



# Today's Catholic Sisters

**Who they are. Why we need them.**

## **Today's Catholic Sisters Gatherings**

**Executive Summary**

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## INTRODUCTION

The TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS gatherings, sponsored by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) and funded by the GHR Foundation, were designed to commemorate the Year of Consecrated Life and serve as follow-ups to the NRVC's *Women Religious Moving Forward in Hope* and *Keys to the Future* programs, also sponsored by GHR Foundation.

## RATIONALE

Based on feedback from participants of the 2013 *Next Steps in Hope* gathering, the TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS gatherings were in response to a call to educate the larger Church about contemporary religious life for women, particularly as sisters are often misrepresented in the media and these popular distortions can have an adverse effect on vocations. The gatherings also served as a continuation of NRVC's efforts at building a "vocation culture" within religious communities and the wider Church in an effort to attract and retain new members.



*Today's Catholic Sisters poster distributed prior to the event at the four gathering venues.*

## CAMPAIGN

***Today's Catholic Sisters:  
Who they are. Why we need them.***

The TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS gatherings were held in 2015-16 at four universities sponsored by women's religious congregations in different regions of the United States:

- Sept. 12, 2015**  
UNIVERSITY OF THE INCARNATE WORD  
Austin, Texas  
(Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word)
- Sept. 20, 2015**  
DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY, River Forest, Illinois  
(Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters)
- Oct. 10, 2015**  
IMMACULATA UNIVERSITY  
Immaculata, Pennsylvania  
(Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary)
- Jan. 23, 2016**  
MOUNT SAINT MARY'S UNIVERSITY  
Los Angeles (Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet)

The symposia planning committee included NRVC staff, the authors of *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* (Oxford University Press), and university representatives and sisters from the sponsoring congregations.

An approximate total of 550 people attended the gatherings. The audiences were comprised primarily of women with about 30 percent under age 35. Ten to 20 percent of each gather-



NRVC Executive Director, Brother Paul Bednarczyk, C.S.C. with presenters and panelists at the Jan. 23, 2016 Today's Catholic Sisters gathering at Mount Saint Mary's University in Los Angeles.

ing was made up of laypeople with women religious representing the rest of the participants. In addition, a number of people tuned into livestreams of the sessions from San Antonio and Chicago.

## PRE-EVENT PUBLICITY

The gatherings were publicized locally by each of the university's communications departments via printed posters (created by TrueQuest Communications for NRVC), social posts, and e-newsletters. Nationally, the gatherings were advertised through print and web ads in *VISION Vocation Guide*, *National Catholic Reporter*, *Our Sunday Visitor*, *America*, *HORIZON*, *Global Sisters Report*, *A Nuns Life*, *National Catholic Register*, and *CruxNow (Boston Globe)*. Additionally notice was sent via email blast to thousands of Catholic parishes, vocation discerners, and individual Catholic subscribers to various Catholic publications. Bulletin inserts and social media posts were also provided as part of the email promotion.

## PRESENTATIONS

Each half-day symposium featured presentations by Dr. Mary Gautier, Sister Mary Johnson, S.N.D.de N., and Sister Patricia Wittberg, S.C., the authors of *New Generations of Catholic Sisters*, which explores the portrayal of women religious in the increasingly polarizing "culture wars" playing out in the Catholic Church.



The presenters shared sociological data from various studies on religious life pertaining to women religious from the past 15 years. Their presentations were meant to complement the existing theological, spiritual, and psychological literature on religious life, and to give particular attention to the experience of a newer generation of Catholic sisters today.

*Synopsis of Dr. Mary Gautier's report on the myths, perceptions,  
and realities of religious life today*

In the mid-1960s there was a huge cohort of sisters serving in the United States—as many as 180,000 religious sisters—due to the large numbers of Catholic women entering religious life in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. But because of various cultural, sociological, and ecclesial shifts, vocations to religious life began to drop to the point that today we have approximately the same number of women religious as we had at the beginning of the 20th century. This contrasts with the fact that since then the total Catholic population in the U.S. has grown by 500 percent.

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never-married  
Catholic woman  
who was born  
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religious vocation.*

This dramatic turnaround in the numbers of women religious in the U.S. has had an impact on perceptions about religious life for Catholic women today. One perception is that women today are turned off by religious life; that religious orders of women will go out of existence at some point in the not too distant future. The reality, however, is that about one in every 10 never-married Catholic woman born since Vatican II has considered a religious vocation. This means that 250,000 never-married Catholic women have “very seriously” considered becoming a sister at one time or another in their lives. Clearly, religious life still offers a way of living that appeals to Catholic women.

Another perception is that institutes belonging to the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) are attracting vocations but the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) groups are not. The reality is that very few institutes of either group are attracting large numbers. About a third of the institutes in either group currently have no one at all in formation. For those institutes that do have newer members, the retention rate remains the same regardless of the conference to which they belong. It is true that CMSWR institutes tend to attract younger women, while LCWR institutes are more likely to attract women who are over the age of 40.

These realities pose a couple of serious challenges for those who are asking how to make religious life a salient choice for women today.

The first is the challenge of age. There are more women religious today over the age of 90 than there are under the age of 60. Most women religious today are in their 70s or older. Many religious communities of women, therefore, are made up of elderly sisters, who grew up in a very different church and who have very different experiences of and expectations for religious life compared to those who recently joined religious life. Studies have found that generational cohorts explain much of the differences in attitudes, often better than age, leadership conference, or year of entrance into religious life. Understanding and addressing these generational challenges has been one of the goals of the TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS gatherings.

The second is the challenge of diversity. While nearly all perpetually professed wom-

en religious are Caucasian, the women who are currently in formation for religious life are much more racially and ethnically diverse because they are products of a much more diverse Catholic population today. Understanding and addressing this challenge is critical for the future of women religious in the United States.

*Synopsis of Sister Patricia Wittberg, S.C.'s report on commonalities and challenges in religious life today*

*New Generations of Catholic Sisters* looked at similarities and differences in the respondents:

- Across ages—Were young women who entered religious life different from older women who did?
- Across the two conferences—Were women who entered CMSWR institutes different from those who entered LCWR institutes?
- Across time periods—Were the women who entered between 1965 and 1980 different from those entering between 1993 and 2008?

The research found many similarities. The most common reason cited for entering religious life across all of these dimensions was a sense of being called by God. There was also no difference in the number of sisters citing the “charism” of their institute as an attraction, although the respondents were vague in explaining what the charism meant to them. The respondents also uniformly agreed that community living was often both a joy and frustration for them. Another challenge that was uniformly cited by the respondents was the difficulty in balancing prayer, community life, and ministry.

The differences between the respondents seemed mostly to arise from generational differences among the four commonly described generations in Catholicism (the Pre-Vatican II Generation, born before 1943, the Vatican II Generation born between 1943 and 1960, the Post-Vatican II Generation, born 1961-1981, and the Millennial Generation, born after 1981). Simply put, the kind of Catholicism a person grew up in, and the experience that person had of religious sisters while growing up, influenced their expectations of religious life.

The study also found that young people entering both CMSWR and LCWR institutes:

- 1) attached greater importance to common life: to living together, eating and socializing together, praying together, etc.;
- 2) were more likely to value Mass, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, and other devotional prayers, and less likely to value faith sharing experiences.

In LCWR institutes, specifically, the youngest entrants were somewhat more likely to value a religious habit, while in CMSWR institutes, the youngest entrants were the most likely to mention the value of women religious as the spouses of Christ.

While both leadership conferences have the same number of persons entering their institutes, because there are significantly fewer CMSWR institutes than LCWR institutes, CMSWR institutes proportionately have more women in religious formation. Each conference also has approximately the same percentage of institutes with no new members.

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But the age distributions of the entrants was dramatically different: in CMSWR institutes, half of the entrants were under 30 and only 15 percent were over 40, while in LCWR institutes these proportions were reversed.

***Synopsis of Sister Mary Johnson, S.N.D.de N.'s report on the implications and recommendations from New Generations of Catholic Sisters***

Each chapter of *New Generations of Catholic Sisters* begins with the ongoing story of Maria, a young, Mexican-American law student who is discerning religious life but who encounters several obstacles along the way. Maria is a composite of women the authors have met over the years who have recounted what some of those obstacles have looked like.

Some have to do with the perceptions held by family members and friends of the role of women in the Church or the current status of religious life.

Some have to do with the lack of information in campus ministry offices or parishes regarding how to begin the process of discerning a call to religious life. And some have to do with the availability in some religious institutes of certain defining characteristics of religious life that seem to attract some members of the new generation of religious.

Since 8 percent of Millennial Catholic women in the U.S., along with women from other generations, are considering religious life at this time, the urgent question facing the Church is how to remove as many of these obstacles as possible so that these women can get the support they need in their discernment. These efforts require multiple strategies across several constituencies in the Church, taking into account the multiple levels of

diversity of the women coming to discern religious life: racial, ethnic, generational, age, life experience, and theological and ecclesiological. The efforts must also use the multiple facets of the identity of religious life in new and creative ways to respond to the needs of these discerners, for example, opening the prayer life, community life, and ministries of congregations in new and creative ways.

A clearinghouse for information is needed that focuses on the findings of religious life research and concrete applications for best practices to be shared across congregations and the wider Church community. Providing support to women and men discerning their vocation belongs not just to vocation directors but to the whole Church. No matter which way of life is ultimately discerned, the individual and the Church are strengthened because of this process.

Three examples of creative structures recently instituted to respond to contemporary vocation needs:

- 1) The National Fund for Catholic Religious Vocations (NFCRV) that has been established to assist religious institutes financially so that they may welcome candidates burdened with educational debt;
- 2) Retreat weekends offered to provide vocational support for former volunteers who served a year or more after college in Catholic volunteer programs. Such volunteer programs can serve as a pathway to discern a religious vocation. In fact, six percent of volunteers have entered religious life.

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3) The establishment of programs like the AVE (After Volunteer Experience) program begun by the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati which provides ministry and community experience for those who have served as volunteers and now wish to deepen their knowledge and experience of religious life.

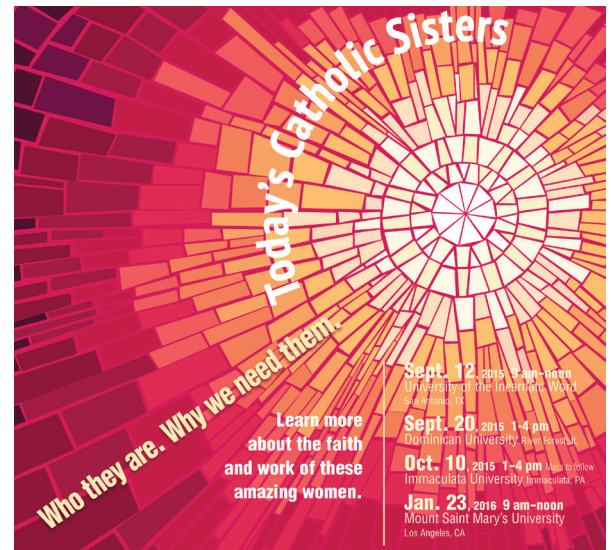
These are just three examples of concrete attempts by Catholic philanthropic groups and some religious congregations geared to remove obstacles to discernment by providing greater support for those considering a religious vocation.

## PANEL DISCUSSIONS

The author presentations at each gathering were followed by a panel discussion with four young and newly professed sisters who answered questions about what drew them to religious life and to their particular communities, and what advice they had for promoting vocations among young people. The young sisters represented 16 different religious communities from both the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. Half of the panelists were born outside of the United States.

The panelists' answers to the above questions were very similar within and between the different gatherings. They spoke of feeling called by God to religious life and being attracted to their communities because they felt "at home." A number reported that friends had told them they would be a good sister. A few described themselves as "closet discerners" who had been considering religious life but who had not revealed their intentions to anyone. About half of the sisters had not attended Catholic grammar or high schools. The majority had no experience with sisters until their college years or even later. All of the panelists spoke of a personal experience with a sister or sisters from their community prior to entering religious life, through a parish, school or college, or volunteer service. These positive experiences also influenced their decisions to enter their religious institutes.

When asked what advice they have for religious communities and Church institutions for promoting religious vocations, especially among younger people, panelists at all four gatherings recommended that Catholics in general and religious in particular reach out to young people and ask them to consider a religious vocation. They encouraged the sisters to find ways to be among young people and share their experiences of religious life. They also asked that older sisters try to understand and appreciate young people and the issues that are meaningful to them. They cited the technology gap between themselves and the older sisters as an impediment to mutual understanding. The importance of making young people feel welcome and an integral part of a community was stressed by the panelists as well. Multicultural diversity is also an important reality to the young sisters and they encouraged religious communities to incorporate cultural diversity in prayer, meals, and celebrations.



*Today's Catholic Sisters ad that appeared in national Catholic periodicals, websites, and social networks.*

***Panelists recommended that Catholics in general and religious in particular ask young people to consider a religious vocation.***



## GATHERING OUTCOMES

The TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS gatherings were highly rated by the attendees. Of the evaluations submitted, 98 percent of the feedback was positive. Eighty percent said their understanding of Catholic sisters had changed for the better. The comments can be summarized as:

- The presenters were excellent. It is good to have data about religious life and that women continue to be attracted to it.
- The young sisters on the panel were enlightening.
- Attendees were happy to hear that people are still interested in joining religious life.
- The laypeople came away with a better understanding and deeper appreciation of the importance of women religious and the need to pray for and promote religious vocations.
- The presentation and panelists provided hope for the future of religious life.
- Attendees now have a better understanding of:
  - » How generational differences affect religious communities;
  - » The importance of technology in attracting young people to religious life;
  - » The importance of communication among different generations;
  - » The significance of welcoming members from different cultures;
  - » The role of laypeople in promoting religious vocations.
- The information on how to engage young people was very helpful.
- The sisters are now more committed to reaching out to young people and inviting them to consider religious life.
- The gatherings increased the enthusiasm among religious sisters for their vocation.

*Eighty percent of respondents said their understanding of Catholic sisters had changed for the better.*

The success of the first four TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS gatherings spurred further discussion and interest. St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, MN, under the sponsorship of NRVC Region 8 and LCWR Region 11, has offered to host another TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS gathering on July 15, 2016. Such efforts in response to continued interest in accurate, up-to-date information about religious women is further testimony of the need for these initial gatherings and the important service they provided to the church.

## CONCLUSION

In dedicating the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis called on the Church to celebrate the legacy of religious life and to renew the Church's appreciation for this unique form of discipleship with a hope that others may join its ranks in the future. Religious sisters, in particular, have had a remarkable legacy in the United States, for they were some of America's first pioneers who quickly became the backbone of the Catholic hospital and health care systems, parochial schools, and social services agencies that have been integral to the health, education, and welfare of generations of Americans and helped ensure the strength and endurance not only of the Church in the U.S. but the nation itself.



Recognizing the unique and significant gifts of women religious, NRVC sponsored the TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS gatherings to provide a greater awareness and more informed understanding among laity, clergy, media, and other interested parties about women's religious life today and why a younger woman would consider being a part of it.

The participants' positive response to these gatherings affirmed that the faithful witness and selfless service of religious sisters continue to inspire and have a positive impact on our Church and world. Undoubtedly, there is a need to continue to tell this extraordinary story of faith, love, and service.

NRVC hopes that these gatherings will spur other church constituencies (especially Catholic colleges and universities) to engage in similar projects supportive of women religious and their unique and essential vocation, which in turn will contribute to an environment more conducive to religious vocation discernment among young women and men. The future of religious life depends on the efforts of an entire Church that benefits from the lives, works, and prayer of those who choose religious life.

*NRVC hopes these gatherings will spur other church constituencies to engage in similar projects supportive of women religious.*

## **TODAY'S CATHOLIC SISTERS CONTRIBUTOR ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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