



## Family matters

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COMING FEBRUARY 2015

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AT CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL UNION



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# Editor's Note

## It is *your* time



**T**he time is now!

It is time to rejoice in consecrated life. It is time to renew it. It is time to invite the next generation to join it. On the first Sunday of Advent, November 30, the church begins an international, year-long celebration and examination of consecrated life. By the end of 2015, let us hope that every Catholic who has opened a church door during the year (and perhaps some who haven't) will also be rejoicing in the gift of this vocation. Single, married, young or old: the gift of consecrated life is meant to be a gift to the universal church.

We've always known it was time to promote religious life. But this special year is a chance to pause, pray, ponder, and—sticking with the “p” words—party! We hope this edition helps with all of those activities. See our special section on page 5 for more about this year.

### **Synod on the Family connects to consecrated life**

It is appropriate that in addition to kicking off the Year of Consecrated Life this month, the church focused on the family during its recent synod. The two are tightly interwoven. Families ideally begin when two people marry, and thus, Father Timothy Radcliffe, O.P. shares his wise understanding of how the vocations of marriage and consecrated life are complementary—not competitive and not opposites. They each reflect a different aspect of the light of God's love.

Family has always been the seedbed for vocations. As Sister Mary Ellen Moore, S.H. points out (page 14), it is where we all begin our first formation as human beings. But seedbed or not, for even the most faithful Catholic parents, it can be painful to send a son or daughter off to join a religious community. Will their child still be in their lives? Will he or she be happy? On page 21 parents weigh in on what it was like to have a child join a religious community.

Our other writers, Father Linh Hoang, O.F.M.; Craig Gould, Sister Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M.; and Father Larry Rice, C.S.P. also deliver perceptive and timely articles on Asian culture, youth culture, spirituality, and social media. I encourage you, then, to enjoy this edition, and may it be a springboard to a rich Year of Consecrated Life. ■

We've always known it was time to promote religious life. But this special year is a chance to pause, pray, ponder, and —sticking with the “p” words—party!



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## Cultural diversity study released

U.S. religious communities are experiencing a subtle disconnect when it comes to welcoming new members who are not from the dominant race and culture. Leaders and

vocation ministers tend to be more open to receiving diverse members than are other community members. That is one of several key findings in the 2014 study, “Incorporating Cultural Diversity in Religious Life,” which was released in October 2014 by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). On behalf of NRVC the Center for Applied Research in the



Apostolate surveyed the leaders of all 835 religious institutes in the country, of which 42 percent responded.

NRVC commissioned the study to learn from leaders about the policies and procedures communities use and the experiences they have had with the formation and integration of culturally diverse candidates. Find the full report at [nrv.net](http://nrv.net)

Asked to name what they have done well to integrate culturally diverse new members, leaders reported four steps: 1) having bilingual formation staff; 2) having multicultural formation communities; 3) establishing formation houses in other countries; and 4) educating membership in cultural understanding.

Although the study focused on cultural concerns during formation, given an open-ended question about what their biggest formation concerns are, leaders reported concerns linked to age. New members often lack age-peers; and (with fewer religious still in the

workforce) communities have difficulty maintaining a formation staff. The study was funded by an anonymous foundation.

## International vocation gathering underway

A first-ever gathering of national vocation leaders representing most English-speaking countries in the developed world will gather during the Year of Consecrated Life in Rome in February 2015. Initiated by NRVC, and with the generous support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the purpose of this meeting is to explore ways in which we can globally promote vocations to religious life. Participants will include representatives from the United States, Canada, England/Wales, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific Islands. (France and Germany are also included because of their prominence in Europe). Both general secretaries from the Union of Superiors General and International Union of Superiors General will be attending as well.



Sister Gemma Simmonds, C.J., of Heythrop College in London will be the facilitator for the international meeting.



## World Youth Day advances

NRVC and VISION Vocation Network continue to lay plans with collaborating partners for an English-speaking vocation pavilion at the July 26-31, 2016 World Youth Day (WYD) in Krakow, Poland. Organizers hope to:

- promote WYD websites. The international

site is [krakow2016.com](http://krakow2016.com). The U.S. bishops' site is: [wydusa.org](http://wydusa.org);

- encourage minority and non-affluent youth to attend; and
- promote "at home" WYD events in various dioceses so that more people can be influenced by the vibrant WYD experience of faith and community.

## Second "Sisters Week" slated

After its premier in 2014, National Catholic Sisters Week (NCSW) will again be celebrated in 2015 on March 8-14.

Those leading the effort are encouraging communities to organize their own local and regional events and activities. They ask women religious to post their activities on the NCSW website in the "events" tab. The site offers prayer, liturgy, and activity resources for religious communities and their affiliated colleges, schools, and parishes. Go to [www2.stkate.edu/ncsw/participate](http://www2.stkate.edu/ncsw/participate).

## Giving Voice-CTU to launch leadership development project

In partnership with Catholic Theological Union, Giving Voice, a peer-led network of young women religious, has received a \$1 million grant for developing leadership skills among young sisters. The project aims to prepare them to assume leadership positions in their religious communities, ministries, and the Catholic Church. Because of the dramatic demographic changes going on in women's communities right now, the youngest generation in religious life will need to begin leading their communities much sooner than previous generations. Learn more at [givingvoice.org](http://givingvoice.org).

## "From Service to Sisterhood" focuses on volunteers

The Catholic Volunteer Network has begun a three-year initiative to help religious communities of women begin volunteer programs and better connect with volunteers in existing programs.

Called "From Service to Sisterhood" the effort is funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Research has shown that those who do full-time volunteer service are much more likely than other Catholics to seriously consider religious life or priesthood.



Carol Lackie is leading "From Service to Sisterhood."

From Service to Sisterhood has provided financial and technical assistance to women's communities to establish full-time volunteer programs. In addition the initiative will be sponsoring four vocation discernment retreats a year for women who have done volunteer service or ministry. For further information contact [clackie@catholicvolunteernetwork.org](mailto:clackie@catholicvolunteernetwork.org).

## Tentative workshops for 2015

The NRVC 2015 Summer Institute workshops at DePaul University in Chicago tentatively will include:

### BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT II

by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D., July 17-18

### BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT I

by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D., July 20-22

### ORIENTATION PROGRAM

by Brother Paul Bednarczyk, C.S.C. and Sister Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M., July 24-28

### ISSUES IN FAMILIES OF ORIGIN

by Father Gerard McGlone, S.J., July 29-31

The NRVC 2015 Fall Institute at the Marrillac Center in Leavenworth, Kansas tentatively will offer:

### BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT I

by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D., October 13-15

### ETHICS IN VOCATION MINISTRY

by Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D., October 16-17

### ORIENTATION PROGRAM

by Brother Paul Bednarczyk, C.S.C. and Sister Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M., October 18-22

### YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

by Sister Maria Cimperman, R.S.C.J., Dr. Ted Dunn, and Brother Sean Sammon, F.M.S., October 23-25 ■



# Year of Consecrated Life

## What is the Year of Consecrated Life?

The Year of Consecrated Life is a worldwide opportunity for the church to take note of consecrated life in the following ways.

- **For renewal** for the men and women in consecrated life. Please pray for them as they re-examine and renew their commitment to vowed life.
- **For appreciation and thanksgiving** for the witness and service of those in consecrated life.
- **For invitation to the next generation of Catholics** to “Be courageous!” in the words of Pope Francis, and, “Wake up the world to a different way of doing things, of acting, of living!”

## What resources are available?

The National Religious Vocation Conference with VISION Vocation Network has produced a logo (see it at the top of this page) and a hymn to be used in conjunction with the Year of Consecrated Life. Both are available for free at [www.nrvn.net](http://www.nrvn.net). (Go to the Resource tab on the home page and select “Year of Consecrated Life.”)

In addition a special edition of VISION vocation guide is available online ([vocationnetwork.org](http://vocationnetwork.org)) and in print. Hard copies can be ordered at [www.vocationnetwork.org/orders](http://www.vocationnetwork.org/orders) or by calling (800) 942-2811. The U.S. bishops have also posted resources at [usccb.org](http://usccb.org).

## Has Pope Francis said anything about consecrated life?

Yes, he has addressed people in religious life many times, and as a member of the Jesuit religious order, he has been formed by religious life; he understands and supports it. Some of the pope’s statements about religious life can be found at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). Some of the pontiff’s statements are also available at [nrvn.net](http://nrvn.net).

This past summer, Pope Francis visited Korea where he was enthusiastically received by the Catholic community, including men and women religious. Following are

the Holy Father’s words to the religious with whom he met. His short talk echoes a theme he has emphasized: that one’s joy in Christ should shine for others to see.



Pope Francis was received enthusiastically in Korea in August, 2014.

## ADDRESS TO WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN KOREA

**T**HE WORDS OF THE PSALM, “My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:26), invite us to think about our own lives. The Psalmist exudes joyful confidence in God. We all know that while joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty, “it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 6).

The firm conviction of being loved by God is at the center of your vocation: to be for others a tangible sign of the presence of God’s Kingdom, a foretaste of the eternal joys of heaven. Only if our witness is joyful will we attract men and women to Christ. And this joy is a gift which is nourished by a life of prayer, meditation on the word of God, and the celebration of the sacraments and life in community, which is very important. When these are lacking, weaknesses and difficulties will emerge to dampen the joy we knew so well at the beginning of our journey.

For you, as men and women consecrated to God, this joy is rooted in the mystery of the Father’s mercy,



PHOTO: TOM FOX / GLOBAL SISTERS REPORT: A PROJECT OF NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER

Sister Kim Keun-Ja, R.S.C.J. was among the hundreds of Korean women religious who attended a meeting with Pope Francis during his pastoral visit to Korea in August 2014. She told Tom Fox of *National Catholic Reporter* that the visit inspired her to re-examine her own commitment to simplicity and outreach to the poor.

revealed in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Whether the charism of your institute is directed more to contemplation or to the active life, you are challenged to become "experts" in divine mercy precisely through your life in community. From experience I know that community life is not always easy, but it is a providential training ground for the heart. It is unrealistic not to expect conflicts; misunderstandings will arise and they must be faced. Despite such difficulties, it is in community life that we are called to grow in mercy, forbearance and perfect charity.

The experience of God's mercy, nourished by prayer and community, must shape all that you are, all that you do. Your chastity, poverty and obedience will be a joyful witness to God's love in the measure that you stand firmly on the rock of his mercy. That is the rock. This is certainly the case with religious obedience. Mature and generous obedience requires that you cling in prayer to Christ who, taking the form of a servant, learned obedience through what he suffered (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 14). There are no shortcuts: God desires our hearts completely and this means we have to "let go" and "go out" of ourselves more and more.

A lively experience of the Lord's steadfast mercy also sustains the desire to achieve that perfection of charity which is born of purity of heart. Chastity expresses your single-minded dedication to the love of God who is "the

strength of our hearts." We all know what a personal and demanding commitment this entails. Temptations in this area call for humble trust in God, vigilance, perseverance and opening our heart to that wise brother or sister whom the Lord puts on our path.

Through the evangelical counsel of poverty you are able to recognize God's mercy not only as a source of strength, but also as a treasure. It seems contradictory, but being poor means finding a treasure. Even when we are weary, we can offer him our hearts burdened by sin and weakness; at those times when we feel most helpless, we can reach out to Christ, "who made himself poor in order that we might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

This fundamental need of ours to be forgiven and healed is itself a form of poverty which we must never lose sight of, no matter how many advances we

make in virtue. It should also find concrete expression in your lifestyle, both as individuals and as communities. I think in particular of the need to avoid all those things which can distract you and cause bewilderment and scandal to others.

In the consecrated life, poverty is both a "wall" and a "mother." It is a "wall" because it protects the consecrated life, a "mother" because it helps it to grow and guides it along the right path. The hypocrisy of those consecrated men and women who profess vows of poverty, yet live like the rich, wounds the souls of the faithful and harms the Church. Think, too, of how dangerous a temptation it is to adopt a purely functional, worldly mentality which leads to placing our hope in human means alone and destroys the witness of poverty which our Lord Jesus Christ lived and taught us. Here I wish to thank your presidents, because both of them have rightly mentioned the threat that globalization and consumerism pose to religious poverty. Thank you.

Dear brothers and sisters, with great humility, do all that you can to show that the consecrated life is a precious gift to the Church and to the world. Do not keep it to yourselves; share it, bringing Christ to every corner of this beloved country. Let your joy continue to find expression in your efforts to attract and nurture vocations, and recognize that all of you have some part in forming the consecrated men and women of tomorrow. Whether

you are given more to contemplation or to the apostolic life, be zealous in your love of the Church in Korea and your desire to contribute, through your own specific charism, to its mission of proclaiming the Gospel and building up God's people in unity, holiness and love.

I commend all of you to the loving care of Mary, Mother of the Church, and in a particular way I offer a heartfelt greeting to the aged and infirm members of your communities. And I cordially give you my blessing: May Almighty God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, bless you all.

## What are religious communities doing for Year of Consecrated life?

*HORIZON asked this question of members of the National Religious Vocation Conference, and the responses we received show the creativity and variety at the heart of this way of life. Here is a snapshot of the kinds of things that will be happening around the United States.*

Our community and several others are planning a **diocesan wide conference** called: "Wake up the World! The Joy of Consecrated Life." We will have an evening just for those in consecrated life, a day for junior high and high school students, and a day for everyone else. Father Stan Fortuna and others will be our speakers and entertainers. We are very excited about it!

*Sister Sarah Roy, O.S.F., West Peoria, IL*

Communities in NRVC's Region 8 (Minnesota and the Dakotas) are making **four-minute videos** about themselves to post on YouTube. These will be released systematically, one every few weeks, beginning in October 2014. Each will showcase an aspect of community life. My community is doing one on our charism; others will create videos about prayer, community life, etc.

As a region we are also writing to each bishop, pastor, and church leader to express our love for religious life and the church. We want to communicate our desire to work with them to strengthen the faith, promote vocations, and develop a broader vocation culture.

*Sister Adrienne Kaufmann, O.S.B., Watertown, SD*

We will join students at Rosemont College, which we sponsor, on November 21 in their pre-Thanksgiving **service project**. This will be followed by a prayer together to open the Year of Consecrated Life.

Our vocation director will make weekly posts on our Facebook page according to the liturgical seasons

and the five themes presented in the "Moving Forward in Hope" workshops. She'll draw from Scripture, *The Joy of the Gospel*, and writings of our foundress, Cornelia Connelly; she has also asked some of our sisters to write substantive **short reflections** on the five themes. These will be posted both on our website and Facebook.

We are looking for every way to link our celebration with other province events, such as our chapter preparation, our jubilee celebration, and our efforts to reduce global warming. We'll also participate in diocesan events in the various locations where we have sisters

*Sister Mary Ann Buckley, S.H.C.J., Rosemont, PA*

We are collaborating to spark a renewal of spirit among our sisters as well as among those with whom we minister. So we are distributing **care packages** to each of our convents. Each package will contain a personal letter written by some sisters and young women from the University of Notre Dame (where I minister). These are meant to encourage a renewed fidelity and gratitude for vocation. There will be some table tents for discussion at meals so as to spark conversation in order to learn more about each Sister's story; we'll have monthly prayer services, favorite recreations and games, etc.

Our hope is that we come to grow in our love for God and others.

*Sister Mary Jane Hahner C.S.F.N., South Bend, IN*

The Toronto Area Vocation Directors Association is planning a **Taizé prayer service, adoration, and social** the evening of November 21. The Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Canada is also planning events starting with an opening prayer service in November or December.

*Sister Rosemary Fry, C.S.J., Toronto*

We'll **read and discuss "The Joy of the Gospel"** by Pope Francis. We'll also pray for an increase of vocations, attend workshops or conferences provided by the NRVC, and attend the annual consecrated day provided by the Archdiocese of Chicago. If the opportunity arises, we will invite young people to pray with us.

*Sister Bridget Zanin, M.S.C., Des Plaines, IL*

The Dominican Sisters of Peace annually choose a topic for common study and provide a packet of study materials for our sisters and associates. During this special year, our primary **study focus will be consecrated life**.

The study packet we are creating will contain relevant articles, books, movies, and study questions. We hope

these materials will bring us to a deeper understanding of our unique Dominican vocation in the church and give us a better grasp of who we are called to be for God's people in this 21st century.

We hope also to show joy and kindness to the people we meet every day and to take every opportunity to talk about what our vocation means to us—speaking to young people, parents, grandparents, relatives, friends, and co-workers.

We want to take part in anything that the diocese and parishes do to celebrate the Year of Consecrated Life. When we meet a woman whom we think may have a vocation, we'll invite her to pray with us and perhaps have a meal with our sisters and connect her to one of our vocation ministers. Finally, we'll be praying that God sends laborers into the vineyard!

*Sister Pat Twohill, O.P., New Haven, CT*

My hope for the Year of Consecrated Life is to bring many religious and other consecrated men and women together for a **pilgrimage to Walsingham**—England's National Shrine to Our Lady. I don't know if this hope will be realized—I am only a junior sister in a small community—but I would love for it to happen! I am sure that if we came together in prayer to seek Our Lady's blessing, we would see a wonderful renewal of consecrated life in England and beyond.

*Sister Theresa Weight, Walsingham, England*

Our community's plan for the Year of Consecrated life includes **distributing a copy of "Rejoice"** to each member for prayerful reading, reflection, and discussion during our monthly community sharing. We will also be posting vocation stories of our sisters in the archdiocesan newsletter and in our own vocation newsletter.

*Sister Sandy Nguyen, F.M.S.R., New Orleans, LA*

One of our thoughts regarding the Year of Consecrated Life is to create a **postcard-sized handout**. One side will describe who the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers are and what is sought in a candidate to the life of a Christian Brother. The other side will have a brief description of our formation program."

We intend to distribute this material to all our schools and ministry sites in the U.S. and Canada. Our recent general chapter calls all of the Edmund Rice

Christian Brothers to "welcome as companions all inspired by the charism of Blessed Edmund Rice," and "to seek and welcome new members to the vowed life as Christian Brothers."

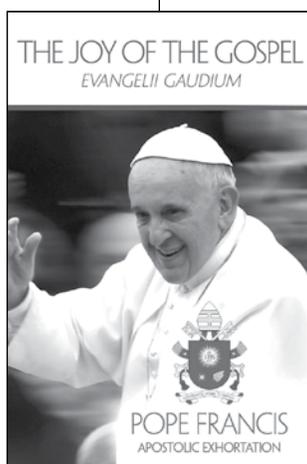
*Brother James McDonald, C.F.C., Chicago*

We plan to have **special liturgies** with our Boards and Oblates during the year. As a community we will have special DVDs and resources for discussion on our appreciation of consecrated life. We hope to participate in all the diocesan events to celebrate consecrated life. I am also hosting and working with three other communities in town on a life choices event once a month for young adults called Samuel Evenings.

*Sister Marietta Schindler, O.S.B. Mount Angel, OR*

In Canada the National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors (NAVFD) will sponsor **webinars** on religious life themes. We'll be setting up a **Facebook** page for congregations to post their initiatives for the year. Also, as a follow-up to the year, NAVFD will offer a **retreat** for priests and religious at three locations across Canada based on the objectives for the year, which are to make a grateful remembrance of the recent past, to live the present with passion, and to embrace the future with hope. Our two retreat themes will be to renew the vision of religious life today, and our call to celebrate life.

*Sister Nancy Sullivan, C.S.J. of National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors (Canada), Toronto*



In anticipation of the Year of Consecrated Life, a local historical site, Clayton House, hosted an event honoring the Benedictine Sisters for 135 years of ministry in the Arkansas and Fort Smith region. It was an **hour-long program** featuring the history and talents of the sisters.

*Sister Kimberly Rose Prohaska, O.S.B. Fort Smith, AR*

We are considering a **Street Fair for Religious Life** as a project in a Fairchester, New York parish where some of our sisters are involved. This would include religious life themed games of chance with prizes of a religious nature; perhaps some R.S.C.J. memorabilia: T-shirts, etc. Our local school alumni and parishioners would be invited. We'd have food, religious life material, etc.

*Sister Mary Pat White, R.S.C.J., New Orleans* ■

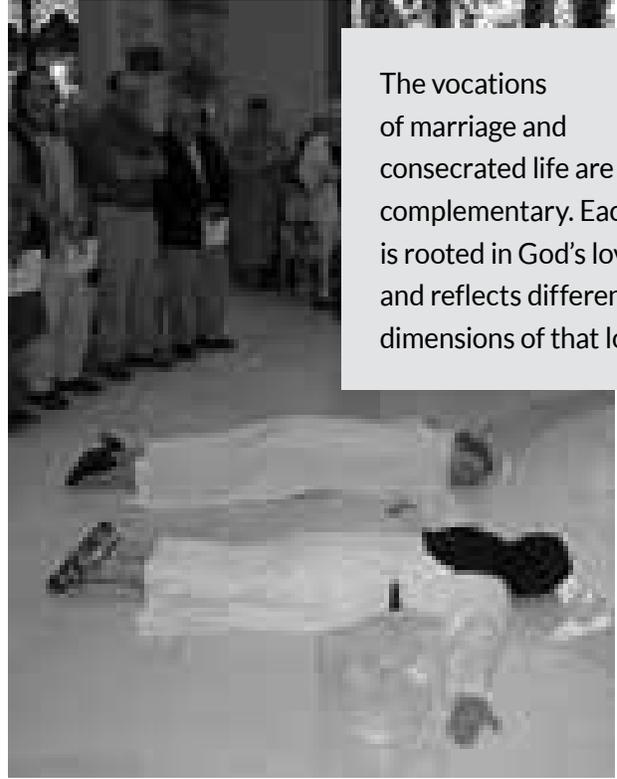


PHOTO: ADRIAN DOMINICANS

The vocations of marriage and consecrated life are complementary. Each is rooted in God's love and reflects different dimensions of that love.

Married love is rooted in the soil of "God's particular love." Consecrated love is rooted in the soil of "God's universal love." Both are valid, both life-giving when the vocation is genuine and lived with commitment and joy.

# Same God, different ways to love

*Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything. —Father Pedro Arrupe, S.J. former Jesuit Superior General*

Every Christian vocation is a call to love, a response to the One who is love. This is clearly so in the case of marriage, which St. Paul sees as sacramental of the love of Christ for the church (Eph. 5.32). But what about religious who take the vow of chastity? If that is not also a sign of God's love, then it is a waste of time or worse. How do these vocations complement each other?

## An extension of God's love

God's love is particular and universal. God does not love humanity in

BY FATHER TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE, O.P.

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general, but each of us individually. The Lord loved David (I Kgs. 3:6). Jesus looked at the rich young man and loved him (Mk. 10:21). He saw silly little Zacchaeus up the tree, despised by everyone, and changed all his plans so that he could dine with him. He spotted the poor widow putting her tiny bit of money in the temple treasury and cherished her. God delights in each of us individually, otherwise we would not exist.

But God's love is also universal, all-encompassing. Everything only exists because it is sustained in being by

this limitless love: "For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned" (Wisdom 11:24). In God, this love, particular and universal, is one. But this is not so for us. We are complex beings who slowly, and

Every time we cherish someone, the veil of blindness is lifted and we see the delight that God has in each of us.

sometimes painfully, edge towards the utter simplicity of God. My thesis is that the love of the married couple is a sign of God's particular love, but that through the grace of God, this love is called to open itself towards universality. The vocation of the religious is a sort of mirror image of that married love. It is a sign of the universality of God's love, but this love undergoes its own transformation as we learn to love in particular.

Each way of loving reaches out to the same mystery, the utter simplicity of God's love, particular and universal. But each vocation is rooted in the soil in which it can flourish. Some plants flourish in an acidic soil. Heathers and azaleas need this sour soil to do their best. But boxelders and hackberries love alkaline soil. In the same way, some people flourish by being rooted in the soil of God's particular love, and others do best in the soil of God's universal love, but we all reach out for that plenitude of love, which is God in whom all vocations converge.

How do we know which is our vocation? It is often difficult since we all long now for the full mystery of God. Dorothy Day said: "You will know your vocation by the joy it brings you." (as quoted by Patrick Jordan in *Not Less Than Everything: Catholics Writers on Heroes of Conscience, From Joan of Arc to Oscar Romero*).

Whichever vocation we ultimately decide is the way that the Lord calls us, it is because here we sense the deeper joy. Neither is inherently better than the other, only better for us. Neither should be chosen with gritted teeth.

## Marriage expands one's heart

Let's look at each vocation. Last year I presided at the marriage of one of my many nephews. In the mutual delight of bride and bridegroom, I could see a sign of God's delight in each of us. Josef Pieper said that when we love deeply we want to say: "It is wonderful that you exist."

Every time we cherish someone, the veil of blindness is lifted and we see the delight that God has in each of us. But that intense love, passionate at least in its early days, must be pried open towards the spacious love that is God. If not, there is a danger that it will grow inverted and sour. This usually begins with the arrival of children. Husbands can be disconcerted to discover that they are no longer the overriding focus of their wives' love. The mutuality of their love is called to become Trinitarian, summoned beyond introversion so that there is the space for a third. This is but the beginning. It is often said that "An Englishman's home is his castle." But a Christian home has open doors, welcoming in friends and strangers.

I have never been married, but I have the impression that the birth pangs of married love often are about how to remain rooted in the soil of that love for another, faithful to that commitment, while expanding one's heart in response to others. This is what Aquinas calls *latitudo cordis*, the stretching open of the heart. The temptation in this process is to just fall in love with someone else, rather than learn to love others precisely as someone who is already married.

Aquinas wrote, with his usual wisdom, that "in love the two become one but remain distinct." In spousal love we are wedded to another person, one flesh and bone. And yet we must resist gobbling up the other person, and abolishing all distance. Father Herbert McCabe O.P. wrote: "What gives us elbow room, what gives us space to grow and become ourselves, is the love that comes to us from another. Love is the space in which to expand, and it is always a gift. . . . To give love is to give the precious gift of nothing, space. To give love is to let be."<sup>1</sup> (as quoted in *God Matters*).

The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, that in a good marriage, we are each the guardian of the other's solitude. So the married love is the soil, the *terra firma* of married love—as the couple, together and alone, aspire towards the mystery of God's love, which is spacious and boundless.

## Religious life: nurtured in universal love

If our vocation is to religious life or the priesthood (with the present discipline of the Latin Church), then we have

to make a journey which is a sort of mirror image of that of our married brothers and sisters. This will also be so for single lay people who feel called to embody that spacious love, such as Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities.

We flourish by being planted in the soil of God's universal love. In our religious communities we shall be called to love people whom we would never have chosen. When we make our vows, we promise to give our love to people who are not yet born and with whom we may well disagree profoundly. Our mission will be to reach out to those who are often difficult to love, hurt and wounded people whose attractiveness may be hidden at first sight. We must embody God's love for the apparently unlovable.

I attended a meeting of young Dominicans, brothers and sisters, in Angola during the civil war. The country was falling apart. The question was raised as to whether each should not return to their own families to care for them in this time of crisis. One young sister startled us all by saying: "Leave the dead to bury the dead. We are sent to preach the gospel." For an African, deeply rooted in her family and ethnic identity, this was an extraordinarily brave decision to opt for God's spacious love, beyond the ties of particularity.

Diocesan priests are called to build parishes that embody a similar openness. Of course parishes tend to become the homes of particular sorts of people, people with whom the parish priest identifies. There are traditionalist parishes and progressive parishes; Polish parishes and Irish parishes; parishes where the Mass is in Latin and others where there are guitars and folk music; parishes which draw young families, and parishes which attract the old. But ideally every parish should be a home for anyone, because God's love holds everyone in being. Indeed the word "parish" comes from a Greek word which means "visiting alien," "stranger." By definition, it is a home for every stranger.

So we religious are planted in the soil of God's spacious, wide love. But unless we learn to love particular people, then our love may become cold and empty. St. Aelred, the 12th century Abbot of Rievaulx, warned religious against "a love that in addressing itself to all, reaches no one." W. H. Auden joked: "We are here on earth to do good to others. What the others are here for, I don't know." In the past religious were often warned against "particular friendships." That was never the tradition of the English Dominican Province, at least in the last hundred years. When I joined, one of the brethren always asserted that he was more afraid of

PHOTO: MAZUR, CATHOLIC CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND WALES



When a woman or man takes final vows, it is a commitment to follow a particular way of loving, a promise to give love in community to people who are not yet even born. Pictured here is Sister Camilla Oberding of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham at her final profession.

"particular enmities" than particular friendships!

Bede Jarrett, elected English Provincial in 1916, received a letter from a young Benedictine novice, Hubert van Zeller, who thought that he must leave religious life because he had fallen in love with someone called P. But Bede disagreed vigorously: "I am glad [that you have fallen in love with P] because I think your temptation has always been towards Puritanism, a narrowness, a certain inhumanity... You were in love with the Lord but not properly in love with the Incarnation. I believe P. will save your life. I shall say a Mass in thanksgiving for what P. has been, and done, to you. You have needed P for a long time. Aunts are no outlet. Nor are stout and elderly Provincials."

But how do we religious and priests open ourselves to love people in particular, often deeply, without subverting our vocation, giving it up to go and join ourselves to another? I first encountered this challenge when I fell deeply in love with a woman not long after I had made solemn profession and been ordained a priest.



PHOTO: MAZUR, CATHOLIC CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND WALES

Being a priest is a call to God's universal love. In a parish setting, this means opening the parish to all, especially "strangers" and "aliens."

I had just made my vows *usque ad mortem*, until death, and yet here was someone with whom I could have been married and who loved me too. It was a wonderful and terrible time and a challenge for which I am ultimately grateful.

I have now come to understand, slowly and painfully, stumbling and being picked up by the grace of God, that this love was not in contradiction with my vocation as a religious. It was the opening up of that vocation to God's spacious love. But little by little I grasped that I can only love another as the person that I am, and that is as a religious and a priest. A vocation is not just a commitment. It is a call to be, to flourish. And I can only flourish planted in the soil of this vow. Otherwise I shall be like a rhododendron mistakenly thinking that it is a carrot!

## We must see others differently

When I fell in love that first time, at least I knew one thing: that I could only avoid a "double life" if my brethren and this woman knew each other. The brothers were a fundamental part of my identity, and this woman and I could not love each other truly unless she grasped that these friars were flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. And they could only support and love me if they had some inkling of her importance to me.

Secondly, I had to learn to look at her—and the other people whom I came to love in different ways—un-possessively. Husbands and wives must learn to give each

other space. Even more radically, the love of someone vowed to chastity must not claim ownership in any way. We must learn to see the other as a subject, not an object, and be the guardians of their freedom, even from ourselves! The terrible temptation of religious and priests is to fall into relationships in which we make other people dependent on us. And then when the relationship threatens our vows, we make a sudden break, leaving the other person puzzled, wounded and desolate.

We choose how we see people. In his book, *Aquinas*, Father Brian Davies, O.P. wrote: "For Aquinas, people have freedom of choice since they can interpret the world in different ways and act in the light of the ways in which they interpret it." We can see the world with greedy eyes, or with eyes that delight without taking possession. Herbert McCabe gave up smoking because he found that he looked at everyone who came into the room as a possible source of cigarettes. As the saying goes, "To a pickpocket, the whole world is a pocket." So we need to train our eyes to see people with reverence and delight. For religious, this is part of our vow of poverty. Supremely we renounce possession of anyone.

The most difficult challenge of all, and I have struggled with this, is to so love the other person that he or she is free to love someone else even more than us. The consummation of our love, as it were, may be in supporting them as they find another to whom they can give themselves forever. For example, we can only really love a married person if our love will strengthen their

marriage and not undermine it. This is a sharing in God's love, which impels married people to love each other deeply, usually more deeply than they love God. But God is not jealous since God is the love which binds them to each other.

## Opening up to a more spacious love

So then, marriage and consecrated life are two vocations which are complementary, each planted in its own soil and each aspiring to the full pleroma of God's love, which is beyond understanding. The maturing of each vocation will probably involve us passing through moments of crisis. In such turbulent times, we may think that we have made the wrong choice: I should have married Mary rather than Jane; I should never have made solemn profession or been ordained a priest since I was really made for marriage; my life is marred by a terrible mistake.

This may sometimes be true, but far more often a crisis is just part of painful flowering of our vocation, whereby our particular love opens itself to a more spacious affection, or our religious vow of chastity matures into an honest loving of particular people.

The Lord says: I will take out your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. Spiritual heart surgery is usually rather more painful and prolonged than the physical version. It may involve living through some sort of affective crisis, often falling in love and being deeply discombobulated! Becoming human is only achieved through crises: there is the wrenching crisis of birth, leaving the warm Jacuzzi of the mother's womb, a physical intimacy that we can never recapture, so that we see each other's faces with astonishment. There is the crisis of giving up the mother's breast, so that we can sit down at table with each other and talk. There is the crisis of puberty, of spots and emotional confusion, hormones dashing all over the place, as one becomes capable of an adult love. There is the trauma of leaving home, whether to marry or go to a seminary or whatever. Finally there is the biggest crisis of all, death.

You cannot become a loving adult without going through a series of turbulent crises. And so it usually is with us religious too. Affective and emotional crisis is, for most all of us, part of the journey. It is not a sign that one does not have a vocation after all. Rather the reverse. When I had been going on about this once, my American brethren gave me a T-shirt with the motto: "Have a good crisis!"

For Christians, the great crisis is the Last Supper. Everything was falling apart. The disciples were getting



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ready to flee. They did not understand what was happening. Death was imminent. In this most profound of all crises, Jesus took the bread and the wine, blessed them and made them the gift of his body and blood, the new covenant, his blood poured out for the salvation of all. This is the sacrament of a love truly for each of us and for all of us. When we are living through a moment of crisis, then let us place it on the altar at the offertory, confident that with the Lord's grace and in the Lord's own good time, it will be fruitful. Even our mistakes and failures may be steps on the path towards that love which is God, and so we do not need to be afraid.

So both the vocation to marry and the vocation to be a vowed religious are signs of that love which is beyond all words. Every vocation is, whether it is that of a doctor, a nurse, a teacher or an artist. All these speak of the love of God which is caring, instructive, healing and creative. But these two—marriage and religious life--do so by aligning us towards a single truth from different angles, by an act of triangulation as it were. They direct our imagination towards a love which is utterly particular and boundlessly universal. There is no competition. The married and the religious help each other on the way. ■



Every member of every religious community begins that life deeply shaped by his or her family upbringing.

Patterns for relating to others are learned primarily in the family. As candidates begin living communal life, they can find traces of their relationship skills buried in the ways that their own families dealt with decision-making, conflict, meal-time rituals, etc.

BY SISTER MARY ELLEN MOORE, S.H.



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for religious and laity. She has also worked in formation and administration for her own congregation. Currently she serves on the formation committee and is the director of training for doctoral students at "The Circle," a resource center for underserved women.

# The profound effect of families on vocations

**A**NY REFLECTION on how our families affect those of us beginning or already in religious life today should begin with a look at the lives of contemporary members. The following vignettes serve as a backdrop for examining the ways our families shape us and influence our success or difficulty in living community life.

## Father John

There was hardly a dry eye in the church. Young, old, men, women, young adults, the faithful, the not-so fervent, all 800-plus had crammed themselves into the small nave. They had come to bid farewell to someone they loved. He had touched their lives. They knew Father John was a priest, and some might even have known he belonged to a religious congregation as well. However, what they valued was that he was present to them in difficult moments of their lives when they needed understanding, attention, or support. John had the capacity to make the love and compassion of God concrete in simple, ordinary ways in the midst of daily life.

The members of his community appreciated and respected him. He

was special in the fact that he was so simple and ordinary. He did his share, did his job, listened to others, enjoyed the community jokes and stories.

John came from a typical 1950s Catholic family. Both his parents were Catholic, went to church regularly, prayed together often, and talked about God, church and Christian life once in a while. He and his siblings went to Catholic school, learned their catechism, received the sacraments, and grew up in the highly Catholic sub-culture that was common in the pre-Vatican II era. The family had its problems; it was not faultless, but the children knew they were loved by God and by family members.

In recalling the most memorable moments of his vocational development in his family, John often talked about his first “spiritual director”—his grandmother who helped care for the children in the family. He loved when she did the ironing. He would sit opposite her and ask: What was God really like? Why did Catholics do this or that? Was there really a hell? What did one have to do to get to be a saint?

## Sister Catherine

The Chapter Room broke into applause. Catherine had just been elected superior general of her congregation. It was obvious that the chapter delegates were pleased. They appreciated her wisdom, admired her ability to lead, and were confident that she was the person to whom they would entrust the leadership of their congregation for the next several years.

Of course she had faults. They had known her for many years. They had lived together, shared ministries and community projects. They knew her to be a little shy, somewhat reticent to say what she really thought. Yet they also knew that when the issues were important, Catherine could be clear-sighted, articulate and surprisingly fearless. True, she doubted herself on occasion, but this led her to seek consultation frequently. This quality they appreciated in congregational leadership.

They knew her to be a woman of prayer and courage, sensitive, practical, and forgiving. What they did not know, nor could they ever really have guessed, was that Catherine had been sexually molested by her uncle. She was a young adolescent at the time and her mother had been in the hospital for a prolonged period. In fact, because of the abuse, Catherine herself had wondered if she could really be a good sister.

Catherine could not bring herself to tell her mother



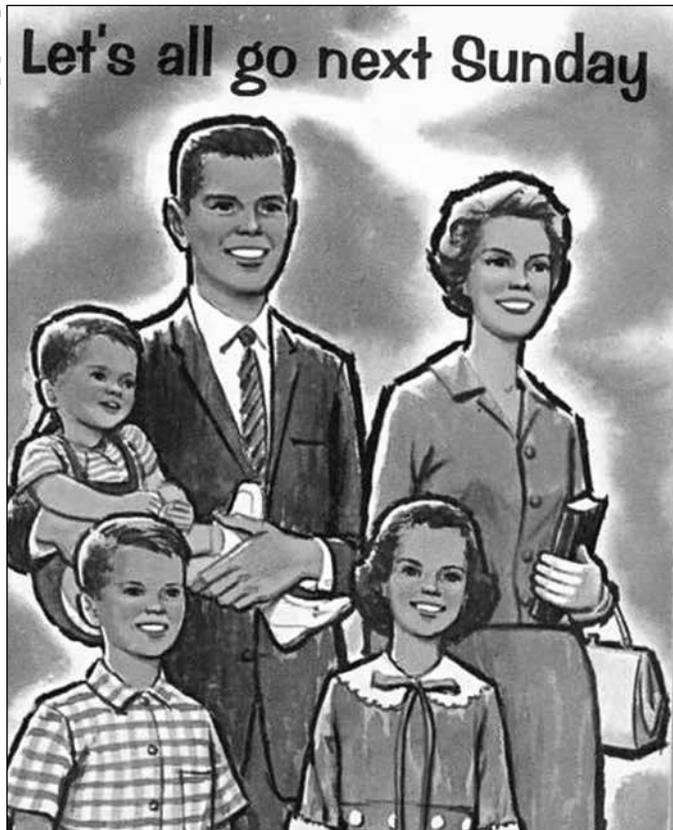
If our families encourage active engagement with the faith—through prayer, devotions, and the Eucharist—we can be formed as Catholics from an early age. That said, it is also true that vocations have come from every type of family, devout and not-so devout.

about this event. However, years later, in spiritual direction and psychotherapy, she was able to confide this embarrassing experience to compassionate and skilled professionals and gain some perspective.

## Sister Joan

A group of general council members gathered together to send one of their younger members, Joan, halfway across the world to India to found a new mission there. She would be the first member to live and work in India and to begin inviting young Indian women to join them.

As a nurse practitioner, she would set up a clinic with another sister of their congregation in the outskirts of Kolkata. They were already in touch with the professionals as well as young women volunteers who would help them in the clinic. Perhaps, as their work and service became known, some young Indian women would join them. The general council trusted this young sister who seemed to have a gift for healing both body and spirit. They knew life in India would be incredibly difficult, and the hours of work would be stressful. Although Joan might become overwhelmed, they felt that her love for people and her gentle spirit, along with her faith-filled prayer life, would bring success



This 1960s drawing of a family going to church seems almost humorous today because the family appears so sanitized. The old approach of seeking out people from “good Catholic families” may be a start, but no one family formula “produces” vocations.

to this new mission. She had the solid relationship skills necessary for a demanding ministry and a challenging community setting.

It was fairly well known that Joan’s mother had been an alcoholic for most of Joan’s childhood and adolescence. Because of this, the community had initially questioned the advisability of accepting Joan into their congregation. The vocation and formation directors did not know what impact this would have on Joan’s ability for community relationships. However Joan’s aunt had often stepped into the family situation, acting as both aunt and mother. She had served as a role model of strength and as a caring, stable presence. While Joan had struggled with her mother’s alcoholism, she had learned a concrete, creative resilience from her aunt.

## Family and the 21st century vocation

Our stories could go on and on. Women and men religious have found their way to their religious congregations with the support of some of the strongest and most loving families and in spite of some of the

weakest, most dysfunctional families. There is no cookie-cutter family pattern that produces healthy religious men and women.

Nonetheless it is important to know that family of origin issues matter greatly in the unfolding of one’s capacity for community life. It is of the utmost importance that we understand that our adult vocational challenges are profoundly shaped by our family histories. We all, every last one of us, come to adulthood and religious community (and every other form of vocational commitment) in need of a little editing, if not a good rewrite at times, despite the best intentions of our parents and siblings and our own deepest strivings.

The paradoxes of family background and adult vocation add complexity and confusion to any neat analysis we would try to make too quickly. We have saints whose parents scorned belief, fervent families whose children rarely, if ever, set foot inside a church, wealthy families whose sons and daughters renounced all and chose to live among and with the poor. We have religious from simple, uneducated families whose lack of privilege gave birth to and encouraged the development of scholars and university presidents. The truth is, we don’t know of any single, neat formula that explains what really helps shape the values and lifestyle choices of the children in a family.

Family is the basic structure that human beings have to prepare them for engagement in the world beyond the family. Ideally our family opens us to school, encourages us to negotiate the world of friends, supports our efforts at achievement and mastery outside the home, and lays the foundations for marriage, partnership, single, or community life.

## Richness of the family contribution

So what can a family contribute to forming adults with skills for community life in a religious congregation today? Are there any red flags?

We could devise a long laundry list of what vital Christian families might contribute to the development of an ideal person for community life. The focus might be narrowed to a few basic elements: the family as the center of faith development, the family as the rough draft of relationship skills, the family as the initial creator of one’s future world view, and the family as the place where fundamental attitudes toward life are transmitted.

Numerous studies have indicated that our sense of God is related to our sense of the parental atmosphere in our home. Spiritual directors can attest to the fact

## WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT WORKING WITH A PSYCHOLOGIST

### **Do you recommend a psychological evaluation of applicants regardless of whether there seems to have been any major dysfunction?**

Yes, at Claret Center where I work, we recommend psychological screening for all candidates. Psychological screening is not just to rule out serious pathology but also to indicate strengths and vulnerabilities for the candidate and the future congregation. It is a tool of self-awareness for the candidate and a companion to formation.

### **Should the vocation director inform the psychologist about family issues that arise during discernment conversations?**

The vocation director does not need to supply the psychologist with any details because a good assessment should include both testing and an interview that explores the experience of family history and its impact on development. A psychologist who knows the relational and ministerial demands of the congregation is a valuable asset.

### **Should vocation directors sometimes encourage counseling before entrance? Or should this kind of referral be handled by the psychologist doing the evaluation?**

This is a rather complex question. Different congregations like to handle this differently. The vocation director can always suggest counseling to a candidate, and the response of the candidate may be indicative of openness to participate in a formation program. However, there is always the question of finances. Who will pay for the counseling? Many candidates do not have the money to pay for any in-depth counseling before they come to a congregation. The psychologist can always suggest therapy to the prospective candidate, and the individual is always free to follow this suggestion or not. Most often, the suggestion has more weight if it comes from the congregation.

However, this also raises the question of the

place of psychotherapy in the formation program. Some congregations are convinced that therapy should not take place during pre-novitiate, novitiate, or sometimes even temporary profession. Others have the financial resources to support the formation program in this way and view psychotherapy as a helpful tool in the ongoing development of a community member. For these congregations therapy is a good investment to support the psychological and spiritual development of the future members of their congregation. For most congregations, the age-old antithesis and competition between psychotherapy and spirituality has given way to an appreciation of how each discipline/experience helps the other. Most often we are forming persons for ministry in which the individual herself or himself will be a key tool in the ministerial situation. Greater psychological and spiritual maturity will be a hallmark of effective ministers and loving community members.

Lastly there is an ethical question to be considered if the candidate or the congregation comes to a decision that it is better for the candidate not to continue in formation. Often this means that the congregation will no longer continue to pay for therapy, perhaps at a time when the candidate is in a very vulnerable stage of transition and needs the support of a therapist the most. These issues need to be discussed by vocation, formation, and leadership persons in view of the resources of the congregation and the moral responsibility toward those who are asked to leave.

### **How can a vocation director know that a person who has dealt with family issues of trauma or severe dysfunction is healthy enough to handle formation and community life?**

Psychologists and vocation directors do not have a crystal ball. The test of any vocation is the lived experience in community over time. The individual and the congregation discover together whether this vocation is life-giving or toxic. This is where the ultimate discernment of vocation takes place. ■

that images of God can be related to how authority was perceived and experienced in the family. The creative faith dimension in our families strengthens a child's sense of being loved and appreciated, even though mistakes are made. God's enduring care and forgiveness is experienced because parents can demonstrate an abiding care, appreciation, and forgiveness in daily life. One is encouraged and supported in learning how to make good choices as well as how to tolerate mistakes, let go of them, and move on. In our Catholic context,

strong, healthy adult families witness to a faith that nurtures and supports the daily lives of the adults and children in the family.

A family with healthy faith prays together, and faith is experienced as personally meaningful, life-giving, and challenging to the members of the family. Faith is not used to shame children into submission or good behavior. Faith life is both talked about and implicit in the way the adults interact with one another and with the children. Ideally, faith life, while rooted in tradition, is

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not static. It grows and deepens over the years and often changes in expression as time passes.

The family is the first place we explore relationships. We are cared for, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. As young children our needs are a priority for our parents who are themselves learning how to balance the ratio between giving to us while responding to their own needs individually and as a couple. Often we have siblings who are also in the process of learning to receive and give and share.

Thus families are also our first experiences of conflict. We know that what is explicitly taught at home is very important. We also know and have less control over the importance of what is implicitly communicated to one another in our family. Fundamentally we trust that we learn in our families that we are loved, cared about, and appreciated. In a lengthy study of committed lives, Margaret Witty found that each of her subjects had “received exceptional love and care from parents or members of the extended family.”

As much as we all receive good things from our fam-

ilies, we also experience some form of deprivation. We are loved and cared about, but we are also overlooked, ignored, misunderstood, and hurt. Our adult vocations are shaped as much by what we have received as by what we have not received. In some ways what we have missed propels us out into the wider horizons of our world to fill the gaps. In the vocation stories of Father John, Sister Catherine, and Sister Joan, it was mentioned that Joan found support in her aunt in the face of her mom’s alcoholism. Her aunt was there to listen, to encourage, and to help her deal with a reality that could easily have overwhelmed her.

Therefore family is the place where we can begin to learn how to accommodate this tension between what we have been given and what we have missed. Indeed there is a delicate balance in how we live our Christian community vocation in this world both as laity and religious. The prayer of St. Ignatius, “Lord, teach me to be generous, ... to give and not to count the cost,” articulates the generosity of the Christian vocation that is born in family giftedness and deprivation. Father Howard Gray, S.J. once acknowledged that we are not born compassionate people, but compassion is hammered into us by our own suffering, and often this suffering takes place in the context of our own family relationships. We are loved and neglected, cherished and forgotten, appreciated and taken for granted, valued and overlooked.

## Formation begins at home

Twenty-first century American families are probably some of the most sophisticated families on the planet. Many of us are aware of the abundance of material, intellectual and psychological as well as spiritual gifts that are packaged in our cultural experience. At the same time we are witness to almost every form of inequality and violence on a daily basis. It is not uncommon that electronic media alert us to violence, crime, and injustice on corporate and individual levels in a matter of seconds. We also see wealth and privilege beyond what most of us will ever experience personally in our lifetimes. Our families are our first formation programs, our laboratories, if you will, of how each one of us will think about the grand scheme of privilege and deprivation in our world. Our parents’ judgments form a setting for the development of our implicit evaluations. Church leaders, educational institutions, the media, and significant peers will challenge or develop and expand these beginning judgments, but the family lays the foundation.

Thus the ideal family is also the place where we learn not only how to think about privilege and deprivation but also that we can do our part to create justice and peace in our world. Parents can model that we are not just passive recipients of a world the way it is but that we can and want to do some small piece to contribute to the future of a more just world.

It is in this context that the family can make one of its strongest contributions to the development of individuals capable of commitment in community. Parents can learn to transmit to their children attitudes of openness and learning because they themselves desire to be open to learning and changing. Today's parents enjoy the opportunity for spiritual direction, individual and couples psychotherapy, group experiences, couples retreats, and experiences such as Marriage Encounter. An abundance of resources are available to help adults become better family leaders.

A core value transmitted in a growth-oriented family is one of humility. It is not shameful to be in need of help or to need to change something in ourselves or in our way of being in this world. We need families committed to "doing their own inner work" to become freer, more loving and more deeply committed individuals and couples. As couples and as leaders in their family, parents ideally are serious and work hard, and they know how to relax and play. They are comfortable with their sexuality and are willing to learn how to communicate about sexuality with their children. They are willing to learn how to participate in difficult conversations. They find ways to talk about what matters most. They are also willing to admit that they too, can make mistakes.

Parents who attend to their own inner life, as well as to the needs of the outside world and community around them, model a capacity for growth in love. This can be a strong base for the development of a commitment to religious life in community, as well as a great model for future partnership in marriage.

## Discernment in light of family background

The vocation director responds to the interest of men and women to discern religious life whether or not those who come to them are good candidates for the life. This discernment is not easy. As has already been said, one's family background is of critical consideration in the development of one's vocational story. There are stronger and weaker families, those exposed to trauma, and those who have overcome huge obstacles in the course

of their history. Sometimes the trauma leaves too many scars, and it is almost impossible for an individual from this particular family to find happiness and meaning in a religious community.

It is no longer a question of whether one comes from a "good Catholic family" but more a question of whether or not the candidate and the vocation director begin to understand just how a particular family reality has impacted this candidate's development: relationally, spiritually, and psychologically. This understanding requires transparency on the part of the candidate and openness on the part of the vocation director.

Candidates will probably not be able to articulate all the implications of their individual story, especially when they first begin to explore religious life. Implications have a way of gradually revealing themselves over the course of several years. However, the candidate needs to be able to demonstrate a non-defensive attitude and a willingness to explore the strengths and vulnerabilities he or she brings to the group.

In some way, most families carry remnants of heavy burdens and fragments of shameful secrets. These realities in and of themselves are not necessarily an indication that one does not belong in community. Families also pass on attitudes, values, and strengths that can sustain individuals in their formation as religious in community. Vocation directors know that community situations will evoke family vulnerabilities in some form in the context of adult community life. The deciding discernment for the candidate and the congregation is to discover together that these experiences can open a person to learn to deal with vulnerabilities differently, move beyond them, and grow in love. ■

### NRVC to study families of newer religious

To learn whether there are common characteristics in families of Catholic sisters, brothers, and priests, the National Religious Vocation Conference will begin a study of families and vocations in 2015. The study will examine ways that families might support and encourage religious life and diocesan priesthood. This research will be conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). It will be released to coincide with the Eighth World Meeting of Families to be held in Philadelphia in 2015.

The research will include:

- a survey of parents of religious and clergy,
- a survey of a random sampling of Catholic parents,
- focus groups of survey participants in two to three regions of the country.

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Parents frequently have concerns when an adult child enters formation. What gives them pause; what do they celebrate?

Mick and Nikki Combs (center) attend the ordination of their son, Timothy Combs, O.P. (in white), who was ordained in September 2014.

## Parents have fears, too

**M**OTHERS AND FATHERS come in every flavor imaginable. In the case of eight parents who were willing to share with HORIZON their experience of having an adult child choose religious life, a few similarities emerged among the eight.

They love their children deeply. Most are very active Catholics. Even so, most said they didn't "get" religious life, and those who had some concept of it were concerned their children might be unhappy or regretful, living entirely with people old enough to be their grandparents. More than anything else, parents resisted the separation from their adult children, either real or imagined. All of them have by now made their peace with their children's new life, and they are uniformly proud of their offspring.

To put it into context, these eight parents might not be completely different from parents in the past. While in the past, it might have been more common to celebrate a child becoming a priest, brother or sister, many of today's religious still laugh at outrageous stories of parental opposition that took place even during the days of big families and a strong Catholic

BY CAROL SCHUCK SCHEIBER WITH ERNESTO AND ANA AVELAR, MIKE AND VICTORIA GERTSEMA, GAIL MOTZ, JENNIFER DEVOTTA, AND BILL AND DEB SJOBERG

Carol Schuck Scheiber is editor of HORIZON. The parents whose words appear here have walked with their adult children into the world of consecrated life.

subculture. “My mom cried all night,” a Catholic brother aged 50+ recently told me. “In the morning, she sat at the foot of the bed and said, “Baby, you were drunk last night when you said you were joining the brothers, weren’t you?” I didn’t even drink!”

The stories aren’t as funny when they are attached to the precious and few today who desire and are qualified for membership. But the drama is real, and it behooves vocation directors to understand it and be able to work effectively with not just candidates but the families surrounding them. To that end, we present the words of eight parents who told HORIZON what it was like for their child to join a religious order.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor



Ernesto and Ana Avelar (right) with their seminarian son, Diego (center) and their other two children.

## Ernesto and Ana Avelar

*Parents of pre-novitiate candidate Diego Avelar, who is attending the Divine Word College Seminary.*

**W**e attend Mass either daily or weekly, and my wife often attends Eucharistic adoration. So it was joyful news when we learned about our son’s intention to enter the Society of the Divine Word. We are happy he will serve God and the community. I was concerned, though, that he might change his mind in the middle of the program and choose a career instead. I was very concerned that he be committed to his call and complete the program. This is no longer an anxiety, however, because I see a great deal of maturity in him, and my wife and I believe that through the grace of God everything is possible and achievable.

It’s important that both the parents and the religious community be united in action and prayer. Knowing that our son is following Jesus Christ is the most fulfilling feeling a parent could have.



Sister Angela Gertsema, A.S.C.J. and her father (right) at a wedding.

## Mike and Victoria Gertsema

*Parents of Sister Angela Gertsema, A.S.C.J.*

**M**IKE: My wife and I have been involved in our parish over the years in everything from teaching confirmation classes to serving as board president for the Catholic high school. However, when Angela told me she was joining the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, I was shocked!

**VICTORIA:** We thought she was joking. When we realized she wasn’t, I was upset, and Mike was leaning over the kitchen sink, pale as a ghost. He thought he was going to be sick. We pleaded, we begged her not to join.

I had the concerns that so many mothers have, that she was giving up her life, leaving us and entering an entirely different world, one we could not relate to.

**MIKE:** The average age of the sisters in the order was older, and they had not had any new women joining. I thought the future of the religious looked very bleak, and our daughter would have no way of supporting herself in the future. I am not as concerned as before because since the time she joined, there has been a consistent flow of new women joining the religious order, and the future is looking much brighter.

**VICTORIA:** Angela used to have a wonderful boyfriend that I had hoped she would marry. In the end my struggle was between God and me. I fought him hard for my child, and then I came to the realization that she’s his child, and God gave me the blessing to raise her. Can’t fight with the Big Guy; he always wins.

Nonetheless, the entire family struggles, not only parents, when a child leaves to enter the religious life, especially when it happens out of the blue. Having very little or no contact with their loved one makes it worse.

It's hard to be supportive when it feels like your child has been removed from the family. I feel allowing more direct contact with family (more phone calls) would have helped tremendously. But then again, maybe that makes it harder on the one who's entering.

I'm very supportive and proud of her now. I actually sew her habits. But it's still difficult with only a 10-day home stay once a year. Angela gets one shot to see everyone, so it's pretty hectic to fit in visits and travel.

MIKE: I've learned to appreciate those involved in religious life and understand that they are truly happy. Their vocation as sisters and my vocation as a parent overlap a lot within the Catholic Church, and we need to support each other if we are all to survive and prosper.

Their vocation as sisters and my vocation as a parent overlap a lot within the Catholic Church, and we need to support each other if we are all to survive and prosper.

make it easier for my other the kids to spend actual holidays with their inlaws. Mark does get family visits that are very generous, but I have never been one to let go easily. I still long for everyone home for summer vacation, which isn't happening for any of my children—not just Mark.

I have known a lot of Marianists since the days my brothers and I were at the University of Dayton. One of my brothers was even a Marianist priest for a time and remains very positive about them. In the end, there was never any reason for me to do anything but encourage my son in his vocation choice.



Gail Motz and her son, Mark Motz, S.M.

### Gail Motz

*Mother of Mark Motz, temporary professed Marianist.*

I was not at all surprised when Mark said he wanted to become a Marianist priest. He told our parish priest when he was very young that he wanted to be a priest so that he would

only have to work weekends! More seriously, Mark was a religious studies major at the University of Dayton, which is a Marianist school, and, really, it was just a matter of his discerning diocesan versus the Marianists. He started a vocation discernment group in college and gathered brochures from many orders.

Mark has always had a knack with children, and I know he would have been a great dad, but I was happy with Mark's vocation decision. It is a big sacrifice and we are proud of him. His brother and sister are both committed lay Marianists, so I have a lot of reasons to be proud!

The only parent perspective I would add is very selfish. I have had to learn that holidays always are spent with his new family. I am learning to not look at the date on the calendar. Having Christmas on December 26 will

### Jennifer Devotta

*Mother of Kevin Devotta, a pre-novitiate candidate who is attending the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.*

I am a very strong Catholic and attend Mass every Sunday and many weekdays. I was sad at the beginning [after learning of Kevin's plans to enter the SVDs]. I wondered why, but I know it's his life, so I let him make the decision, and I've



Jennifer Devotta and her son, Kevin Devotta.

accepted it now. I was worried that he would be lonely because we are very close. I worried that he was making the wrong choice, and I worried that he would change his mind and be disappointed in himself.

I know he has always wanted to help others and I think this is a good way for him to achieve that goal. He's kind to all people and very helpful, so I know that he will find his way. But it's still bittersweet: on the one hand, I know that he is out there, living his dream, but on other hand, he had to move away and we don't see each other that often, so it's hard to get used to the separation.

When I mention to other people that my son is joining the priesthood, it's difficult to get them to understand why he made the decision and how I feel about it

because a lot of people have a negative idea of Catholics, priests, etc. It's rare to hear that someone is becoming a priest.

My advice to parents in similar circumstances is to let your children do what they want to do; don't hold them back, even if it's hard for you as a parent. If it is meant to be, it will be.



Bill and Deb Sjoberg with their daughter, Sister Liz Sjoberg, D.C.

## Bill and Deb Sjoberg

*Parents of Sister Liz Sjoberg, D.C.*

Both of us have always been very involved in the life of our church through the various parishes in the places we lived during our Air Force assignments. Our daughter's initial interest in a religious vocation was not a surprise.

However, her commitment to actually join a religious order was not expected. We felt that it is one thing to talk about doing it and quite another to do it. We knew she had prayerfully considered a possible vocation, so we were peaceful with her decision.

There was a certain sadness in knowing she would never experience being a wife and mother, something that has been such a blessing to her mother. We were also concerned that we would lose some of the closeness we had with her as her priorities became more focused on her spiritual life and the Daughters of Charity.

We've been blessed by our daughter's vocation. We had not anticipated how much we would be drawn into her new life. The Daughters of Charity have become our second family; we enjoy spending time with them.

Parents are often conflicted as their son or daughter begins a new life away from home. So, in many respects, choosing a vocation is not too different than choosing a career or married life. However many Catholics have lost touch with the religious life, and it has become a calling with real uncertainty. If a religious order works hard to connect to the parents and family on a regular basis, it can increase the home support for the religious. It makes a huge difference when someone has a strong relationship with a religious. Then vocations no longer are a concept; they are a friend. ■

## RESOURCES RELATED TO PARENTS OF CANDIDATES

### Articles in HORIZON

"How Holy Cross reaches out to parents," by Father James T. Gallagher, C.S.C., p. 17, Spring 2011

"Coping with parental resistance: explanations and possible solutions," by Brother John Mark Falkenhain, O.S.B., p. 19, Summer 2012

"Confessions of a seminarian's mother," by Lisa M. Anderson, p. 23, Summer 2012

"Building bridges with a Family Gathering," by Sister Virginia Herbers, A.S.C.J., p. 25, Summer 2013

### Videos

*Absolutely Millennial*, 30-minute introduction to religious life by Millennial members. Ideal for educating family members. At [nrv.net](http://nrv.net)

*Parenting Vocation*, 40 minute video of parents discussing their responses to their children's vocations. [www.wordnet.tv/parenting-vocation.dvd.htm](http://www.wordnet.tv/parenting-vocation.dvd.htm).

### NRVC brochure for parents

Purchase at [nrv.net](http://nrv.net)

### VISION articles on parents

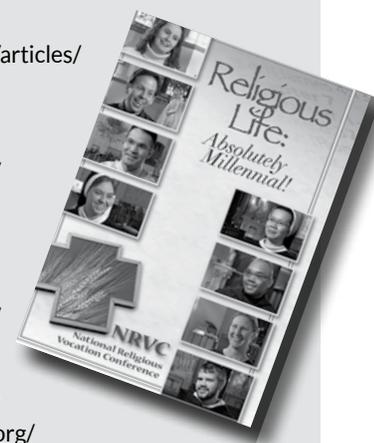
"Family matters"  
<http://www.vocationnetwork.org/articles/show/76>

"How is your family taking it?"  
<http://www.vocationnetwork.org/articles/show/281>

"How to talk to your family about your vocation"  
<http://www.vocationnetwork.org/articles/show/438>

"Letter to my daughter, the sister"  
<http://www.digitalvocationguide.org/vision/2012/>

*Uscsb.org, vocation section, also lists parent-related resources.*



Asian American Catholics tend to be open to religious life. Is your religious community prepared to receive them?



Vocation directors and communities that make an effort to understand and adapt to Asian cultures are more likely to have a positive experience in inviting and receiving Asian American members. Pictured here are young women enjoying social time at church.

## Six keys to inviting Asian Americans

**“YES, I AM DOING FINE,”** replied Sr. Ana as we sat down in the living room of her convent house. Even though we were alone, she whispered to me that I should just speak to her in English because that is now the official language of the house. I looked at her, perplexed because I knew the majority of the religious sisters living in the house were from Asia and specifically from Vietnam.

“Even when we are alone?” I asked. “Yes,” she told me, “The other sisters want us all to speak English because we are in America.” The frustration on her face pushed me away from continuing the language discussion.

This encounter about 10 years ago sticks with me as I reflect on the growing number of Asian Americans entering religious life and priesthood in the United States. I have often wondered if other convents, seminaries, and houses of formation had an English-only policy to help improve their new members’ language skills. After investigating, I found that there was

BY FATHER LINH HOANG, O.F.M.



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at Siena College in Loudonville, New York. He is currently serving a three-year term as a consultant to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Asian and Pacific Islander Catholic concerns. In addition he has great interest in vocation awareness, having served on the Diocese of Albany Vocation Awareness Committee and as a consultant for his own province vocation team.

never a strict written policy in any community, but it was always suggested to new English speakers to practice it.

But as I have talked to Asian religious, the informal policy became much more complicated to me than just helping members become competent English speakers. Many wondered: Was this rule really to help the new members? How come the non-Asian members were not encouraged to learn at least some of the language and culture of the Asian members, particularly when Asians were a majority? Couldn't prayers or food or traditions of Vietnamese Catholicism become part of the life of the community? Could the English only rule be a subtle form of racism veiled under a cloak of fraternity? These questions cannot be adequately answered here, but they merit further reflection. They point toward the complex issues that arise in religious communities when Asians and Asian Americans join what was a traditionally Caucasian group.

In the 2009 NRVC-CARA study of newer members of U.S. religious institutes, Asians represented over 14 percent of all vocations, and that percentage has slowly risen in recent years. Asians are over-represented in religious life because they only account for 2.6 percent of U.S. Catholics. This report underscores the need to respond to this population.

In this article I hope to first provide a general snapshot of Asian American Catholics overall. Second, I will look at six areas related to Asian American candidates that I hope will provide vocation directors, community members, and religious leaders a better understanding of these new vocations. I present these six facets in broad brush strokes: 1) understanding the cultural background, 2) family dynamics, 3) education and language, 4) food and socializing, 5) racism, and 6) preparedness of receiving communities.

## “Asian” encompasses many cultures

First let us look at the overall Asian American Catholic population. According to the 2010 U.S. census, Asians are a small but growing ethnic group in the United States. They are just 5.6 percent of the 308 million-plus people in the country, and by mid-century they are expected to rise to 10 percent.

The term “Asian” lumps together a number of groups. The U.S. Catholic bishops describe the break-

down on their website, [uscbb.org](http://uscbb.org): “The U.S. Asian Pacific population with the largest number of Catholics is the Filipino community, followed by the Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, and Korean communities.” Growing numbers of Catholics can also be found among other Asian communities such as Indonesians, Laotians, and Burmese.

Among the Asian Catholic groups, the Chinese, Filipinos, and Japanese were the first to arrive in the United States. In the late 1800s, they came in substantial numbers to work on the West Coast. The Archdiocese of San Francisco in the 1870s was the first diocese to minister to Chinese immigrants. These three groups (Filipinos, Chinese and Japanese) can now claim many generations of Catholics, as well as newer Catholics still coming to the U.S. looking for economic betterment.

The other Asian Catholics—Koreans, Vietnamese, Indonesians, Laotians, and Burmese who arrived in the mid-20th century—came predominantly to escape political and civil conflicts in their respective countries. Many are refugees who came anticipating that they would go back to their home country. Still others have settled and now count second and third generations among their ranks.

Similar to previous Catholic immigrants, the newer Asian immigrants have some common traits: the request for liturgies in their own language, especially among the first generation immigrants; the creation of national parishes (Vietnamese and Koreans have the most); a habit of regular attendance at weekly Masses and holy days; a custom of pilgrimage to Marian shrines (for instance, annually Asian Americans flock to the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.); and a custom of generously giving time to parish activities.

In addition the support for vocations is high among Asian Catholics because being a priest, brother, or sister is respected. These are professions that bring honor to the immediate family. But there are some concerns, as the second and subsequent generations become more influenced by an American society that does not value the vocation of religious life. Nevertheless, the support among Asian Americans for religious vocations remains high. I turn now to the six areas to be considered when inviting and keeping Asian Americans in religious life and the priesthood.

Since there is little information on the specific

Support for vocations is high among Asian Catholics because being a priest, brother, or sister is respected. These are professions that bring honor to the immediate family.

Asian ethnic groups entering religious life, I present here some general attributes that apply to most Asian groups. From my own observation, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Filipinos appear to be the predominant groups among Asians who are entering religious life and priesthood these days. Hence, my discussion will draw from experiences with these three groups but also try to maintain a broader perspective because there are growing numbers of Chinese, Indonesians, and South Asians interested in religious life. Since these vocations represent vastly different regions and cultures of Asia, I encourage vocation directors and their communities to become educated about the specific Asian Catholics they are encountering.

Photo: Knoxville Museum of Art



Most Asian cultures stress filial piety. When children become adults, their responsibilities and commitments to their parents and family remain very important.

## 1. Understand the particular culture

Understanding someone's cultural background means learning about the person's country, its traditions and practices. A vocation director and his or her community should have conversations about what they already know. They might consult references in print and online to gain elementary knowledge about the candidate's background. For example, I have met vocation directors who, when they meet potential candidates, ask directly what their background is, where they were born, and where their parents came from. This prevents guesswork and wrong assumptions—such as making a claim about a symbol that does not resonate with the candidate.

For instance, with a little research anyone can learn that the ubiquitous Asian symbols of chopsticks and bamboo are not used or recognized by all Asians. The chopstick is used only among Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese. The remaining Asian groups—Indian Asians, Filipinos, Thais, and Burmese—do not use them. Knowing this, a vocation director can avoid the cultural mistake of offering chopsticks to a Filipino.

Also bamboo is not part of Korean or South Asian culture but is readily used by the Chinese and Japanese. Another confusing symbol is the lunar new year. All Asian cultures celebrate a new year marked by the cycles

of the moon and not occurring on the same date every year such as in the Western calendar. Knowing this much, a vocation director might chance to ask questions about a candidate's new year. What is it called in his or her culture? How is it celebrated? And why does it fall on a different date each year?

Being able to understand the major symbols for a particular candidate can help welcome that person, make him or her more comfortable, and also show that the vocation director took time to learn about him or her.

## 2. Filial piety an important value

In researching any Asian culture, a vocation director would no doubt learn about filial piety, a practice that is central in the lives of most Asian Americans. Filial piety means giving respect to living parents and paying homage to dead ancestors. This piety transfers to all familial and social relationships. Respect is shown through keeping appropriate distance and performing proper gestures to uphold the honor and dignity of all involved. Particular obligations fall to the eldest child in a family to maintain these familial bonds. The gender does make a difference in some cultures, but that is not always strictly observed. Hence, the eldest son or daughter must take responsibility for the elderly parents until and beyond their death. The value of honor first learned in the familial relationship will be applied to all aspects of life. All relationships take on a sense of honor for the other. Also, for many Asian Americans, age becomes a factor in

relationships. The elder in a relationship is always shown deference because elders have gained wisdom through lived experiences.

Filial piety has many consequences, both good and bad. One in particular is the insatiable expectation parents (first generation) have for their children (second generation), manifested through repaying the parents' sacrifices for the child. The child's payback seldom involves money or any other tangible compensation. Rather, repayment for the parents' sacrifice takes place through educational and professional achievements, making the parents proud and affirming the worth of their sacrifices. Many second-generation Asian Americans choose occupations consistent with their parents'

I have met vocation directors who, when they meet potential candidates, ask directly what their background is, where they were born, and where their parents came from. This prevents guesswork and wrong assumptions.

desire for a mark of success as defined by the larger society, such as becoming a medical doctor or lawyer. In turn the result is that some Asian Americans do not want their child to become a consecrated religious or priest because there is not much visible financial reward.

However the dynamic of filial piety can work in favor of a

choice for religious life. Devout Asian Catholic parents who desire to have a priest or nun in their family will be very supportive and proud. They will feel that the child is repaying them with a profession that brings honor to the family and respect to them as parents. In some Asian cultures, such as among Vietnamese and Korean, there are special names and tremendous recognition bestowed on parents who have a son as a priest or a daughter in consecrated life.

Sometimes this wholehearted support and desire for a religious or priestly vocation can overshadow the real desires of daughters or sons who may respond out of filial desire to please their parents rather than out of an internal sense of calling. This is a complicated issue which does not surface immediately, but it is something that vocation directors should be aware of. Thus, it is always good for a vocation director to visit the family setting of potential candidates because this will provide a better understanding of filial piety at work. Vocation directors can observe how the candidate defers to the parents, how he or she

interacts with siblings, and what role he or she plays in the overall family relationships. Through these familial observations, directors can ask questions about the responsibilities that a candidate has in the family. From the discussion of responsibilities, a director can probe further about whether the candidate has thought through cultural implications, and about whether he or she feels heavy expectations from the family.

To invite an Asian American into religious life, it is necessary to understand how the dynamics of filial piety and honor play out in vocational development. Since an older person will receive respect because of age and rank, a younger discernor may not say or do anything to cause conflict. A young discernor or a young person in formation may feel that he or she must just learn and observe rather than to cause tension, such as by questioning a rule in a formation house. This brings us to the third attribute, the Asian value for education.

### 3. Education is esteemed

Education is so highly valued in Asian cultures that it is a collective pursuit rather than just an individual one. The individual must take into consideration the expectations of the immediate as well as the extended family. As a collective affair, it can create enormous pressure for an individual to be successful in every aspect of his or her education. Also, it can be humiliating for an Asian candidate to not succeed in the classroom due to a deficit such as a lack of fluency in English. Added to this pressure is the stereotype that all Asian Americans perform well in school. Asians who enter American schools with insufficient skills may not get the help they might need because of this stereotype.

Even though education is a highly valued, collective affair, vocation directors will need to discern the individual capability of each candidate. They will have to evaluate not only the capability and desire of the new member but discuss realistically the person's educational goals. This is especially true for Asian American candidates who lack English proficiency. These candidates will need fluency programs and other help to first bring their language skills up to speed. Then they can further their education. Poor language skills should not deter a religious vocation, but lack of fluency may challenge an individual's educational desires. It can be troubling when education is highly valued but is not a reality for some because of individual ability. The individual may feel the expectations of his or her family, and vocation directors should be aware of that when discussing edu-

cation with potential candidates.

In considering Asian Americans not fluent in English, a vocation director should inform candidates about the help and expectations of the community. Most candidates probably are already trying to learn the language but may not have adequate opportunities to practice it, or they may have to curtail their classes because of other obligations. The community's help and expectations should be communicated from the beginning so that candidates do not have to later endure restrictions on using their native language. This is particularly important for communities with many members from the same ethnic group. They will want to express themselves with others who understand them and share the same situation.

#### 4. Food can unite or divide

Food is an essential identity marker for many Asian Americans. Since Asian food is different from “American” cuisine, it is naturally distinctive and important to Asian Americans. It is both a comfort and an expression of who they are. Among Asians there are particular cuisines for each ethnic community, making it difficult to generalize about the food, and yet many times the discussion of food in religious communities revolves around its aroma. This is the point where food can become a point of contention.

When Asian Americans want to cook or eat their own food in a new community, they frequently come across members who say that the food “smells.” All food produces an aroma, either good or bad, depending on the perspective of the one smelling it. Many Asians are told that their food “smells,” which in general means smelling bad. For some this can be jarring and for others embarrassing because they feel they have offended others. When Asians have grown up with favorite foods that give off a particular aroma that reminds them of home or family, then being told it smells can cause tension in their engagement with the larger community.

Ideally food can open up opportunities for religious communities to share and to discuss, for example, why certain aromas give off a pungent odor but taste delicious, such as fish sauce or kim chi. In the same way some cheeses, such as limburger, can be quite strong smelling but actually taste good.

The community inviting in Asian Americans must be aware that many will want to have foods from their homeland. Those who have entered communities with large numbers of Asian Americans have been able to



Korean American Catholic students at the University of Virginia play a game together during a retreat. For those in an ethnic minority, spending time together where cultural norms are shared can be refreshing and renewing. The same is often true for racial or ethnic minorities in a religious community.

cook and share their foods. Asian Americans in predominantly white communities often find their access to traditional foods is lacking. But this can be an opportunity for both the new member and the community to invite each other to try one another's foods.

#### 5. Racism is real

Within the racial conversations in America, Asian Americans continue to be considered “foreign,” which inevitably excludes them from debates that pit the majority whites against the minority blacks. Asians do not fit in either of those two camps. Furthermore Asian Americans are given the label of “forever foreign”—or the more insidious label of the “model minority.”

The “model minority” concept imposed on Asian Americans provides a favorable recognition compared to other minority groups, but ultimately it keeps them from being completely welcomed as part of larger white-dominated community. The “model minority” stereotype creates resentment by other racial minorities who see the educational achievement, successful businesses, and financial security of many Asian Americans. But the label also glosses over inequalities among Asian Americans. For instance, many Asian Americans use public assistance such as welfare and food stamps. Many Southeast Asians (Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians) have a disproportionately high rate of high school dropouts compared to Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Americans.

There are also racial characterizations to consider about Asian Americans. Those who are born and raised in the U.S. can find it racially insensitive when they encounter questions about whether they can speak their native language fluently; how they practice the traditions and customs of their “home” country; and whether they know the full history of their “home” country. These questions are often innocent, but when Asian Americans regularly confront them, it communicates that they remain “forever foreign” in America.

These racial stereotypes can be particularly harmful when they occur within the church and religious

life. However religious communities can help remedy this. For instance communities with large numbers of Asian Americans can make an effort to appoint Asian members to administrative bodies, such as leadership councils and formation programs. The inclusion demonstrates in an important way the awareness of the community, and it can be a means of encourag-

ing new members from the Asian Catholic population. Their inclusion demonstrates that they truly belong, and it sends this message to members of all races. Another practical step is to have new Asian American candidates share their stories, not just about their ethnic background but rather about their vocational journey. This will help members see the similarities in God’s call to all people. Sharing stories connects the candidates to the members of the community and creates common ground.

## 6. Prepare members of the receiving community

A call to religious life or priesthood is both personal and communal. It is through an intimate relationship with God that a woman or man feels drawn to serve the church in consecrated life. The call is communal in that the person’s family and friends become a source of support, and the religious community needs to confirm, through the vocation director, that the candidate’s call is genuine.

In addition to confirming an individual’s call, a community that is inviting and receiving Asian Americans should be willing to explore the differences in culture and racial experiences of Asian Americans. It is necessary to prepare members of receiving communities to understand the realities that confront the Asian American population. These realities do not go away when people enter religious life. In some cases, racial and ethnic differences become even more heightened. This preparation for including Asian Americans in religious community will require knowing the five previous attributes and making them part of the community’s discussion. Members should be aware of the cultural, linguistic, and racial differences of their new member and not shy away from encountering the difference. A community that is willing to be open will find that it will have committed members for life.



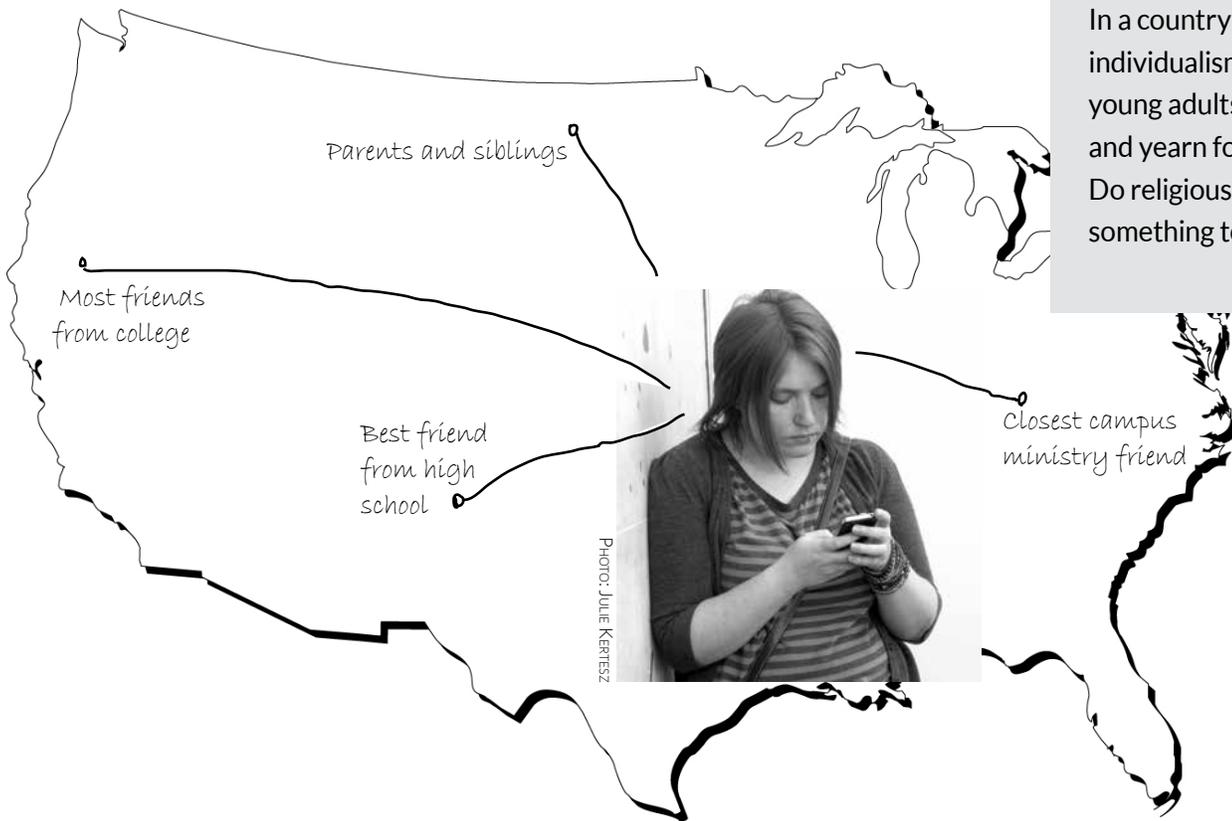
Asian Americans have created and sustained their place within the American landscape. They will continue to help fashion an American society that becomes ever more diverse. The American Catholic Church will also experience this diversity, especially as more Asian men and women enter religious life and the priesthood.

Many Asian American women and men who enter religious life in the United States have the same questions and concerns as any other discerners. They have the same desire to become better followers of Jesus and the same hunger to faithfully live the Gospels. But Asian American women and men face many different challenges because they are entering communities that are culturally, socially, and racially different from themselves. Some may feel that they cannot do anything about the differences and must accept their new environment without question. Most do not realize that their receiving religious community may not have consciously thought out the different cultural and racial backgrounds of new members. Many communities have not given thought to the changing face of the American church and its impact on them.

Therefore the responsibility falls on both the new member and the receiving community to acknowledge the differences. But ultimately it is the religious community that must make the first step toward a hospitable environment where new members feel welcomed to explore a call from God. May all of our religious communities—through the grace of God—welcome in word and deed the gifts that Asian American Catholics can bring. ■

### Intercultural competencies for ministry

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has produced a course to help church groups develop their cross-cultural awareness and competence. Learn more about the course at [uscbb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/](http://uscbb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/)



In a country with strong individualism many young adults are lonely and yearn for community. Do religious have something to offer?

Post-college young people frequently find themselves living in a city far away from family and established friends. Might religious communities reach out to these young people to share what they know about building relationships and forming community?

# Community appeals to a lonely nation

*“We have all known the long loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”*

—Dorothy Day

Many young adults today know about loneliness, and I believe they need community. Not long ago I was speaking at a Theology on Tap event in the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois. I drew a map of the United States on the board and asked the young people in the room to identify where their closest friends were on the map. Some indicated Illinois, but many more pointed all over the country, from Florida, to Massachusetts, Washington, and Texas. It seemed we covered every corner of America as we described our community of friends.

If any single visual sums up the current world of young adults, particularly college graduates, it is that U.S. map with marks representing dozens of friends. This is a generation marked by distance, both in geography and intimacy. If the information age has allowed young adults access to any data or facts they could hope for, it has also left them all too comfortable to remain there. Even more than that, having spent most of their lives jumping from one group to another, they lack many of the skills necessary to build strong, long-lasting communities

BY CRAIG GOULD



Craig Gould is the director of youth and young adult programs at the Bernardin Center at Catholic

Theological Union, including the Catholics on Call program. He is married with children.



PHOTO: NIKKY STEPHEN

Cultivating creative solitude is an important part of developing one's interior life. However, social isolation can be unhealthy, and observers of young adults say that religious communities have a wealth of communal wisdom to share with them.

that will sustain them in faith and life. This is why every young adult, considering a religious vocation or not, can benefit from the wisdom of the women and men who have spent centuries invested in the art of intimate community. Young people need the religious.

## Desire for community

In the National Religious Vocation Conference study in 2009, most newer members of religious communities showed a strong preference for building community in their own institutes by living together with at least four other members. In fact younger members had such a strong preference for community that, "Findings from the survey of religious institutes suggest that new membership is negatively correlated with the number of members living alone. That is, the higher the number of members who live alone, the less likely an institute is to have new members." What this survey discovered is that young adults are desperately seeking women and men who will allow them to experience the depth of community that they are lacking.

It is necessary for those who grew up in a much different culture than exists today to offer a picture that will provide insight into why community is a greater need for this group of young adults than for prior ones. There was a time in American history when being Catholic was not simply a religious designation but a cultural one as well. Catholics lived in conclaves that could either be outlined by city blocks or country farms. These close-

knit, culturally homogenous groups all attended Catholic school together, and all received sacraments at the same Catholic parish. When they graduated from high school many of them would go on to get married to each other, have children together, and have their children baptized in the parish they had attended their whole lives. It was an insular, circular process that certainly had its failings but was successful in creating unity and a security to those inside.

The current collection of Catholic young adults, or Millennials (those born between 1980 and 2000) as they are often referred to, grew up in communities, and sometimes homes, that can best be described as fragmented. If they were not subject to the divorce of their own parents, they at least have been caught up in a society where they spent less time in integrated communities and more time in accomplishment-oriented events. The paradigm for today's youth has never been to build a strong community but to build a strong individual. From early on many youth are expected to finish high school, move on to college, and then move to a career. With the exact opposite narrative as many of their older relatives, young people are not only expected to leave their home community, but are actually groomed from early on to be able to do so. They participate in sports to achieve a scholarship, enroll in National Honor Society because it looks good on the college transcripts, and take advanced classes to shore up their ever-expanding application for college. They marry later, usually in their late 20s, and begin having children in their early 30s. The delay of these social

benchmarks that used to keep them invested in a specific community, and in particular the one they had come from, means that they are less connected to local civic engagement than previous generations.

Harvard Professor Robert Putnam's landmark book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, does a great job of detailing this phenomenon. Putnam uses the phrase "social capital" to measure the amount of time we spend investing—and being invested in—by a community of people we care for and who in turn care about us. His discovery of the decline in social capital is only reinforced by current social trends and media that prompt titles like *TIME* magazine's article, "Me, Me, Me, Generation." (May 20, 2013). This article details how the combination of instant connectivity through social networking and ever-accessible technology, such as smart phones, enables Millennials to share up-to-the-second details of their lives. Young adults, who already have a history of what David Elkind called the "imaginary audience," now find themselves with a stage on which to showcase themselves.

This hyper-social context has at least two effects on young adults. The first is that they become increasingly aware that they are able to control their own images, and more to the point, they decide what type of image of themselves they would like to portray. Young adults become savvy marketers and their lives are the brand. They no longer use social media as a window into their world, but instead it becomes a well constructed façade. And if the point of social media is no longer to simply connect socially but to craft a persona, then rarely do young people want to get too deep into the reality that the lives of most people are not some version of a Hollywood production studio but rather a day in, day out process of growing, changing, developing, and failing. The extravagant becomes the benchmark for what is worthy, which means the mundane day-to-day steadfastness either needs to be twisted to appear new and exciting, or young adults attempt to avoid a steadfast life at all costs.

The second effect is that many young adults have a lot of passing acquaintances and fewer developed friendships. On social networking young adults do share real and intimate details of their lives. They offer condolences and even empathy, often from hundreds of miles away. The problem becomes when Millennials begin to assume that these flashes of response constitute real intimacy. Friendship begins to lack the demands of participating in another's life and is instead measured by how many and what types of responses they receive through networking. The deeply developed human need to be cared

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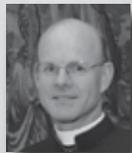
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for is met in quantity rather than quality. The constant connectivity leaves young adults struggling to be comfortable in their own silence and solitude. This leads to the interesting paradox where the most “plugged-in” generation in history also experiences what is probably the deepest and most profound loneliness in history.

Our concern here is what these insights mean for the church. In particular, how should men and women religious practice ministry to young adults? After all if community is not just a social component of all the faithful but a foundational theological principle, then the struggle of Millennials to engage with others in authentic, self-sacrificing relationships is a problem for the church. In fact it may be the most pressing issue facing all those seeking to minister to young adults. If parishes are constructed around parochial lines that no longer apply, and religious communities are built around the mutual gift of one person to another, then the fact that this generation has trouble developing and committing themselves to relationships could possibly leave the church ineffective in its message and ministry to this age group. It becomes not only a question of

how the church responds, but also, who in the church should respond.

## Now is the moment to act

I contend that the time is right for religious communities to enter into the gap that exists between Millennials and the church, teaching the former how to build authentic community and the latter how to walk patiently with those whose formation is ongoing. Religious communities have spent centuries working out the struggles and gifts of intimacy. They hold unique insight into shared leadership, giftedness, service, and vows that are found almost nowhere else in society. They can be a sacrament of reconciliation and healing between the currently exhausted Millennials who long for community and the fulfillment that emerges only as a result of women and men who feel secure enough to give of themselves freely and deeply.

This would not be the first time that religious communities took up the task of revitalizing the faith community by sharing its wisdom. With the universal call to holiness the entire church was invited to put every hand to the plow. Lay women and men became full participants in the church’s works of mercy. Members of religious communities have become the mentors and skilled craftsmen to the apprenticeship of lay service.

In a similar fashion religious communities have often been on the forefront of crafting and developing the spiritual life of many of the church’s faithful. Either through spiritual direction, retreat houses, or liturgy of the hours, religious communities strengthen and develop women and men in Christ so that they are more able to achieve their own holiness and the holiness of the church. It is impossible to imagine what the spiritual life of the larger body of Christ would be like without these communities to contour its soul to Jesus.

Once again now, the church must turn to its wisdom holders and ask to be lead into the process of building community. In previous generations community was not a foreign concept to the women and men who chose religious life as a vocation. Much of the world experienced intense and extensive community through a lifetime of daily interactions with large families and neighboring friends. Without the means or the ability to distance themselves from their familiar settings, Christians understood thoroughly what type of commitments and lifestyle was necessary to build strong kinship.

The response to this need for community is not only a service to the church, but to religious communities

themselves. If religious can teach young adults how to develop a habit of community, then their own efforts in recruiting women and men for their own communities will be enhanced. After all for a young adult who longs for a group to belong to, yet struggles to know how to enter into such a group given their development in an individualistic culture, the prospect of moving into a collection of women and men marked by vows to each other can be daunting. If women and men religious can help the pilgrim church to develop its practice of communal life, then the women and men they invite to explore a vocation would require less formation in community living if and when they do enter an institute.

## Decision making, conflict resolution, sharing of resources, and leadership

I propose four areas in which religious communities can have an impact on the deficit in community that Millennials are experiencing. They are: decision making, conflict resolution, resource sharing, and leadership. Currently decision making for the Millennials is an isolating experience. Though others may be available to offer an opinion, there are no designated processes for how to listen to others and allow their input to affect a decision. The development of “crowd-sourcing,” or seeking input from a massive, mostly online community for a question, is evidence of Millennials’ awareness of their own limits and need for guidance outside of themselves. In religious life there is usually a structure for making decisions that affect how each member spends time and does ministry. Millennials can learn from the fact that the community could have an authoritative say in what an individual does. They might learn, too, about how to gratefully accept input from others; it is a skill that Millennials need to practice but is often absent in their development.

Next, the culture at large is not good at resolving conflict. The current narrative is for a group to try and stack as many people as possible on their side of the aisle so that they can shout down or drown out the people on the other side of the aisle. Too rarely is compromise or dialogue a solution. Religious communities can share practices and ways of being together that promote mutual understanding. The ability to consider multiple perspectives is an essential task for living in religious communities, and it is a gift they could give to the current church.

A third way religious communities could have a great impact on Millennials is in teaching them how to share resources. Most young adults grew up in households where both property and materials had clearly

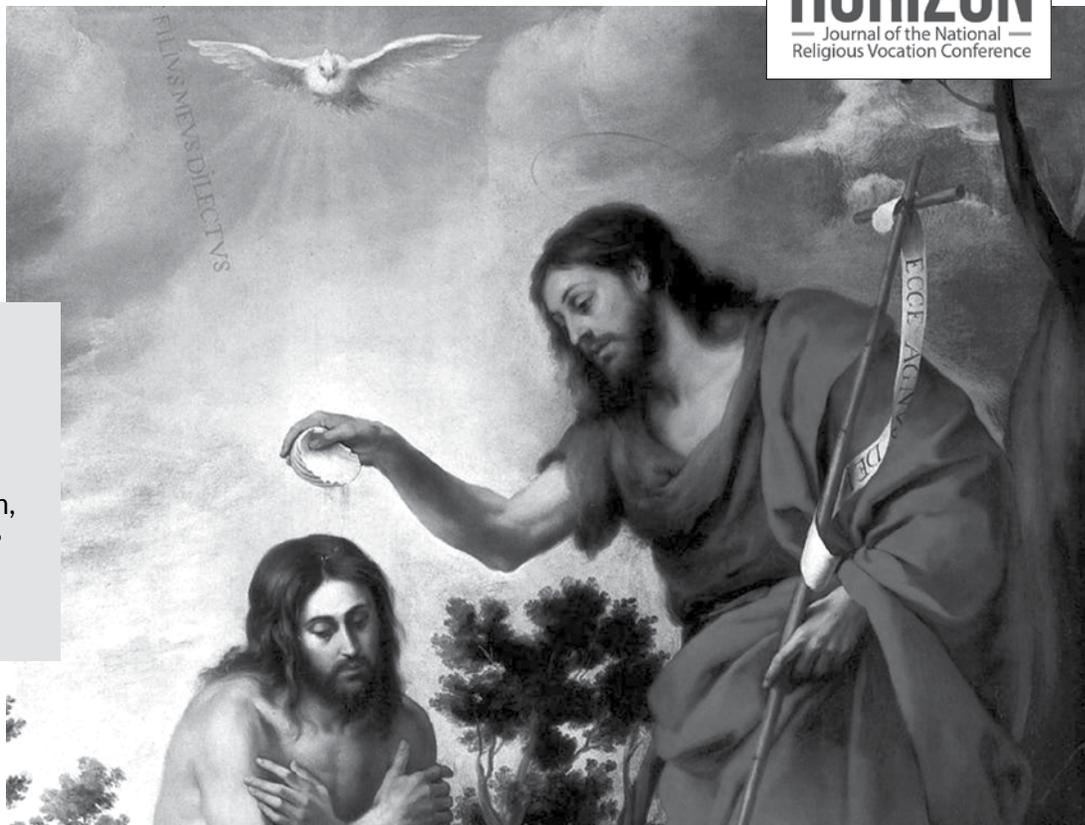
defined ownership boundaries. From bedrooms to vehicles, many of today’s Millennials don’t naturally envision having to share possessions, especially commonly used ones, with others. In fact the acquisition of personal possessions, like a car or a house, often signals an “advance” to adulthood in our society. Religious communities could help younger generations recapture the exercises of communal living. They could demonstrate how this sharing of resources actually allows the community, and the individual as part of that community, to thrive.

Finally, having grown up in close relationships with their parents, Millennials do not hold the anti-authoritarian views that characterized their Baby Boomer parents. Millennials are far more likely to be friends with their parents than to resent them. However that does not mean that they have an easy time with those in positions of leadership. On the contrary, having been reared on a pedagogy of group learning in schools, young adults often do not respond positively to situations in which leaders have been placed over them without their approval. In addition because of the focus on guarding their self-esteem as they matured, Millennials can struggle to openly accept criticism and receive it constructively. Religious communities switch leadership fairly often and are expected to show obedience to those in places of authority. Young adults would stand to gain a lot of insight and wisdom from the ways in which religious communities choose and exercise their leadership.

Every generation brings with it gifts to offer and needs to be met. Millennials are a gift to our church. They bring a sense of multiculturalism, mission, and enthusiasm to the Body of Christ. Yet they also have needs, and chief among them is how to be women and men who commit themselves to a habit of community. Few within the church are more equipped than the religious communities to teach Millennials the practices, skills, and beliefs necessary to achieve the intimacy they long for. Religious women and men have always been a gift to the church, and the church needs their wisdom and experience now more than ever. ■

Religious communities could help younger generations recapture the exercises of communal living. They could demonstrate how this sharing of resources actually allows the community, and the individual as part of that community, to thrive.

# Feed your spirit



We are “unstuck” when we recapture our awareness of God’s love—the lavish, “you are my beloved” sort of love.

God’s extravagant love is revealed in Jesus’ Jordan moment. “This is my beloved in whom I am well pleased,” was the message when Jesus was baptized by John. Painting by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo

BY SISTER MARILYN LACEY, R.S.M.



Sister Marilyn Lacey, R.S.M. is the executive director of Mercy Beyond Borders, a nonprofit working with displaced women and girls

in South Sudan and Haiti to alleviate their extreme poverty. Learn more at [mercybeyondborders.org](http://mercybeyondborders.org). Contact her at [mlacey@mercybeyondborders.org](mailto:mlacey@mercybeyondborders.org).

## Stay unstuck

**N**OT LONG AGO a *Scientific American* blog by Katherine Harmon Courage asked an intriguing question, “Why Don’t Octopuses Get Stuck to Themselves?” (May 15, 2014). It describes the striking ability of octopuses to cling to almost any surface, whether smooth, bumpy, rigid or supple. The hundreds of suckers along each arm instantly stick to almost anything they contact. She cites research from a *Current Biology* article that wryly noted, “[T]he hundreds of suckers along each arm have a tendency to stick to almost any object they contact.... This reflex could pose significant problems with unplanned interactions between the arms.”

Apparently the brains of octopuses are so small that they cannot actually keep track of where their arms are or what they are doing (reminds me of myself at certain points in my life). The octopus brain is not “Mission Control.” The arms are essentially exploring on their own. But here’s the surprise. Due to some mysterious chemical interaction on their skin, there is one thing those little suckers never get stuck on: themselves! This proves

very useful. Their skill at distinguishing between octopus and non-octopus enables them to avoid becoming hopelessly entangled in themselves. Who knew?

More to the point: what does this have to do with vocation work? What might vocation workers learn from a small-brained, many-armed octopus? I suspect that experiences of getting stuck on oneself, of flailing about, of failing to notice attachments, and of ending up in sticky “unplanned interactions” (to use the researchers’ words) are common to us all. True, we humans lack the visible suckers that line the arms of octopuses and the chemical magic that controls their self-grabbing instinct. On the other hand, we all have the invisible equivalent. Our brains are a tad larger and, if we grow in awareness, we can choose to engage or disengage from the constant “latching onto self” that is our human condition.

The key is awareness. Awareness of the awesome reality that we are loved beyond all reason by a God too amazing and too prodigal even to imagine. Awareness that this God is constantly gazing upon us with extravagant attentiveness, all-encompassing mercy, and boundless delight. Awareness that this God’s love never wavers, no matter who we are or what we do. Awareness that this God chooses to focus on our goodness. Awareness that this God, as revealed in Jesus’ Jordan moment (“You are my Beloved in whom I am well-pleased”), speaks that same blessing to each of us to reveal our true identity.

We are so accustomed to measuring, judging, assessing, evaluating. Can we even conceive of a God who isn’t that way, whose constant desire is solely to convince us that we are beloved, who pays no attention to our past or to our shortcomings or to our deliberate misdeeds but instead keeps vigil for us, waits to embrace us and lavish gifts on us and host a party for us?

For myriad reasons it is exceedingly difficult for most people to believe that we are loved with such abandon and without any preconditions. We require a Jordan moment in our own lives, a heart-stopping, can-this-really-be-true breakthrough moment when God’s unshakable stance toward us is glimpsed, even for a second. That is enough. It becomes our touchstone, our bedrock, through all the ups and downs of our faith journey.

Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace*, recounts just such an “Aha!” moment:

One morning this past Spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was

young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking, he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven.... I felt as awe-struck as Jacob, because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature [God] made and called good.... I suspect that only God, and well-loved infants, can see this way.

Glimpsing in ourselves that spark of inner unsullied goodness—as God sees us—is what frees us from “stickiness.” I no longer have to defend myself, promote myself, grab for the attention of others, be on top all the time, seek recognition, cling to stuff, or try to control others. My inmost core is not a fearsome void. I am overflowing with God’s own expansiveness. Joy replaces the determined effort to do everything right. Compassion trumps perfection. Blessings flow.

The Sufi poet, Hafiz, expressed it this way:

This place where you are right now  
God circled on a map for you.

Wherever your eyes and arms and heart can  
move against the earth and sky

The Beloved has bowed there—

Our Beloved has bowed there, knowing you were  
coming.

This, then, is our calling: to become people of prayer, of deep contemplative seeing, so thoroughly grounded in and freed by our own “Aha!” experience of this amazing God that we could not possibly stay stuck on ourselves. Rather, the graciousness of God in whom we are steeped flows through us to everyone we encounter. We gaze on others the way that child did at the airport gate, the way Hafiz pictures God bowing toward each of us. We reverence others for who they are. We reflect to them their own goodness. What else matters, really?

If we, who call ourselves religious, are not soaked in this experience of God’s constant welcoming embrace, our own unique Jordan experience, what do we think we are doing in ministry? There is no substitute for this, nor can it be faked. It’s not an insight to be achieved through study or conferences or any sort of human effort. It is sheer gift from God who is always giving it. We must simply slow down, pay attention, wake up. Drenched in the mystery in whom “we live and move and have our being,” we become more and more like the One on whom we gaze. Genuine, unshakable, deeply-attractive joy emerges. That’s vocation work! ■

BY FATHER LARRY RICE, C.S.P.



Father Larry Rice, C.S.P. entered the Paulist Fathers in 1983. He has ministered in radio, TV, multimedia, and the Internet.

Currently he is a contributor to Busted Halo, a young adult website, and he is the Paulist Fathers' first consultor and director of St. Mary's on the Lake, a Paulist retreat property on Lake George, N.Y.

## Message to engage online is spot on

**I** AM A SOCIAL MEDIA GUY. I've been engaged in church applications of social media since 1986, long before there was an Internet. At that time, as a Paulist seminarian, I set up a computer in my room, and ran a BBS (Bulletin Board System) I called Cyberchurch in Washington D.C. It was an early experiment in social media that allowed me to engage an ecumenical audience in a wide-ranging discussion of faith and life. Some of the people I met there have remained my closest friends. I've presided at their weddings and funerals and journeyed with them through illness, grief, child-rearing, and the ordinary stuff of life.

In the intervening 28 years, social media has overtaken our culture with a velocity and power that few would have predicted. American cul-

### FIVE TIPS FOR STARTING IN SOCIAL MEDIA

**I**f you are a vocation minister, a congregational leader, or a member supporting a vocation minister, maybe these articles and discussions about social media make you squirm. Maybe you think, "Yes, I suppose for the sake of ministry I should do that." Or, maybe, "Well, I would do that if I had the time to get trained." Or "I would do that if I had the money." If you are ready to discard your resistance, here are six ways to begin without draining your time or your budget.

#### 1. Get a guide

If you have a communications staff for your religious community, reach out to this professional. Today professional communicators spend much time and energy keeping up with and using social media. It's how the world is communicating, and the young world in particular communicates this way.

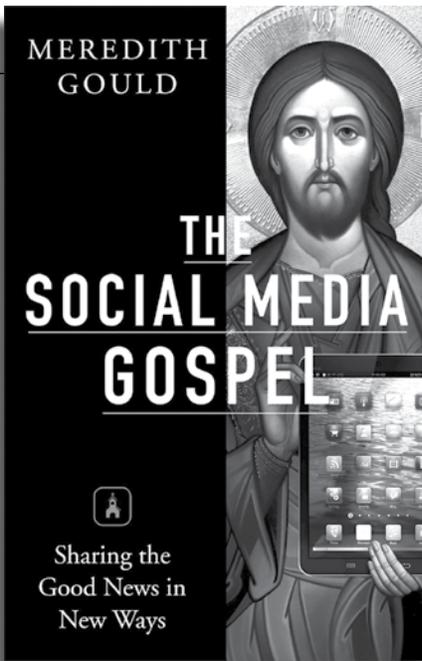
If you don't have a professional communicator who can help you think through goals for using social media and ways of using

it that will help you fulfill those goals, then talk to a few young adults. Young people can tell you what you might have to offer in these platforms, and they can show you the ropes. Another ideal resource is members in your region of the National Religious Vocation Conference. Ask someone familiar with social media to help you get started. Consider having a regional gathering for sharing social media wisdom.

#### 2. Start small

Not only will starting small feel less intimidating, it is probably the most realistic in terms of your time. For instance one post each week on Facebook or Instagram is an easy beginning; you can build from there.

Another "small is beautiful" point is that smaller amounts of text are better. Write short. Social media thrives on short messages. Read the Pope's tweets if you want an example of this (@pontifex). Ideally, your text will be short, and you'll use



ture and social media are converging, and in many ways are now nearly the same thing.

And yet, the church struggles to keep up. As we have with virtually every communications technology since Gutenberg's movable-type printing press, the church and its leaders approach social media with great hesitation and even suspicion. As a consequence, our ability to reach out to youth and young adults (and, increasingly, everyone else!) is compromised. This should be particularly alarming to vocations ministers, whose primary field of ministry is precisely those youth and young adults.

For professional ministers of any sort, finding a concise survey of the social media landscape that makes clear connections to the church's life and mission is the discovery of a rare treasure. *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways* is exactly this sort of treasure.

Meredith Gould, an Episcopalian and a sociologist, has been actively engaged in social media and its applications for church and brings to her book both the

technical expertise to navigate the ever-shifting world of social media and the capacity for theological reflection that makes this book unique. She wisely begins not with an analysis of the current field of social media tools, but with a framework for understanding. Once she has established this framework, she provides a thoughtful look at the current front-runners in the social media race: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube,

and more.

In my travels around the country speaking to clergy convocations, catechists' conferences and similar church gatherings, I've often heard expressed the three objections to social media that Gould confronts in her first chapter: 1) that social media isn't real, and that the relationships and interactions it generates are therefore not authentic, 2) that social media somehow undermines church as traditionally understood (which she charmingly refers to as "church-the-building"), and 3) that so-

some kind of photo or graphic to illustrate your words. Images are very important in these forms of communication. A decent smartphone lets you take photos and instantly upload them to various types of social media.

### 3. Set goals

Have a clear idea of what you hope to accomplish by using social media. If you want to give people a feeling for how your community prays and celebrates the liturgical year, your choice might be Vine or YouTube where you can post short videos showing these things in a way that cannot be conveyed by words. This is where your guide can help you. You're not using social media because it's a trend. You're using it to accomplish clear ministerial goals.

### 4. Collaborate

Others in your community can be part of this outreach. Maybe your superior is already writing a column on the spiritual life

for the donor newsletter; will she or he allow you to use it in the vocation blog? Or perhaps you can divvy up the writing of a blog among several members whom you know enjoy writing.

Maybe a member is good at photos. Could that person take and post photos of the natural beauty around the motherhouse grounds? Can the photographer start a Flickr account so others can find photos of your community (and your community itself can share these photos)?

Both short texts and photos can then link to your website, where you can present longer-form material.

### 5. Keep it personal, and keep it social

The point of social media is to connect people; it's not broadcasting! Tell your story, your community's story, and the stories of your members. Then encourage discerners who respond to tell their stories, and take part in a conversation with them.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, *HORIZON* editor

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cial media should be regarded as a non-essential luxury which takes too much time to learn and use. To this I might add a fourth often-heard objection: that social media is expensive because it requires equipment, service fees, and personnel costs.

## Online is real world

All of these objections Gould handles with finesse, using her own experiences and theological insights to show that appropriate use of social media is not only possible, but necessary. She comments particularly effectively about the nature of social media as a way of bringing people together and building communities:

Of all the fear-based concerns about social media issuing forth from the mouths of nay-sayers, the one about it being alienating and isolating distresses me the most. Using social media has had the exact opposite effect on my own life and I know this to be true for many others.

Amen! For all the concern about “those kids with their phones” and alarmist rhetoric about FaceBook friends not being “real friends,” my own experience is that on-line relationships are as real, affecting, and enduring as any other relationships.

The second half of the book surveys the social media landscape, looks at the current crop of sites and tools, and provides some helpful analysis for how each might be most effectively used for ministry. Gould is very much aware that these chapters are a snapshot in time of what is certainly a moving target. Published in the spring of 2013, her advice is still sound a year later, but will undoubtedly need to be updated as the social media landscape changes.

*The Social Media Gospel* is directed at church leaders and ministers of all sorts, but seems to primarily address the concerns of parish-based ministries. Still, it offers a helpful overview and advice for vocations ministers. In fact, I believe that the insights and information Gould presents are of vital importance for those of us in vocations ministries.

There was a time when vocations were almost entirely local. Young people joined the ranks of the

religious communities they knew: the sisters who taught them in elementary school, the brothers who ran their high school, the priests who served at their parish. They gathered information through personal contacts and relationships. Today inquirers use Internet search engines and social media to research the charisms, mission, and lifestyles of religious communities. (Speaking of search engines, what’s the second most popular website after Google? It’s Facebook!)

While most religious communities are adjusting to the new reality of fewer vocations, a few outliers are experiencing significant growth. I think it’s worth noting that this growth draws people not from local contacts primarily, but from a nationwide pool of people. Young adults are looking online for the religious communities they will join, and they expect to be able to interact with them at a distance, before they make any decisions. (One of my community’s current novices first heard of us when he stumbled on our entry in Wikipedia!) To reach this audience effectively, religious communities must have a strong social media presence.

One critical area of social media ministries needs much more attention: content creation. In order to maintain our presence in social media, we need a steady stream of new content: photos, video, blogs, podcasts, etc. To catch someone’s attention with Facebook requires more than text-based posting. And as younger people move away from Facebook and toward alternatives like Instagram and Vine, that visual content will be even more important.

Generating and curating that media-rich content is a significant burden, but one that will determine the success of our social media presence. I’m hoping that Meredith Gould will produce a second volume that will address this significant but under-appreciated area—how church organizations can staff and finance the social media aspects of their ministry, including the critical photo and video needs.

For vocations ministers who are just beginning to explore social media *The Social Media Gospel* is an excellent place to start. For those with more experience it’s a helpful survey that can point out where and how we can use these tools more effectively. ■

Communities experiencing growth draw people not from local contacts primarily but nationwide. Young adults are looking online for the religious communities they will join.



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