” are almost synonymous.<sup>10</sup>

### In essence: charism, mission, members

Arbuckle lays the groundwork for this section. “As far as the major superior personally is concerned, I believe that he or she must be as free as possible from the practical demands or details of maintenance duties.” He also states: “There are structural changes to be made within existing apostolates in order to remove excessively burdensome administrative obligations from religious, thus freeing them for personal and apostolic creative action.”<sup>11</sup> Major superiors, as much as every member, need to be free for personal and apostolic creative action for the good of the mission and those being served.

The tasks of the major superior are many, but the obligations reserved to him or her are few, yet essential. In essence, the office of the major superior is one of service to guard and promote the charism, mission and members of the institute.

The tasks of the superior stem from the essential obligations of preserving the unity of the institute, fidelity to the charism, promotion of the mission for which the institute was founded, observance of the vows and constitutions, and assistance of members in their pursuit of holiness.

In the midst of safeguarding the patrimony (as defined in CIC canon 578<sup>12</sup>), promoting the mission through the ends of the apostolate, and assisting the members’ wholeness, health, and holiness, the superior must also promote subsidiarity, mutual accountability, participation and consultation. He or she must strive for a balance between subsidiarity and centralization, shared responsibility and the personal authority of the office. There is no question that such a ministry requires the full attention of the one mandated to this service, as well as the contribution and collaboration of all involved in the life of the institute. Although the obligations to be faithful to the charism and pursue the mission, as well as mutually assist all members of the institute, apply to all the members, the superior has the explicit duty to make these her primary obligations from which all action and animation flow. Whatever the structure of governance, the superior needs to be free to be of service to the charism, mission and members, inserted into the life of the local church. Those full-time in the ministry of authority have the privilege to hold these ideals always before their eyes and filter all decisions through renewed fidelity to and promotion of the mission for the good of the church and the people of God. The work of continuing the mission, of being faithful to the charism, of living the consecrated life

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1. M.E. Bendyna and M.L. Gautier, *Recent Vocations to Religious Life: A Report for the National Religious Vocation Conference*, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate [CARA], Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 2009.

2. See “Congregation For Bishops And Congregation For Religious And For Secular Institutes, Directives for Mutual Relations Between Religious and Bishops *Mutuae relationes*,” 14 May 1978, in AAS, 70 (1978), pp. 473-506, English translation in Flanery pp. 209-243, n. 14c.

3. See D.J. Nygren and M.D. Ukeritis. *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States: Transformation and Commitment*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993, pp. 39-59.

4. Nygren and Ukeritis. “Religious-Leadership Competencies.” *Review for Religious*. 52 (1993), p. 415.

5. See P. Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective*, W. Clark Roof (ed.), Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 272 and

D.J. Nygren and M.D. Ukeritis, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States*, pp. 47 and 56.

6. Wittberg, Patricia. *Creating a Future for Religious Life*. New York: Paulist Press, 1991, p. 50.

7. See J. Pasquier, “The Psychology of Leadership,” *The Way*, 15 (1975), pp. 44-45.

8. Arbuckle, G.A. *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, p. 130.

9. See Pasquier, pp. 41-42.

10. R. Harvanek, “The Expectations of Leadership,” *The Way*, 15 (1975), p. 32.

11. Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos*, pp. 117 and 126.

12. Canon 578: All must observe faithfully the mind and designs of the founders regarding the nature, purpose, spirit, and character of an institute, which have been sanctioned by competent ecclesiastical authority, and its sound traditions, all of which constitute the patrimony of the same institute.

with quality and meaning, of being mutually accountable and sharing responsibility belongs to all members in cooperation with their superiors, according to their proper law, therefore preserving the unity of the institute.

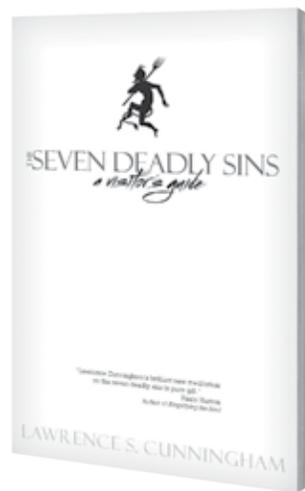
Since the Second Vatican Council religious have conscientiously applied the conciliar principles of collegiality, legitimate diversity and subsidiarity. For them, the monarchical authority of the past has been replaced by genuine inclusivity and collaboration in governance. Religious have interpreted this principle of collegiality in a broad sense to be more than a sharing of opinions or consultation of the membership, but to be an effective sharing in the responsibilities of the decision-making process. This has stimulated a more positive sense among religious of personal responsibility for their own lives and a more profound dedication to the mission of the institute and therefore the church.

Good, appropriate and relevant structures can liberate members to be about the mission of their institute, to live in a manner inspired by their charism, and faithful to the call of the evangelical counsels. The structures of ordinary governance should be stable, rooted in the values, priorities, needs and expectations of the members. The framework of the structure<sup>13</sup> must also account for the essential ministry of those in authority—preserving the unity of the institute, fidelity to the charism, promotion of the mission, and care of the members—while facilitating healthy participation of all the members in decision-making and exercising subsidiarity yet preserving the personal authority of the superior for the good of the whole. ■

(*Codex iuris canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus, fontium annotatione et indice analytico-alphabetico auctus.*) Libreria editrice Vaticana, 1989, English translation Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition, New English Translation, prepared under the auspices of the CANON LAW SOCIETY OF AMERICA, Washington, Canon Law Society of America, 1999.

13. The structural canonical points that must be preserved are: 1) the existence of a superior – canonically elected in the case of a supreme moderator, all others being elected with confirmation of the competent major superior or appointed after communal consultation (cc. 625 §3 and 626) for a determined period of time (c. 624); 2) superiors exercise personal power, proper to their office (cc. 617-618), received from God through the ministry of the church; 3) superiors must have and make use of their own council as defined in proper law and not contrary to universal law (c. 627).

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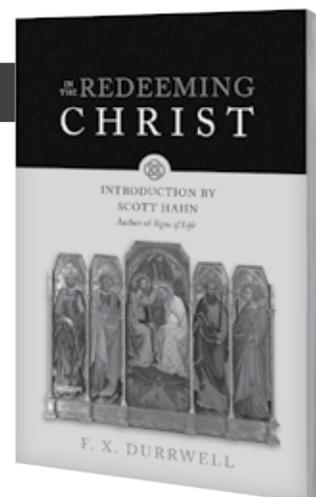
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# FEED YOUR SPIRIT

## What are you really doing?

BY SISTER MELANNIE SVOBODA, SND

**Y**OU ARE A VOCATION DIRECTOR. You have been entrusted with a ministry that is unique, important and challenging. Sometimes your work is immensely rewarding; other times it is ambiguous or even discouraging. That is why it is good to step back from your ministry periodically and reflect on these two questions: As a vocation director, what are you really doing? Where can you find help to sustain yourself in your work?

### Foundations of vocation ministry

The first question is this: what are you really doing? Some might say you are recruiting new members for your specific religious congregation. But that answer is far too narrow for today's reality. It is more accurate to say that, as a vocation director, you are accompanying men and women as they explore ways to use their gifts and talents to further God's kingdom. Let's unpack that statement.

A primary part of vocation ministry is accompani-

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ment. You walk with individuals as they discern their futures. This is a sacred task and somewhat daunting. But in doing this work you are in "good company," for Scripture sets before us a number of individuals who accompanied others in their discernment process. Let's look at two of them: Eli and Philip. Eli was an elderly temple priest when the young Samuel comes to serve in the temple under his wise direction. During the middle of the night, Samuel hears someone calling his name. Thinking it is Eli, he goes to him saying "Here I am. You called me?" Samuel says no and tells him to go back to sleep. This happens two more times. Finally Eli leads Samuel to recognize that it is God who is calling his name. Eli then helps Samuel formulate a response to that call, a response that is just as apropos today as it was back then: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:1-10).

Another individual in Scripture known for accompaniment was the apostle Philip. One day an angel calls his attention to a chariot in which an Ethiopian court official is sitting reading the prophet Isaiah. The official is confused about what he is reading. Philip runs after the chariot, catches up to it, and asks the man, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The man replies, "How can I, unless I have someone to guide me" (Acts 8:26-40). Philip provides that guidance and engages in a dialogue with the man. Eventually the man asks to be baptized.

Both narratives provide a few insights into your ministry as vocation director. First, Eli and Philip were people of God. That means they were committed to God



*The apostle Philip provides guidance to an Ethiopian court official and engages in a dialogue with the man.*

and had years of personal experience themselves with discerning the mysterious ways of God. Your ministry requires this same kind of commitment to and familiarity with God, with Jesus.

The foundation for your ministry is always your own journey of faith. Another insight is this: Eli was willing to be awakened in the middle of the night to help Samuel. This reminds us that accompaniment can occur not merely at our own convenience, but even outside of so-called office hours.

Similarly, Philip runs after the man's chariot to talk with him. In other words, he goes where the man is, that is, where the man is physically as well as spiritually. Then Philip initiates the conversation with a question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He begins by finding out where the man is on his faith journey. Effective vocation directors do the same thing. They go where potential candidates are. They ask good questions. They listen well. They guide.

Earlier I said as a vocation director you help individuals explore ways they can use their gifts and talents to further God's kingdom. Vocation work goes beyond service to your congregation. You serve the greater church. Your ministry also involves more than discerning the call to religious life. It includes discerning the wider and more fundamental call to universal holiness.

Even if individuals discern they are not being called to religious life, your work is still immensely valuable. In the process of accompaniment, you impart skills and insights that will benefit the directees for life no matter where their discernment takes them. Your service to

these individuals makes the whole church richer. So do the personal sacrifices, joys and pains that are part and parcel of your work.

## Sustaining helps

So far we have looked at what you are really doing as vocation director. Now let's turn to some of the helps that can sustain you in your ministry. The first I have already alluded to: it is your own deep prayer life. It only makes sense. If you are helping young people in their discernment, then you too must be in discernment every day. And this discernment begins with your personal prayer. Talk to God about your ministry. Share your joys and struggles. Pray by name for the individuals you are serving. Search scripture for courage and enlightenment. Beg Jesus for help. It is also good to regularly reflect on your own call to religious life. What helped you to say "yes" to God's invitation to join your particular congregation? What helps you to continue to say your "yes" every day?

Always remember, though, the future of religious life and your congregation does not rest on your shoulders. It rests on God's shoulders. As the old proverb says, "Resign as general manager of the universe!" An effective vocation director is also a humble one.

Your religious congregation can be a second help for you. It is good to find creative ways to involve the larger community in your work. You might begin by keeping the members informed about the activities of your ministry. Many vocation directors advertise such things as retreats, cook outs, evenings of prayer and reflection, service projects, etc. You might solicit help in advance for these activities from community members. Not every member may be comfortable giving a talk, but all members can pray for the endeavor. Others can help setting up for talks, hosting a refreshment table or cleaning up afterward. It can be helpful to follow every activity with a report to your members. Pictures really help, too.

A third aid in vocation work is to believe in the

In the process of accompaniment, you impart skills and insights that will benefit the directees for life no matter where their discernment takes them. Your service to these individuals makes the whole church richer.

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value of religious life in general and your congregation in particular. If you believe religious life has something to offer men and women seeking to serve God, then that makes your “job” easier. If you believe your congregation has the ability to nurture new members to become who God is calling them to be, then this belief will have a positive impact on all you do.

What are some ways we stir the embers of our belief in our congregation and in religious life? One way is to reflect on the history of your specific congregation. I travel all over the country giving talks and retreats. Many times I find myself at congregational motherhouses. When I arrive I always ask for books on the founding of their congregation. If they have a heritage room, I spend some time in it. As an outsider, I am always impressed with the history of each congregation, the heroic women and men who founded it, the courageous works these religious accomplished, often with meager resources. I suggest every vocation director regularly ponder the roots of her or his congregation. When I ponder the early history of my own congregation, for example, I often find myself saying, “How did those women do it?” or “And we think we have problems!”

But pondering one’s history is not enough. It is important to be in touch with the contemporary life of your congregation. How do you do this? One way is to keep up with the current news about your congregation. Visit and contribute to its website regularly, read all the general communications to your congregation, and even visit some of your members where they are now serving. Another way to keep in touch with the vitality of your congregation is by visiting your retirement or health care center and entering into conversations with these seasoned members who incarnate your charisma and spirit so well.

And, finally, it is good to be connected with other vocation directors through meetings, publications and programs geared to this special ministry. You will find support and insight for your own ministry through this contact, and many vocation outreach efforts work best with the presence and collaboration of many communities.

## Hanging on to hope

Vocation ministry involves the future. And the virtue needed to face the future is always hope. We are living in difficult times. I say this realizing we could say the same thing about every age. Every age has its challenges,

struggles, ambiguities, pains and heartaches. As we religiously watch our numbers dwindle, we might be tempted to think God is deserting us, or we are doing something drastically wrong. When such negative thoughts plague me, I remind myself that one of the major themes of the Bible is this: God chooses the lowly and the few to accomplish the great and the wonderful. Moses was a lousy speaker. Jeremiah thought he was too young. Gideon’s army kept shrinking. And Mary was a poor teenage girl living in a town no one ever heard of. Yet God worked marvels in and through them.

I am reminded of that passage from the prophet Habakkuk that is a part of the Divine Office:

Though the fig tree does not blossom  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
(Habakkuk 3:17-18)

Talk about a bleak situation! No figs, no grapes, no olives, no flocks, no herd! And yet the psalmist can still exult in his saving God. Now, that’s hope! The passage graphically reminds us that our hope is not in things, in size, in numbers. Our hope is not in our intelligence, creativity, hard work or goodness. No, our hope is in God. In God!

Similarly at the Last Supper there was little reason for hope. Judas was about to betray Jesus, Jesus was about to be arrested, and the other disciples were about to run away. And when Jesus hung on the cross, it certainly looked like The End. Yet it was precisely at these seemingly unpromising moments that God was working marvelous things: birthing the church, destroying evil, conquering death, and bestowing salvation upon humankind. Who knows what marvelous things God is working in and through you as you serve as vocation director?

But vocation ministry is not only a work of hope; it is a work of faith and love. You plant rather than reap. You water even when you see no growth. You pour your time, attention, and care upon those individuals God puts into your life. Then you entrust the fruits of your work to God. Yes, that is what you are really doing as a vocation director. And what’s more, with God’s grace, we do all of this with joy. With great joy! ■

# BOOK NOTES

## A book that makes Catholicism seem hip

BY FATHER RADMAR JAO, SJ

**W**HAT DOES IT MEAN to be a Catholic, young (“emerging”) adult in the 21st century? This is a fundamental question we vocation ministers ask ourselves as we accompany young women and men on their journey toward understanding, both intellectually and affectively, how God may be inviting them into a deeper relationship with God’s self, and thus into a life of service for and with Jesus Christ. After all, isn’t that what vocation discernment is all about?

Matt Weber’s engaging book, *Fearing the stigmata*, (Loyola Press, 2012) gives us a glimpse into the world of a young adult’s perspective of Catholicism, and it begins with a humorous admission of how his fourth grade religion teacher unknowingly drove him to fear

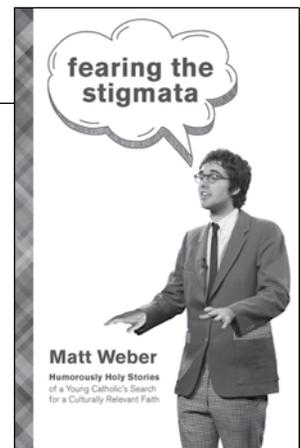
*Father Radmar Jao, SJ is originally from a Valparaiso, IN family of nine children. He currently serves as the Vocation Promoter for the California Province of the Society of Jesus. Before entering the Jesuits in 2001, Radmar enjoyed a successful acting career in Los Angeles, appearing on film, TV, and stage and now uses his acting skills to witness to his faith and calling as a Jesuit priest.*



any semblance of holiness by simplistically explaining to him that St. Francis’ stigmata was a result of his being a “good Catholic.” It’s no wonder Weber “went home that night and did a little more sinning than usual, just to be certain [he] wouldn’t receive the stigmata.”

Thus begins our entertaining journey into the culturally Catholic world of the book’s author—a 27-year-old Harvard graduate and Catholic TV personality. Each chapter is a humorously written vignette (of the almost sound-bite length that young adults are accustomed to) of a moment in Weber’s life that conveys his thesis: pursuing a “good Catholic life” should be done in “whatever way you can, [taking] this charge with an adventuresome spirit” (161); all of it done publicly, boldly, and with a lot of good humor. I have to say, his writing style makes Catholicism sound really hip, which is one of the book’s strong points, and what I imagine will sell many copies.

The problem, however, is that he never mentions the challenges of being, let alone remaining Catholic in an ever-growing secular world. He focuses on the externals of Catholicism, such as sacramentals and attending Mass, and he makes it all seem like a lot of fun. But he doesn’t explain with any depth why his Catholic faith is



important to him. Nor does he answer the question that I believe many young adult Catholics ask themselves: “Why be Catholic at all?” especially when you can still make a difference in the world and even be considered a good person, without going to church or praying the rosary or even believing in God.

As vocation ministers, we must continually grow in our understanding of why many emerging adults behave the way they do when it comes to their faith. For example, the most recent Pew report (pewforum.org) on the increasing number of “nones” in society (those who don’t subscribe to any particular religious institution) was most helpful for me to understand some of the challenges

I couldn’t resist laughing out loud reading about his joining a “gang”—an altar boy gang, that is!

to our work as vocation ministers. This valuable information also helps us “target” our marketing and vocation promotion efforts, as well as open up avenues for conversation with candidates about their prayer life, desire for community, and motivations to live a

life of service to the church and the world.

*Fearing the stigmata* is a good read for anyone who finds herself or himself on the margins of our Catholic faith; seekers in search of any form of connection with anything Divine, perhaps even teetering on whether or not to leave the church because of this or that controversial social issue that they may find problematic to reconcile. Weber faithfully demonstrates that our faith can be filled with joy, our liturgies can lead to spiritual health, and God can be found in our everyday encounters with one another, despite what the rest of the world says. To his credit, Weber makes Catholicism something worth belonging to. However, if I were a discernor reading this book, I would be left feeling a bit empty because I’m already at a point where I’m not asking whether or not God is active in my life. Rather, I’m discerning how God is active and what that means for me.

Weber’s book gives us 33 chapters of witty stories that chronicle his journey through young adulthood. Yes, his Catholicism is an important part of his identity and his drive to represent it to his generation is something to be commended. But I wouldn’t say the experiences he shares in the book would be helpful to the women and men who discern a vocation to priesthood or religious life; women and men with a deep desire for what St. Ig-

natius would call the magis, the more, as they recognize a burning need to do something of more significance and meaning with their life. But what the book perhaps lacks in spiritual depth, Weber more than makes up for with his wit and gift for storytelling.

For example I found the chapter on how he got involved with CatholicTV very compelling. His creative and successful pitch to the producers and eventual rise to become the CatholicTV voice of his generation drove me to watch a few of his clips online (he’s got quite the personality and energy and seems to be the kind of guy I’d like to sit down with for a cup of coffee or even a beer).

I couldn’t resist laughing out loud reading about his joining a “gang”—an altar boy gang, that is! “We did not have guns and knives or drugs and tattoos; we had albs, ciboriums, corporals, cruets, pyxes, boats, and a really nice lavabo. These were the tools of the trade” (42). This rang true with my own experiences of growing up as an altar boy. Though I never looked at it as joining a gang, it was one of the more salient experiences that influenced my discernment to become a priest.

And I thoroughly enjoyed his story of “babysitting” a kid while working as a production assistant for Milwaukee’s Miller Park baseball stadium. His description of calling the boy’s mom and how it quickly devolved into sounding like a kidnapping is classic comedy for the movies.

That said, I would not include this book on a recommended reading list for potential discerners who, presumably, have moved one or more steps deeper in their relationship with the Lord, which compelled them to contact us in the first place and begin their discernment process. I still wish he had included more about his pursuit of a deeper relationship with God and maybe even given us a glimpse into what motivates him in times of doubt and difficulty in living his Catholic identity in an increasingly secular world.

Perhaps I’m placing unrealistic expectations on a book that was not intended to be a vocation promotion tool that answers that burning question we vocation ministers desire answered: “What is preventing young women and men from even considering religious life?” That’s what slogging through the Pew research report is about, and not as enjoyable. Also, nothing indicated to me that Weber himself is representative of young adult Catholics, so it’s not a book to help vocation ministers grasp a different generation. But if you want a quick, enjoyable nighttime book to read, *Fearing the stigmata* is worth having on your nightstand. ■



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