



Pope Francis and vocations

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Editor's note

Live with hands unfolded

AFTER 25 YEARS IN VOCATION PUBLISHING, I've started to hear vocation stories everywhere. On the first day of spring this year I heard a beautiful one on the radio program *Story Corps*. Fourth grader Aiden Sykes was interviewing his father, Albert Sykes in Jackson, Mississippi. The following question had added poignancy because Albert had just told his son how daunting it is to raise an African-American boy when approximately one in three African-American men winds up in jail at some point.

"Dad, what is your dream for me?" Aiden asks.

"My dream is for you to live out your dreams," Albert replied. "There's a old proverb that talks about when children are born, children come out with their fists closed because that's where they keep all their gifts. And as you grow, your hands learn to unfold because you're learning to release your gifts to the world. And so, for the rest of your life, I wanna see you live with your hands unfolded."

This understanding of our gifts and their need to be shared is what "vocation culture" looks like. We don't always name secular images and ideas like these for what they are, but the vision that Albert Sykes holds for his son is profoundly spiritual.

§ § §

On a less elevating note, I want to call attention to the series of articles starting on page 21 on creating safe youth environments. I know first hand that having to take courses on safe protocols is an inconvenience. If the pain of sexual abuse by clergy and religious had never happened, the case for these rules and regulations would be much less compelling. However, as a mother of three, I cannot overstate how much I value every effort by churches and community groups to create safe environments for youth. The ongoing suffering and loss of trust that abuse causes means we all must pay a small price of "jumping through the hoops" and maintaining awareness and vigilance. Experts tell us that sexual abuse crimes can be prevented when an entire church or school community works together for prevention.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor

"As you grow, your hands learn to unfold because you're learning to release your gifts to the world."



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Summer Institute 2014 participants engage in a small group discussion.

Summer Institute is filling up

Vocation ministers from North America and beyond have begun to register for the NRVC 2015 Summer Institute, to take place at the downtown branch of DePaul University in Chicago July 17-31. Workshops 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

THE ASSESSMENT OF FAMILY OF ORIGIN ISSUES FOR CANDIDATES TO RELIGIOUS LIFE

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

For details and online registration, see nrvc.net.

Collaborative workshop targets Spanish-speaking sisters

NRVC is partnering with Catholic Extension to sponsor a June 2, 2015 pastoral and vocation skills workshop specifically for Spanish-speaking sisters from South America who minister in the United States.

The workshop's aim is to assist the sisters in becoming relevant, proficient, and credible pastoral ministers who are also confident vocation promoters. This event will include presentations, small-group activities, and time for participants to network with one another.

Sisters Raquel Ortez, S.S.N.D. and Elsa Garcia, C.D.P. will be presenters at this workshop, entitled *Vocaciones sin Fronteras en un Mundo Cambiante* (Vocations without Borders in a Changing World).



NRVC is partnering with Catholic Extension to create a workshop for Spanish-speaking sisters. The workshop design team includes, left to right, Ms. Ana Bojorquez and Sisters Raquel Ortez, S.S.N.D.; Mary Jane Gawlik, C.S.S.F.; Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M. In the front are: Sisters Teresa Gomez, H.M.S.S.; and Elsa Garcia, C.D.P. Not pictured is Sister Elyse Ramirez, O.P.



Many vocation directors took part in the 2013 NCYC. Among them were Sister Claire Vanborg, I.B.V.M.; Mr. Bart Hisgen, Father Adam MacDonald, S.V.D., and Sister Maria Brizuela, O.S.F.

NCYC offers opportunity for ministry and outreach

Vocation ministers are encouraged to take part in the National Catholic Youth Conference, a large, biennial youth gathering to take place November 19-21, 2015 in Indianapolis. Sponsored by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, the gathering brings together approximately 25,000 youth, youth ministers, parents, and chaperones.

Vocation ministers can take part in one of two ways: by hosting a booth where they give away promotional items, or by being part of a registered vocation team. Vocation teams will help meet the growing desire of teen participants to have a direct experience and conversation with religious. Teams of up to six will help in assigned areas of service, crafts, prayer, and interactive activities. New this year will be the opportunity for NRVC members to teach and pray in the chapel next to the Vocation Nook using the spiritual traditions of their institutes. For details see nrvc.net, ncyc.info, or contact Sister Deborah Borneman, SS.C.M., director of member relations and services for NRVC: debbiesscm@nrvc.net.

Not too early to plan a fall workshop

The NRVC 2015 Fall Institute will take place at the Marillac Center in Leavenworth, Kansas October 13-25, 2015. Offerings will include:

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, Brother Sean Sammon, F.M.S., October 23-25

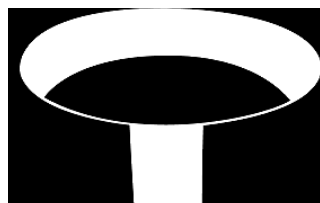
The following retreat will take place at the Redemptorist Renewal Center in Tucson, Arizona:

ADVENT DAYS OF RENEWAL AND REFLECTION

by Sister Addie Lorraine Walker, S.S.N.D., December 14-17. This will be a collaborative program with the Religious Formation Conference.

More men preparing for ordination

A new study of U.S. men being ordained to the priesthood in 2015 identified more men eligible for priestly ordination this year than in the recent past. The total



number of men identified by seminary rectors, vicars for clergy, and major superiors as prospective ordinands for the class of 2015 is 595. This number is up from 477 potential ordinands identified by

the same study in 2014 and 497 in 2013.

Men ordained to the priesthood in the U.S. in 2015 reported that they were, on average, about 17-years-old when they first considered a vocation to the priesthood and were encouraged to consider a vocation by an average of four people. Of those preparing to be ordained, 37 percent have a relative who is a priest or member of a religious order.

Seven in 10 of the new ordinands (71 percent) say they were encouraged by a parish priest, as well as friends (46 percent), parishioners (45 percent), and mothers (40 percent). On average, they lived in the diocese or eparchy for which they will be ordained for 15 years before entering seminary. Religious community ordinands knew the members of their religious institute an average of six years before entering.

A full report of the study—conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate—is at uscab.org. ■



Year of Consecrated Life

Rejoice in your vocation

In 2014 the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life released “Rejoice: A letter to consecrated men and women, a message from the teachings of Pope Francis.” The full message is available on vatican.va and through nrvc.net (see the “Resources” tab, and look for “Year of Consecrated Life”). This article is made up of sections 4, 10, and 11 and a selection of reflection questions by Pope Francis that appear at the end of the document. All quotes are the words of Pope Francis.

“**I**N CALLING YOU,” says Pope Francis, “God says to you: ‘You are important to me, I love you, I am counting on you.’ Jesus says this to each one of us! Joy is born from that! The joy of the moment in which Jesus looked at me. Understanding and hearing this is the secret of our joy. Feeling loved by God, feeling that for him we are not numbers but people; and we know that it is he who is calling us.”

This call is given to us gratuitously by free divine sovereignty and free human response: “Jesus, at the Last Supper, turns to the Apostles with these words: ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you’ (Jn. 15:16). They remind us all, not only those of us who are priests, that vocation is always an initiative of God. It is Christ who called you to follow him in the consecrated life and this means continuously making an ‘exodus’ from yourselves in order to center your life on Christ and on his gospel, on the will of God, laying aside your own plans, in order to say with St. Paul: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’ (Gal. 2:20).”

Francis invites men and women on a pilgrimage in reverse, a pathway of knowledge to discover ourselves on the streets of Palestine or near the boat of the humble fisherman of Galilee. He invites us to contemplate the beginnings of a journey or rather, of an event initiated by Christ, when the nets were left on the lake shore, the tax collector’s desk by the side of the road, the ambitions



BROTHER OCTAVIO DURAN, O.F.M.

Friars from Holy Name Province in New York City offer each other the sign of peace during their 2014 final vows ceremony. On the left is Brother Ross Chamberland, O.F.M.; on the right is Brother Michael Reyes, O.F.M. (Chamberland has since been ordained.)

of the zealot among discarded plans. He invites us to remain for a long time, on an interior pilgrimage, before the dawn, when, in a warm environment of friendly relationships, the intellect is led to open itself to mystery, the decision is made that it is good to set out to follow this Master who alone has the words of eternal life (cf. Jn. 6:68). He invites us to make our whole “life a pilgrimage of loving transformation.”

Francis calls us to pause at “the joy of the moment when Jesus looked at me” and to recall the important and demanding, underlying meaning of our vocation: “It is a response to a call, a call of love.” To stay with Christ requires us to share our lives, our choices, the obedience of faith, the happiness of poverty, the radicality of love.

It is about being reborn through vocation. “I invite all Christians ... at this very moment, to a renewed per-

sonal encounter with Jesus Christ today, at least to an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.”

Saint Paul brings us back to this fundamental vision: No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid (1 Cor. 3:11). The word “vocation” indicates a free gift, like a reservoir of life that never ceases renewing humanity and the church in the depths of their being.

In the experience of vocation, God is indeed the mysterious subject of an act of calling. We hear a voice that calls us to life and discipleship for the Kingdom.

Pope Francis calls us to pause at that opening scene: “the joy of the moment when Jesus looked at me” and to recall the important and demanding, underlying meaning of our vocation: “It is a response to a call, a call of love.”

Francis calls us to a consciousness of that personal call: “I would like to say to those who feel indifferent to God or to faith, and to those who are far from God or who have distanced themselves from him, and to us also, with our ‘distancing’ and our ‘abandonment’ of God, that may seem insignificant but are so numerous in our daily life: look into the depths

of your heart, look into your own inner depths and ask yourself: do you have a heart that desires something great, or a heart that has been lulled to sleep by things? Has your heart maintained a restlessness searching or have you let it be suffocated by things that will finally harden it?”

The relationship with Jesus Christ asks to be nourished by this restless searching. This makes us aware of the gratuity of the gift of a vocation and helps us to explain the reasons for our initial choice and for our perseverance. “Letting Christ make us his own always means straining forward to what lies ahead, to the goal of Christ (cf. Phil. 3:14).” To continue listening to God requires that these questions become the coordinates guiding the rhythm of our daily life.

This inexpressible mystery, leading us within, sharing in the indescribable mystery of God, can only be interpreted in faith. “Faith is our response to a word that engages us personally, to a ‘Thou’ who calls us by name” and “as a response to a word which preceded it, would always be an act of remembrance. Yet this remembrance is not fixed on past events but, as the memory of a promise, it becomes capable of opening up the future, shed-

ding light on the path to be taken.”

Francis explains: “Faith contains our own memory of God’s history with us, the memory of our encounter with God who always takes the first step, who creates, saves, and transforms us. Faith is remembrance of his word that warms our heart, and of his saving work which gives life, purifies us, cares for and nourishes us. . . . The one who is mindful of God, who is guided by the memory of God in his or her entire life is able to awaken that memory in the hearts of others.” It is the memory of being called here and now.

Companionship in community

We are called to undertake an exodus out of our own selves, setting out on a path of adoration and service, says the pope. “We must go out through that door to seek and meet the people! Have the courage to go against the tide of this culture of efficiency, this culture of waste. Encountering and welcoming everyone, solidarity and fraternity: these are what make our society truly human. Be servants of communion and of the culture of encounter! I would like you to be almost obsessed about this. Be so without being presumptuous.

“The ghost to fight against is the image of religious life understood as an escape and consolation in face of an ‘external’ difficult and complex world.” The pope urges us to “leave the nest,” to live the life of the men and women of our times, to hand ourselves over to God and to our neighbor.

“Joy is born from the gratuitousness of an encounter! . . . And the joy of the encounter with him and with his call does not lead to shutting oneself in but to opening oneself; it leads to service in the church. St. Thomas said: *bonum est diffusivum sui*. Good spreads. And joy also spreads. Do not be afraid to show the joy of having answered the Lord’s call, of having responded to his choice of love and of bearing witness to his Gospel in service to the church. And joy, true joy, is contagious; it is infectious... it impels one forward.” Faced with this contagious witness of joy, serenity, fruitfulness, the testimony of tenderness and love, humble charity, without arrogance, many people feel the need to “come and see.”

Many times in his papacy Francis has pointed out the *path of attraction*, of contagion, the path for the growth of the church, the path of the new evangelization. “The church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. . . . It is this witness I expect from you.”



Pope Francis asks religious: “Look into the depths of your heart; look into your own inner depths and ask yourself: do you have a heart that desires something great?”

Entrusting to us the task of *waking up the world*, the pope urges us to approach the stories of the men and women of today in the light of two pastoral categories that have their roots in the newness of the Gospel: *closeness* and *encounter*, two ways through which God himself is revealed in history culminating in the Incarnation.

On the road to Emmaus, like Jesus with his disciples, we welcome in daily companionship the joys and sorrows of the people, giving them “heart warmth,” while we tenderly care for the tired and the weak, so that our journey together has light and meaning in Christ.

Our journey together “matures towards pastoral fatherhood, towards pastoral motherhood, and when a priest is not a father to his community, when a sister is not a mother to all those with whom she works, he or she becomes sad. This is the problem. For this reason I say to you: the root of sadness in pastoral life is precisely in the absence of fatherhood or motherhood that comes from living this consecration unsatisfactorily, which on the contrary should lead us to fertility.”

The restlessness of love

As living icons of the motherhood and of the closeness of the church, we go out to those who are waiting for the Word of consolation and we bend down with motherly

love and fatherly spirit towards the poor and the weak.

The pope invites us not to privatize love, but with the restlessness of the seeker: “Tirelessly seeking the good of the other, of the beloved.”

The crisis of meaning of the modern person and the economic and moral crisis of Western society and its institutions are not temporary phenomena of the times in which we live but they outline an historical moment of outstanding importance. We are called now, as the church, to go outside in order to arrive at the margins, geographic, urban, and existential—the margins of the mystery of sin, pain, injustice, and misery—to the hidden places of the soul where each person experiences the joys and sufferings of life.

“We live in a culture of conflict, a culture of fragmentation, a culture of waste.... The discovery of a tramp who has died of cold is not news.” Yet poverty for us is a theological category, “because our God, the Son of God, abased himself, he made himself poor to walk along the road with us.... A poor church for the poor begins by reaching out to the flesh of Christ. If we reach out to the flesh of Christ, we begin to understand something, to understand what this poverty, the Lord’s poverty, actually is.”

To experience in one’s own life the beatitude of the poor means to be a sign that the anguish of loneliness and limitation has been conquered by the joy of the person who is indeed free in Christ and has learned how to love.

What are you doing this summer?



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During his pastoral visit to Assisi, Pope Francis was asked what the church must strip away. And he replied: “[Strip away] every action that is not for God, is not of God; strip away the fear of opening the doors and going out to encounter all, especially the poorest of the poor, the needy, the remote, without waiting. Certainly not to get lost in the shipwreck of the world, but to bear with courage the light of Christ, the light of the Gospel, even in the darkness, where one can’t see, where one might stumble. Strip away the seeming assurance structures give, which, though certainly necessary and important, should never obscure the one true strength it carries within: God. He is our strength!”

This resonates like an invitation for us “not to be afraid of the newness the Holy Spirit works within us, not to be afraid of the renewal of structures. The church is free. She is sustained by the Holy Spirit. It is this that Jesus teaches us in the Gospel: the freedom we need always to find the newness of the Gospel in our life and in structures, the freedom to choose new wineskins for this newness.” We are invited to be audacious, frontier men and women: “Ours is not a ‘lab faith,’ but a ‘journey faith,’ an historical faith. God has revealed himself as history, not as a compendium of abstract truths.... You cannot bring home the frontier, but you have to live on the border and be audacious.”

Besides the challenge of the beatitude of the poor, the pope invites us to visit the frontiers of thought and culture, to promote dialogue, even at the intellectual level, to give reasons for hope on the basis of ethical and spiritual criteria, questioning ourselves about what is good. Faith never restricts the space for reason, but opens it to a holistic vision of the human person and of reality, and defends it against the danger of reducing the human person to “human material.”

Authentic culture, constantly called to serve humanity in all its conditions, opens unexplored paths, opens doors to allow hope to breathe, strengthens the meaning of life and watches over the common good. An authentic cultural process “promotes an integral humanism and the culture of encounter and relationship: this is the Christian way of promoting the common good, the joy of living. Here, faith and reason unite, the religious dimension and the various aspects of human culture—art, science, labor, literature....” Authentic cultural research encounters history and opens up ways of seeking the face of God.

The places where knowledge is developed and communicated are also the places where a culture of closeness, of encounter and dialogue can be created that lowers defences, opens doors, and builds bridges.

Reflection questions for those in consecrated life from Pope Francis

- I want to say one word to you and this word is “joy.” Wherever there are consecrated people, seminarians, men and women religious, young people—there is joy, there is always joy! It is the joy of freshness, the joy of following Jesus; the joy that the Holy Spirit gives us, not the joy of the world. There is joy! But where is joy born?
- Look into the depths of your heart; look into your own inner depths and ask yourself: do you have a heart that desires something great, or a heart that has been lulled to sleep by things? Has your heart preserved the restlessness of seeking, or have you let it be suffocated by things that end by hardening it? God awaits you, he seeks you; how do you respond to him? Are you aware of the situation of your soul? Or have you nodded off? Do you believe God is waiting for you, or does this truth consist only of “words”?
- We are victims of this culture of the temporary. I would like you to think about this: how can I be free; how can I break free from this “culture of the temporary”?
- This is a primary responsibility of all adults, of formators: to set an example of consistency to the youngest. Do we want consistent young people? Are we consistent? On the contrary, the Lord will say to us what he said to the People of God about the Pharisees: “Do what they say but not what they do!” Consistency and authenticity!
- We may ask ourselves: am I anxious for God, anxious to proclaim him, to make him known? Or do I allow that spiritual worldliness to attract me which impels people to do everything for love of themselves? We consecrated people think of our personal interests, of the functionality of our works, of our careers. Well, we can think of so many things... Have I, so to speak, made myself “comfortable” in my Christian life, in my priestly life, in my religious life, and also in my community life? Or do I retain the force of restlessness for God, for his Word that makes me “step out” of myself towards others?
- Do we feel the restlessness of love? Do we believe in love for God and for others? Or are we unconcerned by this? Not in an abstract manner, not only in words, but the real brother we come across, the sister who is beside us! Are we moved by their needs or do we remain closed

in on ourselves, in our communities which are often “comfortable communities” for us?

- This is a beautiful, beautiful way to holiness! Do not speak badly of others. “But father, there are problems...” Tell the superior, tell the bishop, who can rectify them. Do not tell a person who cannot help. This is important: brotherhood, [sisterhood]! But tell me, would you speak badly of your mother, your father, your siblings? Never. So why do you do so in the consecrated life, in the seminary, in your priestly life?
- At the foot of the cross, Mary is at the same time the woman of sorrow and of watchful expectation of a mystery far greater than sorrow, which is about to be fulfilled. It seemed that everything had come to an end; every hope could be said to have been extinguished. She too, at that moment, remembering the promises of the Annunciation could have said: they did not come true, I was deceived. But she did not say this. And so she who was blessed because she believed, sees blossom from her faith a new future and awaits God’s tomorrow with expectation. At times I think: do we know how to wait for God’s tomorrow? Or do we want it today? For her the tomorrow of God is the dawn of Easter morning, the dawn of the first day of the week. It would do us good to think, in contemplation, of the embrace of mother and son. The single lamp lit at the tomb of Jesus is the hope of the mother, which in that moment is the hope of all humanity. I ask myself and I ask you: is this lamp still alight in monasteries? In your monasteries are you waiting for God’s tomorrow?
- The restlessness of love is always an incentive to go toward the other, without waiting for the other to manifest his or her need. The restlessness of love gives us the gift of pastoral fruitfulness, and we must ask ourselves, each one of us: is my spiritual effectiveness healthy, is my apostolate fruitful?
- An authentic faith always involves a profound desire to change the world. Here is the question we must ask ourselves: do we also have great vision and impetus? Are we also daring? Do our dreams fly high? Does zeal consume us (cf. Ps. 68:10)? Or are we mediocre and satisfied with our “made in the lab” apostolic programs? ■



PHOTO: E. MIRANDA, SCNY

Pope Francis is encouraging a new energy and authenticity in communities of consecrated life.

Letting joy in their vocation shine through during a celebration of their golden jubilee are Sisters of Charity of New York Lynn Ann Dalton, S.C. (left) and Sister Patricia Quinn, S.C.

The “Francis effect” on religious life

THE ELECTION OF POPE FRANCIS two years ago brought wonder and hope for some, as well as, perhaps, some fear of change. The cardinals chose, for the first time, a man from Latin America who was known for his commitment to the poor and marginalized. The first Jesuit elected to the papacy then chose the name Francis, not to honor the great missionary Jesuit St. Francis Xavier, but instead to remember the universally recognized preacher to all creatures and founder of the Franciscans, St. Francis of Assisi, champion of voluntary poverty.

With all these unexpected “firsts,” certainly Catholics knew to expect something different. Even his appearance on the balcony bespoke a new sense of the “papa” as one of the people—wearing simpler clothing than his predecessors and humbly asking the prayers of the people gathered in St. Peter’s Square and in front of televisions around the world.

As we got to know the new pope, we saw a happy religious, a kind pastor, and a conscientious administrator. Francis sought to live among the community by not moving into the papal apartments, he spoke to and

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for people who are often ignored, and he even paid his own hotel bill. He acted—and still acts— more like a country pastor or kindly father than a head of state. By his actions and words, it became clear very quickly that Pope Francis understood himself to be a Christian like other Christians, a priest like other priests, and a Jesuit like other religious. It was also clear that his realistic view of himself as sinful and of the world as suffering did not diminish the joy that seeped into his encounters with people around the world.

In fact, Pope Francis' first major writing, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), called every Christian to re-examine her or his life in order to remember that "the joy of the Gospel fills the heart and the whole life of those who encounter Jesus." The text calls all Christians to be transformed by the joy of Jesus, and to bring that joy into the world. That joy is our missionary work, and that joy will draw others to the Gospel. While the message is ancient, by his words, his actions, and his joyful presence, Pope Francis gives new vitality and energy to the Christian mission we all share.

Message resonates

Much in Francis' message to all Christians resonates with me as a religious and calls me to re-examine my life. Yet it is clear that Francis highly values his identity as a member of a religious order, and that the Christian life of women and men religious carries special nuance. In November, 2013—during an informal conversation with the Union of Superiors General of Religious men during their General Assembly (and it is my hope that he chooses to have a similar conversation with leaders of women's religious orders)—Francis announced the Year for the Consecrated Life. In this conversation, documented by *La Civiltà Cattolica* in an article entitled "Wake Up the World" by Father Antonio Spadaro, S.J., Pope Francis makes it clear that every Christian is called to "evangelical radicalness," but that women and men religious are to live that evangelical radicalism in a special, prophetic way.

Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world. We are speaking of an eschatological outlook, of the values of the Kingdom incarnated here, on this earth. It is a question of leaving everything to follow the Lord.

Religious institutes across the globe are called to reflect on the intersection of life and the Gospel, "with the desire and intention of making courageous decisions

leading to revitalization, bearing fruits of joy" (See "Re-joice! A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women"). This is, of course, not the first time religious institutes have been called to renewal. It is also not Pope Francis' first call to Christians to exude the joy they find in Gospel living. What makes this call new at this moment in history?

While I see much of Francis' message as a challenge to every Christian to revisit the Gospel message, his call to religious men and women is particularly strong in these areas:

1. We are called to show the world our joy.
2. We are called to live as a people, not as individuals, bound not only to our religious institutes, but also to those people who are most vulnerable in society.
3. We are called to see beyond the boundaries of our expectations.
4. We are called to intimate relationship with God, to be witnesses of prayer and discernment in our world.

While the message is ancient, by his words, his actions, and his joyful presence, Pope Francis gives new vitality and energy to the Christian mission we all share.

Joyful witnesses

First, on a very basic level, we in religious life (and, indeed, all Christians) are called to live our missionary evangelism with obvious and visible joy. Our joy is an expression of the transformative message of God's love, and one of the means by which we "wake up the world." We are called to embody the Gospel message of love, to embrace the will of Jesus—to glorify God—as our own, and to become in that embodiment an expression of the kingdom of God present here and now in a world that is full of suffering. Our encounter with suffering, with the cross, draws us to self-sacrificing love. Thus, suffering and self-giving love are united in the same mystery, the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection (Homily, July 7, 2013). It is "the logic of the cross," a logic foreign to the secular world, that confronts us with the suffering we know in our world and the great consolation God's love offers. In the same homily cited above, Pope Francis states, "People today ... need us to bear witness to the mercy and tenderness of the Lord, which warms the heart, rekindles hope, and attracts people towards the good. What a joy it is to bring God's consolation to others!"



Francis calls upon religious to witness to the joy of Christ and to be bold. Pictured here is Father Abed Wambua Peters, O.C.D.

Community of central importance

Second, Pope Francis calls all Christians to remember that they are God's own people, drawn to God as a people, not as individuals. This assertion from Chapter 3 of *Evangelii Gaudium* underlines the necessary connection each human being has with everyone else. It means that the church must be a place where everyone feels welcome, and the mercy of God is constantly shown. It means we must care for the needs of others, which draws us out of our tendencies toward individualism and self-centeredness. Francis reminds us that every human being stands in a particular culture, and "God's gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it" (*Evangelii*, sec. 115).

The role of the Holy Spirit in this Christian community is to inspire the diversity of gifts that allow all our human needs to be met, and then to unite diverse peoples as one community, one People of God. Implications of this theology of the people of God include the necessity to share the sorrows, needs, and hopes of others, to step outside ourselves and offer help when others need it, and to seek peace when conflicts arise out of diversity. "One important challenge is to show that the solution will never be found in fleeing from a personal and committed relationship with God which at the same time commits us to serving others" (*Evangelii*, sec. 91). Our lives in the Christian and world community must

be centered on love, on the theological virtue of charity (*Evangelii*, sec. 177).

Life shared in community is a particular call of religious men and women. Our attention to life with our sisters or brothers does not diminish the Christian call to be committed to our neighbors and wider community. Yet, our commitment to life together becomes a witness to a different way of living. "Religious brotherhood [and sisterhood] with all its possible diversity, is an experience of love that goes beyond conflicts. Community conflicts are inevitable: in a certain sense they need to happen, if the community is truly living sincere and honest relationships. That's life" ("Wake Up").

Even the church is not immune to conflict, as we have seen in the disagreement between the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The conflict was very discouraging to many women religious, but it illustrates Pope Francis' comment by showing that conflict is a part of honest and sincere relationships. The depth of commitment of the LCWR to the church requires open dialogue about the diversity the church holds. Conflict, both local and global, is part of life, and yet a discerned and prayerful approach to conflict can provide a glimpse of the peace that God promises us. Conflict is transformed through dialogue, and through genuine care and tenderness for one another. In these loving prayer-filled relationships, community life witnesses to the Kingdom of God.

Exceed our own boundaries

Thirdly Pope Francis repeatedly challenges all of us to see beyond the boundaries of our expectations. This is part of the prophetic call to religious life: to view reality from every angle, but particularly from the peripheries, from the eyes of those who are marginalized. Being prophetic means understanding and then speaking up for those on the peripheries, “making some noise” (“Wake Up”). The view from the edges also forces us to see in a way that is not bound to the past, or to institutional structures that oppress or no longer serve. The need is to focus on the charism, he says, rather than the apostolic work, which needs to change as the world’s needs change over time. The charism must be inculturated into the place and time in which it lives today.

I am reminded of the great works of women religious in the United States, which met an initial need for education and health care, and then changed slowly as the country evolved and the demographics of communities changed. In particular, many congregations have experienced a moment in recent history when they realized they needed to let go of their institutions in order to be life-filled and life-giving. The charism remains unchanged, but the sisters needed new hands to care for it in the context of the institutions, and the sisters themselves had changing needs and desires for living out their charism. How must we adapt our lifestyle and ministries to reflect the needs from the peripheries in today’s world?

In addition to ministry, inculturation must also be addressed in the area of formation and vocations. As vocations increasingly come from Africa and Asia, methods of attracting new religious and forming them must be adapted to the needs of new members. On another level, young people today grow up in a world with very different expectations and norms than did many of their formators or vocations directors. The changes needed to suit the younger generations are no less a question of inculturation than those changes needed for new religious from non-Western cultures and ways of thinking (“Wake Up”). We have already seen a shift in some of these areas, alongside greater collaboration among religious orders. Continued dialogue across generations and constant reflection to recognize our limitations will help us see the new ideas in this cultural and generational diversity.

Pope Francis invites us to avoid complacency in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.” This bold thinking results from seeing prob-

lems from the peripheries, and acknowledging the need to inculturate the Christian message and our institutes’ charisms in today’s world. Many of our founders and foundresses boldly set in motion new ways to meet the world’s needs. What might we do if we trusted the Holy Spirit’s guidance as boldly as they did?

In union with Jesus

Finally, Pope Francis invites us to prophetic lives of prayer. The final chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium* calls all Christians to a life of prayer. “The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer” (sec. 262). That prayer unites our vision to Jesus, so that we can act with his heart, on his desires. “In union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves. . . . If we wish to commit ourselves fully and perseveringly, we need to leave behind every other motivation” (*Evangelii* sec. 267). But, like Jesus, our prayer leads us into the world, to enter fully into society to know the joy and suffering of the people of our world. Prayer must draw us to mission.

The relationship between prayer and mission was taken up again in Pope Francis’ homily of July 7, 2013, at a Mass with seminarians, novices, and those discerning their vocation. Pope Francis spoke of three points regarding the Christian mission: joy, the cross, and prayer. The mission, and even the church, is not ours, but it belongs to God. When we forget this, and try to invent a mission that is not founded in our prayer, it “ceases to bear fruit, indeed, it is extinguished the moment the link with its source, with the Lord, is interrupted.”

In prayer, we unite our heart, will, and mind to that of Christ, and without prayer we lose that connection. We must be cautious that our demanding ministries do not take away from our life of prayer, but rather that they find rest in contemplation. “And the more the mission calls you to go out to the margins of existence, let your heart be the more closely united to Christ’s heart, full of mercy and love. Herein lies the secret of pastoral fruitfulness, of the fruitfulness of a disciple of the Lord!”

These calls—to joy amid suffering, to community, to the view from the peripheries, and to deep prayer —

Pope Francis has a joy-filled energy that is irresistible, that makes me want to be a better Christian and a better sister.

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draw from me a response of joy and urgency. Pope Francis has a joy-filled energy that is irresistible, that makes me want to be a better Christian and a better sister. Perhaps what most encourages me is his clear recognition that these are not necessarily easy: that the world is filled with the cross, that community living can be challenging, that our world is permeated by individualism and secularism, and that human beings are sinful. Francis devotes an entire chapter in *Evangelii Gaudium* to the challenges of our time. Yet, fundamentally, despite the challenges, Francis exudes joy, the joy of God's message of love and tender mercy for the whole world. He is a prophet, pointing out a different way of living in the world that will not mire us in sorrow and meaninglessness.

I find these calls a reaffirmation of my personal sense of vocation as a woman religious. When I entered I longed for community life, which I quickly learned was as much a challenge as it was a blessing. Acknowledging the challenges and working through them with love is important not only for a healthy community but also as a witness to the world that dialogue and tenderness can help us resolve our differences and bring peace. Francis' focus on prayer as the "deep breath" the church dearly needs, and its companion impulse to do God's work in the world, reinforces in me the "wholly contemplative, wholly apostolic" life that I have chosen in the Society of the Sacred Heart. I cannot deny the need to contemplate our charism in light of the needs of this world in this moment and in the places where we live—and yet I am challenged by the profound lifestyle and ministerial changes that such imaginative thinking might inspire.

Above all, Francis reaffirms the life I have chosen, one which the world doesn't understand and which even Catholics sometimes call "diminishing" or dying. My conviction in my own call reassures me that God continues to draw women to this life, though perhaps the call is drowned out by other priorities or concerns. Francis reminds the seminarians and novices that the Gospel message does not depend on full convents or an abundance of resources, but rather that missionary evangelism remains the work of the Holy Spirit:

Jesus sends his followers out with no "purse, no bag, no sandals" (Lk. 10:4). The spread of the gospel is not guaranteed either by the number of persons, or by the prestige of the institution, or by the quantity of available resources. What counts is to be permeated by the love of Christ, to let oneself be led by the Holy Spirit and to graft one's own life onto the tree of life, which is the Lord's cross. ■



Can religious communities rise to the challenges that Pope Francis is presenting to them? The monks of St. Benedict Abbey in Atchison, Kansas prepare for a liturgy.

Daring to live as Pope Francis encourages

AN OLD WAG IN MY CARMELITE province jokingly says religious take vows of property and obesity, not poverty and obedience. Though I am still quite young in religious life, I look around my room, and down at my waistline, and recognize a certain truth in the jest, my aspirations to “saintly” perfection notwithstanding. Yet in this Year of Consecrated Life, it would be wrong-headed and maybe even injurious to double down on perfection. Pope Francis is calling us to look at our vows anew, but in this light: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (*Evangelii*, sec. 164).

Do we dare to live lives that would proclaim this message joyfully? Are we capable of undergoing the change, the conversion of heart necessary to “wake up the world” as he is calling us to do?

The vow of poverty

Before I had read any of the pope’s writings I had already formed a stirring impression of him. I found it exhilarating to hear that he’d paid his own hotel bill after the conclave, that he’d forsaken the chauffeured papal limousine for the bishops’ bus, and the traditional papal chambers for the Vatican’s guest house. And the name that he’d chosen, Francis—did it not suggest a new direction for the church, or rather, a renewal of evangelical

From surrendering to Christ to living the vow of poverty, Pope Francis has set the bar high for those in consecrated life.

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Students from Newport, Kentucky's Central Catholic High School take part in a food drive. Pope Francis has stressed both charity and justice for the poor.

commitment to the poor? As a student of liberation theology, I found it all very thrilling. All the more so to read in *Evangelii Gaudium* that the biblical message of “mercy to the oppressed” “is so clear and direct, so simple and eloquent, that no ecclesial interpretation has the right to relativize it” (*Evangelii*, sec. 194). Pope Francis bluntly rejects “the absolute autonomy of the markets” and Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” and calls upon Christians to live in solidarity with the poor, which he defines as “more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few” (*Evangelii*, sec. 202, 204, 188).

To think according to this new mindset, which is really as old as the gospel, would turn everything upside down. The poor cannot be the afterthought of our charity, not if we have taken to heart what Pope Francis seems to be saying about solidarity. They cannot be the means to the end of our self-justification, as if we paid the poor for yet another commodity, a nice pat on the back. No—“The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good; for this reason, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them” (*Evangelii*, sec. 189). The common good, the poor—the goods we hold we may hold only as a means to serving them. Solidarity is not a commodity to be bought at the price of almsgiving! It truly involves a revolution—the hierarchy of our values must revolve around until all people rank higher than any thing.

No wonder that the words and example of Pope Francis have sent a frisson running through religious life, or at least the circles I move in. It’s Pope Francis in homilies, Pope Francis at the dinner table, and at my province’s chapter, Pope Francis in our prior general Fernando Millan’s opening address. Fernando had been there at the unexpectedly substantive meeting of the Union of Superiors General of religious men with the new pontiff. Though the superiors had only requested “a brief meeting to greet the Pope . . . [he] wished to spend the whole morning with them” (“Wake Up the World”).

And what a morning! It’s customary in my province for the prior general to give a speech on the state of the order at the beginning of each chapter, but he chose this time to report on this meeting instead. Even hearing about it secondhand, I felt as if a current of electricity were running through me. Fernando’s own enthusiasm was catching. Pope Francis bids religious to “wake up the world!” to follow the Lord “in a prophetic way,” to “sound an alarm for people.” And the pope is sounding the alarm for us.

Excitement or fear?

The question is, are we experiencing a thrill of excitement or of fear? For I would venture to say that the majority of us, at least in our Western society, do not live in guest houses. No, we enjoy the trappings of a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, even if we do not technically own anything. The pope bids us “live the Gospel *sine glossa*,” as the Superiors General put it. Their question is mine: how? I live in a house in which three friars work full-time. We pull in three salaries, and though they are modest, we have no dependents. And people are eager to donate so much to us—to give us money and food and furniture and clothing and more and more and more. I will never want for material goods. I will never want for adequate health care. I will never want for education or opportunity or employment.

I am a religious who took a vow of poverty, yet I will never be poor. Religious life naturally lends itself to the accumulation of wealth. What else is going to happen when you put together a group of able-bodied men or women with no dependents, many different talents, and a commitment to sharing everything? No, I do not own a car or a house, but I have my choice of well-maintained cars no matter where I go in the province, and a room in a nice house in every region of the country. We take care of things; we have the time, energy, and money for it. And so we must gloss the vow of

poverty; we must interpret it in order to live it.

Maybe it does mean living simply; or maybe it does mean not owning any goods personally. Maybe it means something else that I will come to understand as I mature in the vows, God willing. But I cannot help but feel the unease of contradiction in my life as I try to explain to my parents and to others what poverty means. For they read the vow *sine glossa*. They find it attractive, as I did when I was first considering religious life. Is not poverty an evil to be eradicated? And yet Pope Francis wants “a Church which is poor and for the poor. . . . In their difficulties they know the suffering Christ” (*Evangelii*, sec. 198).

Do we? Were we enriched by the poverty of a God who became poor for us when we took our vows (Benedict XVI)? Many young people considering religious life or a vocation to the priesthood are idealists. Do they see us at least aspiring to those evangelical ideals? *Sine glossa*?

Furthermore are we even capable of undertaking the interior revolution the Gospel requires? For here is the paradox: poverty cannot be a choice. If you have the option to be poor, then you are not really poor; but here we are, we who freely choose to vow poverty. Those who are truly poor did not choose poverty. Poverty is something that happens to you. Thus, we have made an impossible commitment. You can only choose property.

The joy of Christian life

How, then, are we to live the prophetic lives that we are called to live? How are we to become martyrs in the etymological sense of the word—witnesses? Maybe we can make a start by embracing the poverty of the human condition. If, as religious, we cannot but own such great material wealth, perhaps we can also own our own human frailty and our ongoing need for divine redemption. Thus we can give true witness to the joy of the gospel.

We have made three impossible vows, and we should own up to it. We cause scandal when we pretend to perfection. There is no doubt that Pope Francis exhorts us to upend our lives and live in greater accord with all the simplicity of evangelical faith, hope and love. But the path he suggests we take is not “a radical way understood as a model of perfection and often of separation”; no, we “renew our existence in accordance with the Gospel . . . by adhering wholeheartedly to the saving encounter that

transforms our life” (*Rejoice!*). Pope Francis himself suggests that you can sum up his message to religious in one word: joy.

So we have made some impossible promises. May they be ideals, then, that inspire us and animate us, that turn us back to the loving Christ who has already gone before us to save us from the logical finality of death, and who is already in front of us, calling us onward right through impossibility to eternal salvation. It is Christ who will make us poor and obedient and loving, for it is Christ who saves us.

Let us show the world that religious life is not perfection but a struggle, and precisely a struggle to let go of our own efforts to save ourselves, even in trying to live up to the vows. Thus, we will give the witness that Pope Francis is calling for, the joyful witness of those who are being saved. “We are not called to accomplish epic feats or to proclaim high-sounding words, but to give witness to the joy that arises from

the certainty of knowing we are loved, from the confidence that we are saved” (*Rejoice!* sec. 20). A Carmelite friend and mentor of mine only half-jokingly refers to us as “God’s bumbler.” Maybe that’s who people need; not paragons of perfection, but bumbler who are openly and lovingly stumbling along the narrow road of salvation. We have been called, and that’s enough.

God calls us by name

A letter to religious by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life explains an important point for the pope: “Pope Francis calls us to pause at that opening scene: ‘The joy of the moment when Jesus looked at me’ and to recall the important and demanding, underlying meaning of our vocation: ‘It is a response to a call, a call of love.’ . . . In the experience of vocation, God is indeed the mysterious subject of an act of calling.” (*Rejoice!* 23-24).

We have been called! I have spent so much time in formation analyzing my reasons for joining religious life, especially the less than healthy ones, so much time trying to perfect my motivations, that I sometimes lose sight of the ground and origin of my joy and my vocation—God is indeed the one calling us, calling me, to live out these vows!

Pope Francis is undoubtedly challenging religious “by the absolute simplicity with which [he] offers his

The Francis generation is out there now, waiting to answer the call. Do we dare to make the call heard?

teaching, in tune with the appealing sincerity of the Gospel” (*Rejoice!* 9). We are being called to upend our comfortable lives. Yet the pole of this challenging call for nothing less than revolution must be held in tension with the pole of Francis’ message of joy, with his reminder

Mission pulls us out of ourselves; it flips us upside down, transforming our own impoverished, feeble solidarity into the richness of the poverty of God.

that it is God who moves within us first. There is a movement in *Evangelii Gaudium* from joy to mission to conversion. It all starts with our joy at the incarnation, that Jesus Christ is living at our side to enlighten, strengthen and free us. This is the Good News! “Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who

saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others” (*Evangelii*, sec. 39).

Anyone who has experienced the deep love of God knows that the joy which it occasions in the heart is a “missionary joy,” a joy that sends us forth. Where? Francis would have us go to the peripheries, and that we can do (*Wake Up*, sec. 4-5). He believes that reality is best seen from edges and not the center; and it is there that we will undergo the internal revolution of conversion. He is very concrete; “some time of real contact with the poor is necessary” (*Wake Up*, sec. 4). How do we live out our impossible vows? The answer is very clear: go to where the poor are. Build your monasteries, your priories, and your convents there. Be “deeply moved by the suffering of others” (*Evangelii*, sec. 193).

We cannot make ourselves poor, but we can allow our hearts to be broken by their suffering. If it is our sin that we live our vows imperfectly, then we must live lives of mercy and compassion. Pope Francis quotes the First Letter of Peter: “Maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). He would that our hearts always be moved by the “restlessness of love” (*Rejoice!* 62). If we restlessly move outwards, borne on a tide of evangelical joy; if we allow ourselves to be sent on mission to the peripheries, we will undergo the conversion we simultaneously desire and fear. Mission pulls us out of ourselves; flips us upside down, transforming our own feeble solidarity into the richness of the poverty of God. Francis admonishes us: We lose our joy when we forget that our brothers and sisters are the “prolongation of the incarnation” (*Evangelii*, sec. 179)!

A joyful life is attractive. It may not be familiar or comfortable or easy. I believe Pope Francis is trying to wake us up, to encourage us to step beyond the comfortable but ever shrinking circles of our established apostolates, and dare to do something extravagant, foolish and even impossible—to exhaust our wealth in the joyful service of the poor.

As a friar, I believe my sisters in religious life are way ahead of us on this point, and if there’s one thing I would like to hear more explicitly from the Pope, it’s recognition and encouragement of the women religious in this country for the example they have given us, that they continue to give us today even in this seeming twilight. We are all shrinking. I am a member of a mendicant order, and perhaps it is our time to wander from this world. It’s our natural tendency to resist this final call, to hold on ever more fiercely to our established ministries for as long as we can. But maybe there’s new life waiting for us on the other side of crucifixion—a new generation of young men and women that may be inspired by the flawed but honest example of our impossible vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. I am a member of the so-called JPII generation. The Francis generation is out there now, waiting to answer the call. Do we dare to make the call heard?

I have always been inspired by the outcome of a dire moment in Carmelite history from the 1800s. We were dying; we were nearly dead. In Germany we had dwindled to a single house, in which lived a single old friar. The German government at the time had long forbade religious to accept new vocations, but finally they relented. What harm could one old friar do? A lot, it turns out; he took on new vocations almost immediately, who turned right around and founded a new North American province. It was a foolish venture. We bumbled about for several decades. Yet here we are today. Still bumbling; still failing daily to live up to our own ideals. We could do better. Pope Francis exhorts us to do better, even in the face of the dire circumstances facing us today.

Yet he urges us first to rediscover the joy of the gospel. “If we think that things are not going to change, we need to recall that Jesus Christ has triumphed over sin and death and is now almighty” (*Evangelii*, sec. 275). May we believe it! May we follow the Pope’s example and rejoice in the impossible lives for which we were chosen! May the joy of the gospel transform our vows into an attractive evangelical witness for the sake of the church and the whole world! And may we never forget Christ’s passion for us, that we may restlessly go out, seeking his face in the faces of our suffering brothers and sisters. ■



Will young people who are committed to service and social justice also be drawn to religious life under this papacy? Pictured here is a volunteer for L'Arche, Syracuse, New York, making Valentine cookies with a resident of L'Arche.

Pope Francis has raised church morale, but can he inspire more young people to follow a religious vocation?

Will the pope inspire a vocation bounce?

A MIRACLE OF HUMILITY in an age of vanity”— Elton John’s description of Pope Francis remains, in my book, the most succinct and perceptive explanation for our Argentine pope’s massive, global popularity. And, at the outset, I must admit I’m a big fan of this pope. While we’ve heard of increased church attendance in some parishes, many will wonder what this hugely popular pope will mean for vocations.

First let’s not overburden the pope with unrealistic, messianic expectations. Secondly let’s be careful to calibrate the role a pope should play in any discerner’s vocation journey. Certainly he might be an inspiration, but he should never become a substitute for a deep and meaningful relationship with the Lord. That said can we look forward to a Pope Francis-inspired vocation bounce? It’s still early, but here’s a look at factors that may influence the answer.

1. Identity issues

The NRVC’s landmark 2009 survey of new and recent vocations confirmed the observation that many young adults seek out “firm markers” of identity when searching for a religious congregation. Many discerners appear to be particularly comfortable with a distinctly Catholic culture which contrasts with the secular nature of postmodern society. The pontificates of

By ANDREW O’CONNELL

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Pope Benedict and Pope St. John Paul encouraged young Catholics to see themselves as countercultural witnesses with several hot-button social issues acting as defining reference points. These young Catholics have been formed during what some commentators have termed “The Culture War.” Indeed the church’s own language, with expressions such as “The Culture of Death,” has supported this dualism.

This cohort of young, evangelical, orthodox Catholics cannot be ignored or dismissed by vocations directors: they are prominent among those most likely to discern a religious vocation. I know some religious communities who have returned to some traditional practices in an attempt to attract vocations from this pool.

But things have changed with Pope Francis. While he has supported the traditional understanding of marriage and voiced his disapproval of abortion, he has called on Catholics to focus on mercy and the essentials of the faith. Some media have caricatured this position as a “truce” in the Culture War or, at least, a respite.

What will this change of tone mean for more traditional discerners? Could it pull the rug from under them? How much of their identity is wedded to the “culture warrior” model of church? How necessary is strong papal approval for their Catholic identity?

Some conservative Catholics are already suspicious of Francis—take a look at some Catholic blogs and you’ll discover that not all Catholics are smitten with this pope.

However, will this be offset by a new wave of interest from young people previously uncomfortable with an “us against the world” paradigm of church?

Pope Francis, just like his predecessors, is encouraging young adults to “swim against the tide,” to be “revolutionaries,” to “rebel against this culture that sees everything as temporary.” The difference is that the reference points for his counterculturalism are not immediately understood as limited to divisive social questions.

Could Pope Francis, then, encourage a new and vibrant source of vocations, who will find a home in the church’s many apostolic congregations concerned with the poor and social justice?

2. Image of religious life

Pope Francis, a former Jesuit provincial, knows religious life inside out. Indeed, his messages to religious suggest he is particularly aware of the shadow side of community living! His words to religious have been blunt: There is too much gossip, grumpiness, materialism, and hypocrisy; and not enough joy. His concern highlights the im-

portance he places on the role of joyful religious witness in the life of the church. This pope cares about religious, and they will have to take his critique seriously.

However in offering such a public “examination of conscience” for religious, is it possible that he reinforces an unfair caricature of the cranky nun and the pompous priest? Indeed is he suggesting this is not a caricature at all but the uncomfortable reality? And what do discerners make of these stark portraits of religious life?

In addition this pope is not impressed with excessive traditionalism or liberalism in religious life. He is reported to have bemoaned a religious sister who was no longer praying in the morning but spiritually bathing in the cosmos instead. Sound familiar? Pope Francis is calling religious life to Christocentricity and away from the extremes.

There is always a danger in the spiritual life of carving a Christ to suit ourselves. Similarly we risk carving a Pope Francis to suit our own ends. We should all feel challenged by this man. Will he end up more admired than imitated though? Will he become merely a convenient locus for the world’s vicarious altruism?

3. Expectation management

Pope Francis, based largely on media reporting, is feeding an expectation of change in church teaching on several issues. Could young discerners postpone the decision to follow a religious vocation in the expectation that the church might look very different in five or 10 years’ time? In particular could predictions of optional celibacy for diocesan priests encourage discerners to watch and wait? Of course this will have little bearing on religious life, but early-stage discerners might be unaware of this.

This has a parallel in economics. During a period of deflation, prices fall, and while this is popular among the public, it ends up suppressing economic activity as people stop spending in anticipation of even cheaper prices later. Similarly, if discerners hear signals suggesting change in the future, the result might, counter intuitively, mean fewer vocations in the short term.

Finally, while some religious are celebrating this papacy as the long-awaited sequel to “the Spirit of Vatican II,” the key challenge for vocations directors is to watch how young people respond to Pope Francis’ message in the cultural context of our day and accompany them accordingly.

Pope Francis is amplifying the Ignatian and Franciscan charisms of the church. It will be intriguing to see how our young people respond! ■



PHOTO BY SEAN GALLAGHER, COURTESY OF ARCHDIOCESE OF INDIANAPOLIS

A young woman meets one-on-one with Father Rick Ginther in a set up that allows both privacy and oversight. The two are meeting during the 2013 National Catholic Youth Conference.

We know more than we ever have about how to prevent sexual abuse in ministry situations. Be sure you are up to date on this topic.

Safe youth ministry is everyone's job

ANYONE WHO HAS worked with children and youth over the last several years can attest to the “new normal” of how programs operate with regard to safety. Some may lament the fact that everything feels much more formal and that the days of spontaneity and affection with children are gone. Many attribute these changes to the constant media attention on high-profile cases or to the seemingly endless stream of litigation against child-serving organizations on whose watch incidents have occurred. While this reality reflects the seriousness of abuse and its impact on liability and insurability of organizations, the changes in child-serving organizations actually are a testament to our more comprehensive understanding of how abuse can happen—even within otherwise “safe” organizations.

Praesidium has partnered with organizations that serve children and vulnerable adults for more than 20 years. In that time, we have witnessed a tremendous evolution in the science of abuse prevention, a marked upsurge in awareness of the problem and its corresponding risk in our clients’

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programs, and an overall amplification in the commitment to keep children safe.

No organization wants to see a child abused under its watch, and there are now established best practices to help make that commitment an intentional, integral part of how programs operate. Yes, things are different now, but we are justified by the possibility of creating truly safe places for this generation—and that is a “new normal” that most of us can get behind . . . and affection is not off the table.

Those who work with youths in the context of church ministry have an exceptional responsibility for understanding current best practices in abuse prevention. Church and church activities should be a safe place for youths to learn more about their faith and form as individuals. Any adult who is involved in youth ministry can benefit from an understanding of the dynamics of abuse and

Interrupting inappropriate behaviors or boundary violations is the key to abuse prevention. . . . If you wait for what you may feel is more evidence to suggest a “real” problem, it may be too late.

how to recognize warning signs—even those who may only work directly with the youths on occasion. Integrating best practices into child-serving programs requires significant training for all staff and volunteers. Every trained set of eyes makes the environment safer.

So what should youth ministers and volunteers do to keep their ministry safe? First become familiar with the policies of your particular diocese or religious institute, which should include a framework for acceptable behavior and information about what to do if you have concerns. Meanwhile take advantage of opportunities to learn key skills, such as: how to recognize red-flag behaviors; how to respond swiftly to red flags and suspicion of abuse; how to manage high-risk activities and situations; and how to keep yourself safe. While an in-depth training is critical, below are some highlights for each of these key topics.

Recognize red-flag behaviors

Unfortunately, it is not possible to recognize child molesters by the way they look—we must rely on their behaviors around children and youths to gain insight into their intentions. After decades of research and field

experience, Praesidium has found that interrupting inappropriate behaviors or boundary violations is the key to abuse prevention. Most adults have a healthy sense of appropriate boundaries (physical, emotional, behavioral), but many of us can recall a time when someone behaved in a way that seemed inappropriate or made us feel uncomfortable. It is human nature to want to write off moments like this to someone’s “personality.” While it may indeed be the case that an individual had no intention to abuse, the recognition of this boundary violation is the moment when we are able to potentially prevent abuse. If you wait for what you may feel is more evidence to suggest a “real” problem, it may be too late.

Your diocese or religious institute may have specific guidelines for appropriate behavior with youths, and there are several universal “red flags” to watch out for. For example watch for adults who are too physical with kids, or adults who play favorites, single out one or two children for special attention, or give them gifts. Look for adults who break the rules—like spending time alone with a child, giving a child cigarettes or alcohol, or using inappropriate language—basically adults who let kids do things that parents would not permit. This is an important time to remind ourselves that anyone is capable of abuse—men, women, even other youths. Any time you see questionable behavior, acknowledge it.

Respond swiftly to red flags

Knowledge of red-flag behaviors and suspicion of abuse is only as powerful as one’s likelihood to act upon observing or otherwise learning about particular situations. You are not likely to witness child sexual abuse—and if you wait until you know for sure that something has happened, you may be too late to protect a child. If something looks suspicious, or if you see an adult or another child breaking rules, here are things you can do:

- You can interrupt the inappropriate behavior and remind the person what the rules are or what’s acceptable. If you see an adult playing “favorites,” or arranging unauthorized activities, or using inappropriate language, speak up. If you see a child picking on another or using unacceptable language or behavior, speak up. Pointing out the questionable behavior of co-ministers or even friends is not necessarily something to look forward to, but it can be done in a fraternal way. While the first goal is always the protection of the youths, you may be doing

people a favor by helping them recognize their poor boundaries.

- You can express your concerns to the person in charge of your ministry. They should be trained to handle difficult situations. Oftentimes the behavior highlights a need to review the guidelines for appropriate behavior in ministry or for more training on healthy boundaries. Getting this feedback to ministry leadership may also be critical in establishing a pattern with the individual in question. You may not be the first person with concerns.
- You can speak to the parent of the child involved. Let the parent know what you've seen that concerns you. Parents will be grateful that you take their child's safety so seriously. This should also be followed up with ministry leadership.
- Finally if you suspect that a child is being abused, call the police or child protective services in your community. In most states, you are required to do this by law—and there is always a moral obligation regardless of the statutes.

Part of our work at Praesidium is helping organizations conduct internal investigations after an incident has occurred to learn where the system failed. It seems that just about every time, we interview at least one person who had concerns but never said anything—and they feel tremendous regret. Sometimes they didn't know how to name their concerns. Sometimes they just couldn't believe what they were seeing, or they felt guilty for thinking what they saw was sexual. After all that has transpired with the church and sexual abuse, there is no excuse for withholding concerns and not recognizing the opportunity to keep children safe. Training on boundary violations empowers people to name the concern and act on it.

Manage high-risk situations

Youth ministry can include a wide range of activities—prayer groups in homes, overnight retreats, summer camp, trips to an amusement park, etc. Some of these activities present greater risk for abuse—the activity may take place in a physical environment that is difficult to monitor, or people of many ages may be mixed together,

or you may have an activity that is overnight or requires transporting groups of youths.

Youth ministers and volunteers should have information on how to supervise youths in these programs intentionally. Establishing ratios is not enough—when supervision is simply, “everyone watches everyone,” no one is watching anyone. Monitoring is much more effective if the adults in charge are focusing on a particular group of children or youths, or if each is responsible for monitoring a particular portion of the program space. Some areas are naturally higher risk—for example, make sure to watch carefully in areas like locker rooms, bathrooms, or crowds. Keeping youths in your line of sight, or making sure they are in small groups, can discourage anyone from acting inappropriately. Watch for children who bully others or who make sexual remarks or gestures.

Thorough planning is absolutely critical for higher-risk activities. Where will everyone sleep? Who will remain awake to monitor the youths overnight? What are the bathroom protocols for an off-site program? The more you plan, the easier it will be to monitor the activity and ensure everyone is safe.

Keep yourself safe

False allegations of abuse are actually quite rare, but anxiety about them is understandably high. Here again, the “new normal” may feel paralyzing, but you can learn how to feel comfortable in your own skin again. Training helps re-program our boundaries and places our choices in the context of the safety for everyone—including the ministers.

Sticking to the policies of your diocese or religious institute is the most important thing you can do to keep yourself safe. They are designed to be a frame of reference for what is and is not appropriate—they eliminate guesswork. For example if you aren't supposed to provide transportation, then don't offer rides. If your diocese or institute prohibits outside contact with children you meet at events, then don't give private counseling offsite or hold unauthorized meetings—even if young people or parents pressure you. Do not decide for yourself whether a policy is good or bad. If you don't understand it, ask your superior to explain it. If there's a rule, there's a reason.

In the same vein, always keep your boundaries with youths clear. You are responsible for setting boundaries in your relationships with youths because they can't. Keep your boundaries clear by not discussing details of your personal life, not taking kids to your home, and not using inappropriate or suggestive language. And,

only use the types of physical contact authorized by your diocese or institute—for example, side-hugs, no kids sitting on your lap, and no wrestling or tickling. You should also not go into the bathroom with a child. Instead, take two or more children and stand just outside the door to supervise.

Finally avoid being alone with a child. In most church programs, ministers and volunteers work in line of sight of staff, parents, or other volunteers. This reduces the risk of abuse and of false allegations of abuse. If your ministry includes one-on-one counseling or spiritual direction with youths, make sure you have a safe place to meet. Find as public a space as possible—a room with a window in the door, somewhere others can see you but not necessarily hear your conversation.

Although much of this seems like common sense, it can be challenging to manage boundaries “in the moment.” You might be the last adult left at the end of an activity, with only one child remaining to be picked up by a parent. If so, make certain you are in an open area, preferably even waiting outside with the child. As soon as possible, let your supervisor know that this occurred.

A youth may develop a crush on you. You may get friend requests on social media from youths in the program. Because social media can be a minefield for boundary issues, your diocese or religious institute may have established guidelines for safe use of social media in ministry.

A good rule of thumb is to redirect youths who would like to interact with you online to a page or profile dedicated to the church or ministry. The point is to always be mindful of boundaries and your responsibility as the adult in maintaining them—and always be transparent about your interactions. Seek assistance from peers or ministry leadership should any unusual circumstances arise.

Get training

We are fortunate to live in a time when we have the knowledge to prevent abuse. Training on protocols for a safe ministry is perhaps the most important tool in the abuse prevention arsenal. The “new normal” is good news, but it is something that must be learned, so seek every opportunity to enrich your understanding of best practices. You never know if you might be the one person who protects a child from abuse—that alone is worth a few hours of anyone’s time!

The protocols highlighted here are by no means comprehensive and are but a glimpse of what those serving youths in ministry can learn in an abuse prevention or “safe environment” training. By taking every opportunity to learn more about youth safety protocols, youth ministers and volunteers give parents assurance of their child’s safety and set an example for their peers in ministry and for the young people they serve. ■

BEHAVIOR WITH YOUTH

Appropriate

- Side hugs
- Shoulder-to-shoulder or “temple” hugs
- Pats on the shoulder or back
- Handshakes
- High-fives and hand slapping
- Verbal praise
- Pats on the head when culturally appropriate
- Touching hands, shoulders, and arms
- Arms around shoulders
- Holding hands with young children you are escorting

Inappropriate

- Full-frontal hugs
- Kisses
- Showing affection in isolated area
- Lap sitting
- Wrestling
- Piggyback rides
- Tickling
- Allowing a child to cling to an adult’s leg
- Any type of massage (given or received)
- Any form of affection that is unwanted by the child or youth
- Compliments or comments relating to physique or body development
- Touching bottom, chest, or genital areas



Training for safe youth ministry ensures that all who minister with minors are aware and vigilant, fostering a safer church for all.

Safety for young people is the priority in training programs. Pictured here are students at a rosary pilgrimage Mass in the Archdiocese of Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Why get trained for safe youth ministry environments?

EVEN AFTER MORE THAN a decade of responding to sexual abuse, the discussion about participating in required education programs continues. Unfortunately vocation ministers may still hesitate to attend a diocesan program for employees and volunteers. Or they do not see themselves as being in ongoing ministry with minors that would require them to have a certification showing they have participated in these programs. However there are some solid reasons that training for safe environments makes sense for vocation ministers.

Vocation ministers are the “gatekeepers” for our communities. We invite women and men to visit our communities, and we introduce them to our ministries. We attend workshops to learn how to assess the readiness of candidates. Like any other aspect of ongoing development in ministry, remaining updated on trends and information regarding sexual abuse and misconduct is an important part of our continuing education. For many men’s institutes, it is already required by accreditation standards.

FATHER STAN DE BOE, O.S.S.T.

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The accreditation process put forth by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, “Instruments of Hope and Healing: Safeguarding Children and Young People,” (a process conducted by Praesidium, Inc.) has two standards in particular that address vocation discernment and education.

Standard 1 of the “Standards for Accreditation” specifically addresses vocation ministry. It reads as follows:

Standard 1. The Institute will screen new Candidates for membership in the Institute.

Rationale: Screening is one of the most developed areas of sexual abuse prevention within child-serving industries. Those who sexually abuse minors look for employment or volunteer positions where they can have access to minors. The first action an Institute can take to keep its ministries safe is to carefully screen everyone who has access to minors. Indeed, for many years now, most seminaries and religious formation programs have required a thorough, comprehensive screening of candidates. Specific screening and selection procedures can prevent a potentially harmful candidate from gaining access to minors.

Some requirements for accreditation

R1. Candidates will be specifically screened for a history of sexually abusing minors or violating the boundaries of minors.

R4. Vocation directors and formation ministers must be able, by education, training or experience, to identify Candidates who may be at risk to sexually abuse minors.

In addition, Standard 5 also applies to each member of the institute: “The Institute will educate its Members regarding the prevalence, identification, and prevention of sexual abuse of minors, giving special attention to topics that are of unique relevance to religious.”

I would like to point out the first requirement of the four for accreditation:

R1. All Members who serve in public ministry, even those who only occasionally serve in public ministry, must participate in a minimum of total number of hours of education that is equal to the number of years in the Institute’s accreditation period.

There are a few men’s institutes that do not participate in the accreditation process, and women’s institutes are not involved in the process. However, vocation ministers should seriously consider attending and getting

a certification that they have attended an educational program regarding safe environment and the protection of children and vulnerable adults. These programs are designed to educate people about the causes and effects of sexual abuse of minors, providing information on behaviors that may indicate an individual who could be potentially be seeking a position of access to and authority over minors and vulnerable adults. The programs also explain how to create environments to protect yourself from false allegations of misconduct and abuse. While much of what is presented in these programs might seem like common sense, certification that one has attended provides a safety net for the vocation minister, the candidate, and ultimately the community.

I include “vulnerable adults” because while we vocation ministers may not have much contact with minors, and the vast majority of our candidates are adults, many of those women and men who are discerning with us are vulnerable—emotionally, spiritually, physically, and psychologically. We ask them to reveal things to us in a trusting relationship. Often we learn things about them that will not only give us great insight into the candidate, but at the same time reveal vulnerabilities that they have never disclosed to anyone else.

We will encounter candidates who have been sexually abused, emotionally abused, physically abused, and spiritually abused. These abuses may have caused them to respond to relationships, individuals, and situations that may not be healthy. Some may have addressed these issues, others may not have allowed them to surface until we ask them a question or put them in a situation that triggers a reaction to past experiences. If we are bringing a vulnerable person to meet the members of the Institute, are we aware of any of our members who are restricted from ministry or access to non-members because of past credible allegations of abuse?

Knowing the warning signs of anyone one who might seek access to a vulnerable candidate is necessary so that a proper intervention can be made.

If a candidate has a background of abusing minors or vulnerable adults, and we have not learned that prior to the candidate visiting our Institute and being introduced to our members and our ministries, we run the risk of giving that person access to the people we are striving to protect. Again, knowing the warning signs will enable a vocation minister to intervene in a timely and appropriate way. Certification that you have participated in an educational program regarding prevention of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults will not make you an expert on this issue, nor will it completely

prevent misconduct or abuse, but it does provide you with the skills to act and the awareness of the problem in the church and in our society.

Many educational resources are available. Each diocese requires employees and volunteers to attend a safe environment educational program. These programs not only provide the resources to better understand sexual misconduct and abuse and how to create safe space for children and vulnerable adults, they also provide information on diocesan policies regarding appropriate and inappropriate conduct and reporting requirements. Knowing these takes the guesswork out of what to do if a situation arises that requires action. If any misconduct would take place that must be reported, we are required to follow the policies of our institutes and the diocese in which it occurs. It is essential to be aware of the diocesan requirements of any diocese you serve in.

You can raise your awareness and knowledge of these issues in several ways: screening candidates well, participating in a diocesan educational program, using an online service such as Virtus or Praesidium, contacting other institutes for materials, or taking part in an NRVC ethics workshop. The important thing is to do your part to help keep our youth protected. ■



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NRVC RECOMMENDS TRAINING FOR VOCATION MINISTERS

While ministering to minors may not be a priority for vocation directors, safe environments are essential while promoting vocations. Let's face it, we are in contact with young Catholics in a variety of public settings such as parish fairs, school presentations, service and retreat days, and community open houses. The rationalization that our contact is minimal and not ongoing is no longer an acceptable excuse to avoid workshops that are easily available and accessible. NRVC strongly recommends that all vocation ministers be informed, educated, and certified in safe environment training in the dioceses where they minister with youth and vulnerable adults.

For fall 2015, NRVC is once again organizing vocation teams for the National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC). In 2013 more than 200 vocation ministers from over 60 religious institutes collaborated to promote religious life to more than some 23,000 high school teens, their parents, youth ministers, and chaperones.

In late spring 2015 registration for NCYC will open for vocation teams as well as for traditional booth exhibitors. This year the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministers is requiring proof of safe environment training through documentation of the date of training or education. In 2013, vocation ministers and exhibitors only needed to check a box on a registration form verifying they had completed training. This year an additional safeguard has been added requiring all adults to provide documentation demonstrating current compliance in youth protection training. No one will be admitted into NCYC without this proper documentation.

Whether or not you participate in NCYC, choose to be adequately informed, educated, and trained. Simply put NRVC recommends that all vocation ministers participate in ongoing educational opportunities to further develop their professional skills and competencies.

—Sister Deborah Marie Borneman, S.S.C.M.
NRVC director of member relations and services



Participants in the International Vocation Conference found they shared similar challenges and opportunities.

The International Vocation Conference participants listen to a speaker during their meeting at the Vatican with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL). The February 2015 conference was the first such gathering of vocation ministers and religious leaders from vocation centers of the Western world. The speaker is Sister Nicoletta Vittoria Spezzati, A.S.C., undersecretary of the CICLSAL.

BY DELEGATES
OF THE INTERNATIONAL
VOCATION CONFERENCE

Consecrated life is at the heart of the church

IN CELEBRATION of the Year of Consecrated Life, the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) in the United States sponsored an international vocation conference, bringing together vocation ministers and religious leaders from across the Western world. The unprecedented meeting, held Feb. 23-27 was underwritten by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and had a three-fold purpose:

1. To learn about the larger vocation picture beyond one's own country;
2. To identify common areas of convergence in needs for vocation promotion and awareness; and
3. To explore future areas for global collaboration in promoting new membership to religious life.

Eleven representatives of vocation centers and religious conferences from nine developed countries (Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, United

States, Canada, England/Wales, Ireland, France, and Germany) met at the Istituto Maria Santissima Bambina in Rome from February 23-27, 2015. Also attending was an official from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Secretaries General of the International Union of Superiors General and the Union of Superiors General, and the Vice-President of the Union of the European Conferences of Major Superiors.

In his Apostolic Letter “To All Consecrated People” on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, His Holiness, Pope Francis, outlined the “difficulties which the various forms of consecrated life are currently experiencing ... particularly in the Western world.” This conference, therefore, was focused on the vocation needs of the Western world—and not from other areas of the globe. The intention was not to be exclusive or elitist but rather simply honest in recognizing that issues the representative countries face are far different from other countries where both the church and religious life are growing. In addition, given the consistent diminishment of religious in the developed Western world, there is a greater urgency to address those common issues that may either help or hinder vocations to the consecrated religious life.

Areas of convergence

Through a facilitated process of dialogue, input, prayer, and theological reflection, we identified the following areas of convergence in our common experience of vocation ministry:

DISCERNERS AND NEWER MEMBERS

Those who discern and enter religious life today come from a postmodern world where life and career choices are abundant. This is especially true for women where opportunities for advancement are no longer limited by custom and culture. Those who come to religious life today, therefore, intentionally choose to deepen their relationship with God through private and common prayer, to live the evangelical counsels, and to live in community.

Contemporary candidates are quite diverse in their age, culture, and ethnic background, work and ministerial experience, and knowledge of the Catholic faith. Labels such as traditional and liberal no longer seem to fit their profile. For instance, while they may have a strong devotion to Eucharistic Adoration or the rosary, they may be equally committed to feeding the homeless, sustaining the environment, or working for justice.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES

Some religious institutes receive several newer members, some receive members sporadically, and others receive none at all. There are some newly founded congregations that seem to be attracting multiple candidates as opposed to the more established orders.

A lack of newer entrants, the aging and diminishment of membership, and the strains of maintaining current ministerial commitments can limit a congregation’s vitality, creativity, and ability to risk in beginning newer ministerial initiatives. This can contribute to an institute’s malaise and questioning of the relevance of their life or mission in today’s world.

CHURCH

“The task of promoting vocations . . . calls for the active collaboration of pastors, religious, families, and teachers, as required in something which forms an integral part of the overall pastoral plan of every particular Church” (*Vita Consecrata*, sec. 64).

In some countries, on either a national or diocesan level, there is good collaboration and cooperation among religious, laity, clergy, and hierarchy in vocation ministry. Efforts are made to build a “culture of vocation” through a national framework or office, discernment groups and programs, and other evangelization efforts.

This, however, is not the experience of all countries where collaboration between diocesan structures and religious institutes is either strained or simply nonexistent because of an overriding focus on ensuring the promotion of priesthood and the ordained life. In addition, some bishops and clergy appear no longer to see a future for religious life and therefore do not encourage religious vocations. They seem to see a brighter future for the new ecclesial movements within the Church.

A common concern is that the promotion of vocations to the consecrated life has no clear focal point within the Holy See. The Pontifical Work for Priestly Vocations was formerly within the Congregation for Catholic Education, and so it was part of a much broader work for vocations. Since the move of this office to the Congrega-

Despite challenges facing many religious institutes, we are encouraged that people continue to inquire about religious life and that men and women continue to enter. Although their numbers are fewer, they are not daunted by an aging or diminishing population.

tion for the Clergy, religious vocations seem not to have a home in Rome.

Signs of hope in religious life

Despite the multifaceted challenges facing many religious institutes, we are encouraged that people continue to inquire about religious life and that men and women continue to enter. Although their numbers are fewer, they are not daunted by an aging or diminishing population. They are zealous, committed, and hopeful about the future.

We agree that the Spirit is leading all religious to revitalize the charismatic gift and prophetic dimension of religious life. In order to do this, however, all in the Church must realize that much like our church and world, consecrated life is facing a new reality. While we can be nostalgic about the past, we cannot recapture it.

We recognize and are encouraged by the number of newer foundations of consecrated life founded in our countries, some of which are religious institutes, mixed gendered, or ecumenical communities. They are evidence that God continues to call and people continue to respond.

Although we come from various cultures and diverse religious charisms, our experience these days has been one of solidarity and unity centered on our shared passion of religious life. We were reminded of the wisdom of St. Bernard of Clairvaux on religious orders: “We all need one another: the spiritual goods which I do not own and possess, I receive from others.... All our diversities, which make manifest the richness of God’s gifts, will continue to exist in the one house of the Father, which has many rooms...Unity, both here and there, consists in one and the same charity.” This has given us great encouragement for we have found that when we stand together, we are stronger.

We are encouraged by the growing lay support for religious vocation ministry. We have found that there is an increased number of lay women and men, who not only serve as vocation ministers, but who also support religious life with their prayers, money, and encouragement.

We were especially privileged by the “participation of the laity” at this meeting, who often brought “unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism” and who reminded us of the significance of religious life in their own lives as well as in the life of the Church (*Vita Consecrata*, sec. 65). The future of religious life cannot be dependent upon the religious alone. If religious life is a

gift to the Church, everyone in the Church must support and encourage it. We welcome our lay sisters and brothers as partners in this ministry.

Opportunities for the future

As a result of our deliberations, we identified the following opportunities for the future:

1. While this was a first attempt at an intercontinental vocation gathering, we affirm its value and desire to meet on a regular basis. We also recognize the importance of expanding the conference to include other countries in the future. We desire to maintain our communication with one another for mutual support and resource sharing for the benefit of our vocation ministries.
2. Active involvement and support of religious leadership in vocation ministry is essential for an effective vocation program. We desire to collaborate and to serve as a resource to the UISG, USG, and UCESM in their work with superiors general and religious leadership conferences in prioritizing vocation ministry. We also humbly request that CICLSAL look to ways to collaborate with the Congregation for Clergy in their common interest of religious vocations.
3. A large percentage of recently professed religious and recently ordained priests have participated in World Youth Days and other similar, large youth festivals. Such events are significant for vocation awareness and discernment. We desire to partner together on a consistent and ongoing basis at World Youth Days to witness to the solidarity of religious and the rich diversity and global dimension of religious life.
4. The 50th anniversary of the promulgation of *Perfectae Caritatis* presents the Church with a unique opportunity to develop a comprehensive theology of religious life. This theology would be helpful for the ongoing renewal of religious life and for vocation promotion. We encourage CICLSAL to consider this possibility. It is our hope that this theology be studied in both religious and diocesan seminaries. As parish priests are often the first point of contact for those discerning a vocation, we emphasize the need for their education about religious life.
5. Global communication has changed the way we think and perceive the world. “Communication is a means of expressing the missionary vocation of the entire Church; today the social networks are one way to experience

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this call to discover the beauty of faith, the beauty of encountering Christ (“Message of Pope Francis for the 48th World Communications Day,” 2014). We commit to exploring ways in which global communication can change the world of vocation ministry by strengthening our bonds, learning from one another’s programs and resources, and providing and sharing vocation information so discerners may “further encounter Christ.”

6. We believe that religious vocations will flourish in an ecclesial culture where all baptized Christians claim their own vocation, whether it be to marriage, priesthood, single life, or religious life. We desire to work with our bishops, vocation centers, and religious leadership conferences in creating this vocation culture.

7. We recognize that religious life is a big tent of many charisms with differing ways of living out that charism with each contributing to the building and strengthening of the Mystical Body of Christ. “The gifts are varied, but the Spirit is the same” (1 Cor. 12:4). We embrace this reality as a value and not as threat or as an indictment of one particular style of religious life. We celebrate with those institutes that do receive newer members.

8. We recognize that some religious institutes, like many of their ancestors in the past, are approaching the sunset of their mission and are no longer able to accept nor form newer entrants. This transition is painful to members of these institutes and for the Church at large. We offer our prayerful support and profound gratitude to these religious institutes for their dedicated lives and years—sometimes centuries—of faithful service. We encourage other Church leaders to do the same. We hope, however, that within the final fulfilment of their mission, these religious institutes find opportunities to promote the joy and vitality of religious life for the sake of all religious institutes and the future of consecrated life.

9. We recognize that religious charisms are not private possessions of a given religious institute, but rather they are dynamic gifts of the Holy Spirit intended to be freely shared with the People of God. This often is affirmed by the testimony and witness of those connected with our institutes and ministries who have been enriched by our heritage and traditions. Charisms can and will continue, although in possibly different forms, beyond the vowed membership within a religious institute. We believe this truth needs to inform all decisions made by our institutes regarding their future, especially when they pertain to accepting or not accepting newer members.

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10. While we recognize the need for religious institutes to educate their members about contemporary vocation ministry and the culture from which today’s candidates come, at the same time, we also recognize the need for ongoing conversion of our congregations regarding our own vocations, the essentials of the religious life, and the need to follow Jesus Christ by living our vowed lives of faith to the fullest. “It should be constantly kept in mind, therefore, that even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, sec. 3).

In conclusion

We prayerfully and joyfully join Pope Francis in his exhortation to all consecrated people to “embrace the future with hope” and “to practice the virtue of hope, the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history, who continues to tell us: ‘Be not afraid . . . for I am with you’ (Jer. 1:8).” Confident in the Lord of the Harvest, who continually calls women and men to follow him, we entrust our efforts in vocation ministry to the Holy Spirit who inspires the multitude of religious charisms in consecrated life “which is at the very heart of the Church” (*Vita Consecrata*, sec. 3). Come Holy Spirit! ■



Much still remains to be developed in the theology of consecrated life.

With the sweeping changes of Vatican II, the church began to re-examine its ecclesiology and its understanding of the roles of lay, ordained, and consecrated persons. Today the church continues to seek a fuller, contemporary theology of consecrated life.

The evolving theology of consecrated life

By FATHER GERARD WHELAN, S.J.



Father Gerard Whelan, S.J. is an Irish Jesuit, who worked for 14 years in Kenya and Zambia, both teaching theology and serving as pastor of a poor parish. He

now teaches fundamental theology in the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He is ecclesiastical assistant to the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations.

IN THIS ARTICLE I reflect on the letter of Pope Francis issued in November 2014 to inaugurate the Year of Consecrated Life. I hope to place it within a wider theological context. I relate it to the apostolic letter of the pope, *Evangelii Gaudium*, and suggest that that letter constitutes a development in post-Vatican II magisterial teaching on both ecclesiology and theological method. I conclude that the letter for the Year of Consecrated Life, while brief, contains important indicators for how a future theology of consecrated life might be developed.

Commentators have noted that much remains to be thought through regarding the development of a post-Vatican II theology of consecrated life. Two main church documents serve as a resource for such a theology: the short document of Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*; and the apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, which was produced in 1996 as a response to the synod of bishops devoted to that topic.

In this latter document, Pope John Paul II suggested that so much attention was given in Vatican II to the “reality of ecclesial communion, in

which all gifts converge,” that little attention was given “the variety of charisms and states of life.” Pope John Paul II pointed out that lack of clarity on these distinctions has at times created tension in the church. He further noted that the church started to clarify its thinking on this matter with separate synods of Bishops devoted to themes of: laity (1987), diocesan priesthood (1971), and consecrated life (1994). *Vita Consecrata* is more than 70 pages, and it includes what the pope described as “a number of systematic talks” on consecrated life. However, he did not claim to offer a complete theology of consecrated life, but rather he stated his hope “that reflection will continue and lead to a deeper understanding of the great gift of the consecrated life.”

In this article I explore how the apostolic letter of Pope Francis, “To All Consecrated People, On the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life,” can be understood as playing a role in developing magisterial thinking about consecrated life, especially when related to his recent apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. To do this requires widening my point of reference to questions of ecclesiology and theological method during Vatican II and afterward.

Impact of Vatican II on the theology of consecrated life

Much debate has gone into the question of how to interpret Vatican II in the 50 years since its conclusion. One way to address the question is to ask what are the key “issues under the issues” of the council. My own understanding of the underlying issues of Vatican II is this: The meaning of Vatican II was the acknowledgement of history.

An interpretation based on this view unfolds as follows. In the opening discourse of Pope John XXIII, held on October 29, 1962 the pope called on the council to adopt an “ecumenical and pastoral” tone that included an effort at updating, or *aggiornamento*, of church teaching and an attitude toward modernity that was more positive than that of “prophets of doom.” Next the council fathers recognized that responding positively to this request involved supporting a shift in theological method away from neo-scholasticism toward something toward which certain French and German theologians were moving, the so-called *nouvelle théologie*. Two events in the first session of Vatican II exhibited how they undertook this shift. The first involved the setting aside of documents that had been prepared by curial officials for discussion at the council and the establishing of a

commission to prepare a new set of draft documents. The second involved support for the vision outlined by Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens of Belgium regarding the broad structure of the themes a new set of documents should treat.

Suenens suggested that, first and foremost, the council should concern itself with the identity of the church and its mission in the world. He stated that it was time to change the hierarchical and clericalist notion of the church that had held sway in Catholic circles for centuries and to replace it with an image of the church as “light of the nations” (*Lumen Gentium*). This image implied a positive attitude toward the modern world, and its ability to benefit from this light being shone on it. He spoke of how such an *ad intra* understanding of the church should lead to a new reflection on the mission of the church *ad extra*, i.e. in history. He made it clear that such an approach adopted aspects of the mentality of human and cultural studies, or *geisteswissenschaften*, that had emerged in Germany in the 19th century.

The documents produced by the council largely followed this vision. The document on liturgy introduced a vernacular liturgy. The document on revelation encouraged the use of scripture by Catholic lay people as well proposing a personalist understanding of revelation. However, above all, the document on the church, *Lumen Gentium*, expressed the vision *ad intra* proposed by Suenens. When the draft for this document came under discussion on the floor of the council, a key decision was taken to entitle Chapter 2 “The church as ‘People of God,’” and to move to a subordinate place the chapter entitled “On the Hierarchical Constitution of the church and in Particular on the Episcopacy.” Next the document *Gaudium et Spes* (The church in the modern world), expressed the *ad extra* mission that is a consequence of such an ecclesial self-understanding.

This shift to historical consciousness constitutes an immense shift of paradigm from an approach to theology that had held sway for centuries. That approach had adopted an Aristotelian principle of seeking to explain things by reference to “permanent causes,” and so looked on change as imperfection. It is not a surprise

The lack of clarity on distinctions [between, ordained, lay, and vowed vocations] has at times created tension in the church. The church has started to clarify its thinking on this matter.

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that the council only succeeded in presenting the broad brushstrokes of such a shift. Furthermore, commentators note that while key parts of *Lumen Gentium* were decided upon during the second year of the council, there would still be intense debate before agreement could be found on *Gaudium et Spes*. Perhaps even more disagreement was registered during the formulation of other documents that treated related issues pertaining to the *ad extra* mission of the church: on religious freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*), and on the missions (*Ad Gentes*). Similar difficulty was witnessed in articulating a position on diocesan priesthood and consecrated life. The council produced two documents on the diocesan clergy, one on bishops, and one on consecrated life. Each of these constituted “compromise” documents and included a mix of pre-Conciliar and Conciliar theological arguments. One commentator characterized these documents as “short and soon to be forgotten.” The document on consecrated life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, had five drafts rejected on the floor of the council before agreement was arrived at.

To understand where the problems lay with the document on consecrated life, it is important to recognize

that *Lumen Gentium* had placed a new stress on the role of lay people in the mission of the church, with Chapter 4 having the title “The Laity,” and Chapter 5, “The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church.” This latter chapter seemed to undermine the theology of consecrated life that had been promoted before the council. This theology sat easily with an understanding of the church as hierarchical and with an attitude toward the modern world that was defensive. It described consecrated life as an “objectively more perfect way of holiness” and asserted that, consequently, consecrated persons were more assured of arriving in heaven than those in other states of life. Like a number of the other smaller documents in Vatican II, the preparatory committee for this document included many experts who represented the minority view in the council, which was not happy with the perspective of *Lumen Gentium*.

Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI

In the years subsequent to Vatican II much debate occurred over just how to interpret it and how to apply it. Many pointed out that no one image can capture the meaning of the church and, in 1985, a Synod of Bishops was held to commemorate Vatican II where emphasis was placed on an alternative image of the church: that of “communion.” This image became prominent in church documents both of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. In many ways it represents a theological enrichment of the image of the church as People of God, linking as it does ecclesiology to a theology of the Trinity and of grace. However the image it offers is more “vertical” than “horizontal” and its relationship to historical consciousness and to the *ad extra* emphasis of *Gaudium et Spes* could seem ambiguous.

The apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* employs a theology of communion as a central notion. Chapter 1 is entitled “The Origin of Consecrated Life in the Mystery of Christ and of the Trinity.” Chapter 2 is entitled, “Consecrated Life as a Sign of Communion in the Church.” Only in Chapter 3, “Consecrated Life, Manifestation of God’s Love in the World” are more historically conscious themes addressed such as an “option for the poor,” and “The Prophetic Character of Consecrated Life.” In fact, commentators expressed gratitude to Pope John Paul II for mentioning prophecy at all, because it had been absent from the *lineamenta* prepared as a discussion document for the synod. Some commentators also expressed uneasiness at the fact that, in his desire to distinguish the diversity of charisms and states of life in the church, Pope

John Paul seems, in one place at least, to revert to a Pre-Vatican II articulation of consecrated life. He states, “It is to be recognized that the consecrated life, which mirrors Christ’s own way of life, has an objective superiority.”

While Pope Benedict XVI did not produce a document on consecrated life of the status of an apostolic exhortation, he made many comments on this theme. Addressing Major Religious Superiors in 2006 he employed a theology of communion to point to the trinitarian dimension of the evangelical counsels: “Consecrated men and women of today have the duty to be witnesses of the transfiguring presence of God.” He also focused on the nature of consecrated life as forming a “contrast community” with aspects of modern culture, warning: “Secularized culture has penetrated the mind and heart of not a few consecrated persons, who understand it as a way to enter modernity and a modality of approach to the contemporary world.”

Pope Francis

In what can be seen as a swinging of a theological pendulum, Pope Francis returns the focus of magisterial teaching to an ecclesiology of People of God. His apostolic exhortation on evangelization, *Evangelii Gaudium*, is structured according to a method of “See, Judge, Act,” that is a consequence of the historical approach stressed by this image. His central, theological chapter begins with the subtitle “The Entire People of God Proclaims the Gospel.” Throughout the letter he conducts a critique of clericalism and calls for an approach to evangelization that is attentive to the task of the church aiding “processes of people building.” Furthermore, his frequent references to the poor, as well as the title of Chapter 4, “The Social Dimension of Evangelization,” reflect the connective line found in Vatican II between *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

Evangelii Gaudium makes little mention of consecrated life. However, when the pope criticizes clericalism he states that it attempts to impose “monolithic uniformity.” By contrast, he insists that the Holy Spirit “enriches the church with different charisms.” When he speaks about catechesis he touches on issues of spiritual direction that have a special relevance for religious. He criticizes abstract and dogmatic approaches to imparting the faith and stresses the importance of “mystagogic initiation.” He speaks of the need to assist the “ongoing formation and maturation” of Christians and adds: “the church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this ‘art of accompaniment.’”

The notion of a diversity of charisms is central to the apostolic letter “To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life.” Here, predictably, discussion of consecrated life is located within an encompassing analysis of the church as People of God and the universal call to holiness. For example, the final part of this three-part letter is addressed to lay people, calling them to “be increasingly aware of the gift which is the presence of our many consecrated men and women.” In fact this letter implies that consecrated life could be at the forefront of a renewal in the overall sense of mission of the church:

I am counting on you “to wake up the world,” since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. As I told the Superiors General: “Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way.” This is the priority that is needed right now.

This stress on the prophetic role of consecrated life is a distinguishing character of the letter of Pope Francis:

Prophets receive from God the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events Because they are free, they are beholden to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God. Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side.

While the pope stresses that religious should show a concern for the poor and move to the “existential peripheries” of society, he clarifies that he is not calling for an exaggerated political activism, nor forgetting the difference in consecrated life between charisms that are active and those that are monastic. He speaks of the importance of creating “alternate spaces,” where consecrated life offers examples of the kind of “self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another” that can serve as a model for wider society. He adds that “monasteries, communities, centers of spirituality” should be among those institutions that can “be the leaven for a society inspired by the Gospel, a ‘city on a hill,’ which testifies to the truth and the power of Jesus’ words.”

“Wake up the world!”

I have suggested that a “the meaning of Vatican II was the acknowledgement of history.” At the same time I have suggested that many challenges remained after the

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council concerning just how to bring such a consciousness into theology. I suggest that different emphases on these questions produce different approaches to understanding the consecrated life. For example stress on an ecclesiology of communion tends to emphasize how consecrated life expresses a union with the Trinity that anticipates the afterlife; conversely, an ecclesiology of People of God tends to stress the prophetic aspect of consecrated life.

In conclusion I would like to note how the thinking of Cardinal Suenens anticipated aspects of the teaching of Pope Francis. I have noted how Suenens exercised an influence on the major documents of the council but how the minor documents, including that on consecrated life, tended to be compromise documents in which the theology of *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* was not always clearly reflected.

There is a sad irony here. Before the council Suenens had reflected a good deal on the question of consecrated

life. He believed that women religious were poorly served by the current theology, being required often to remain cloistered and to limit their apostolic activities accordingly. He suggested that not only would women religious benefit from a notion of the mission of the church that was more open to the modern world, but that they could be in the forefront of helping such a generalized understanding of mission to occur. Vatican II would inaugurate many of the changes in ecclesiology for which Suenens had hoped, but in some respects we are still waiting for a theology of consecrated life to be articulated which “raises up to this level.” In fact, it is of historical interest to note that a book he had written enjoyed a title that almost anticipates *Gaudium et Spes*. It is entitled: *The Nun in the World: New Dimensions in the Modern Apostolate*. I believe sentiments similar to Suenens’ are found in the teaching of Pope Francis when he appeals to religious: “I am counting on you ‘to wake up the world,’ since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy.” ■

PHOTO BY FATHER LAWRENCE LEW, O.P.



A young man contemplates a statue of St. Vincent de Paul, founder of the Vincentians and, with Louise de Marrillac, the Daughters of Charity.

In the footsteps of our founders

IN HIS DIARY FOR FRIDAY, January 4, 1963, Pope John XXIII wrote about his “unscheduled visit this morning to the church of Santa Maria in Trevi, to honor St. Gaspar del Bufalo, founder of the Fathers of the Most Precious Blood.” Calling this visit to the church near the Trevi Fountain “the happiest note of the day,” good Pope John expresses his admiration of St. Gaspar, the founder of my Congregation: “I love him much, because he was a priest of Rome and canon of St. Mark’s, my parish church when I was living in Rome at Santa Maria in Via Lata. I invited him to be the first of the saints of Rome to lift up his voice for the Vatican Council.”

St. Gaspar founded the Missionaries of the Precious Blood on August 15, 1815. As we celebrate our 200th anniversary this year, this visit of good Pope John to the tomb of my founder to pray for the success of the Second Vatican Council inspires me. St. Gaspar was a champion of the renewal of the church in his day. Of course, there is no greater champion of the renewal of the church in the last century than Pope St. John XXIII who set in motion Vatican II.

FATHER JOSEPH NASSAL, C.P.P.S.



Father Joseph Nassal, C.P.P.S. is the author of eight books, including *The Conspiracy of Compassion*, *Rest Stops for the Soul*, *Premeditated Mercy*, *Moments of Truth*, and

Stations of the Crib. A Missionary of the Precious Blood, he has been engaged in retreat, renewal, and reconciliation ministry since 1988. Ordained in 1982, he has also served in parish ministry, justice and peace ministry, and in formation, vocation, and leadership ministry for his congregation. He presently is provincial director of the Kansas City Province and lives in Liberty, Missouri.

The Second Vatican Council encouraged religious communities to return to their sources and reclaim the core values upon which the congregations were founded. The challenge was to tap the initial inspiration of our founders and apply that spirit to the signs of these times. My founder, St. Gaspar, defined our role as missionaries as two-fold: the renewal of the church through the preaching of the Word and the reconciliation of the world through the Blood of Christ. These key values—renewal and reconciliation—are the lens through which Precious Blood people see the world. When we look through the lens of our charism, the world looks different. The same is true for all those in consecrated life: seeing the world as our founders saw the world changes us.

A good example of how the inspiration of a founder can influence our vision today is reflected in the story of a married couple who became lay associates (Precious Blood Companions) of our community. Steve and Connie and their five children lived down the street from the parish church where I served as a deacon in 1980. We became very good friends, and I often introduced them as two of the most important formation directors I ever had because often at the end of the day I would walk down the street and sit at their kitchen table and break open the stories of the day. Steve and Connie were accomplished practitioners of the art of kitchen table wisdom.

They were married on the feast of St. Gaspar. It was just a coincidence at first, but they began to see it as a holy coincidence. Because our priests have staffed their parish for more than 100 years, they have had a long affiliation with our community and lasting friendships with many of our priests. When they became Precious Blood Companions and started studying more seriously the life of St. Gaspar and the charism and spirituality of the community, they began to see with new eyes.

A turning point came when the buildings and grounds across the highway from the local Catholic high school were sold to the Missouri prison system. All five of Steve and Connie's children graduated from the high school and several of their grandchildren attended the school. Connie worked as a secretary there for several years. When Steve and Connie heard the news that a minimum-security correctional facility was being planned for the site in such close proximity to the high school, they joined the chorus of concerned parents opposed to the plan.

But as they thought and prayed about their opposition, the stories about St. Gaspar and his work with outlaws and bandits terrorizing towns like Sonnino in the

Papal States crossed their minds and took up considerable space in their discernment. They told me they began to look at the issue through the eyes of St. Gaspar. How might Gaspar have reacted? They realized that Gaspar's charism was about reconciliation and not retribution. The spirituality of the Precious Blood and the charism of Gaspar began to change their minds and hearts toward those who were incarcerated.

Founders continue to inspire

Each one of us in religious life has the gift of a founder to whom we can look for inspiration and guidance. Our way of life is rooted in a charism that flows from the Holy Spirit, through our founders, to each one of us. In our weariness and in our triumphs, our founders accompany us still.

There are many stories about my founder's life that have influenced and informed the way I view certain issues in the church and the world. For example, in 1808 when Gaspar was a young priest, Napoleon invaded the Papal States and occupied Rome. Refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the emperor, Gaspar was sent into exile and incarcerated. Through the years when I have been called to participate in acts of civil disobedience for a just cause, Gaspar has been my guide.

While he is somewhat known in Rome—as evidenced by good Pope St. John XXIII's affection for him—Gaspar is not well-known in the United States. When giving a retreat a few years ago, I met a woman religious who grew up in a parish served by members of my community in the early 1950s. She mentioned she had fond memories of the Precious Blood missionaries. “The priests wore cassocks with a large cross with a gold chain and they told us stories of Blessed Casper,” she said. I told her she remembered the cross and chain correctly but Casper was a friendly ghost and our founder's name was Gaspar.

“Yes, that's right,” she smiled. “Blessed Gaspar—have they made him a saint yet?”

Gaspar was canonized by Pope Pius XII on June 12, 1954. On the 50th anniversary of his canonization in 2004, I was privileged to offer a retreat at the Monastery of San Felice in Giano in the region of Umbria in Italy. It was here that Gaspar founded the Congregation in 1815. As missionaries from around the world journeyed together in the footsteps of our founder, it was clear how his passion to draw all people near in the blood of Christ continues to be our pulse as we promote the renewal of the church and reconciliation for a wounded world. ■

New insights on young Catholics will benefit ministry

THE LATEST WORK from Christian Smith, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults, In, Out of, and Gone From the Church* (Oxford University Press, 2014), explores the faith life of Catholics ages 18-23. While his earlier books looked at young people in several faith traditions, this book narrows the focus to young Catholics. Smith's books are based on the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR).

Young Catholic America begins by placing the NSYR data into both the larger American context and into the context of the study itself, including explaining the methodology that Smith and his team used to obtain their data. After these introductory chapters, which include direct testimonies from some of the young adults interviewed by the team, the book presents the heart of its findings. Fluctuating between statistical data, explanations of data, and then subsequent conclusions, the chapters are organized from the more general to a more specific examination of young adults and their sociological reality.

Before looking at implications of this work for religious communities, a few notes of caution are in order. The first is that this book is descriptive, not prescriptive. It explains the current situation of young adults, to the best of its abilities, but does not necessarily predict what will happen in the next 10 to 15 years with this population or the young adults that follow them. While it seems fair to project out from the data the trends that have the possibility of continuing, it should not be assumed that the next generation of young adults will respond in the same way as this current group. As such religious communities should be always able and ready to respond in ways that are appropriate to the current situation.

Second, for the purposes of this study “young adults” were defined as those ages 18-23. While many young adults who are open and interested in religious life fall in this category, many are beyond this demographic.

Finally the book uses the titles of “practicing,” “sporadic,” and “disen-



YOUNG CATHOLIC — AMERICA —

EMERGING ADULTS IN, OUT OF,
AND GONE FROM THE CHURCH

CHRISTIAN SMITH,
KYLE LONGEST, JONATHAN HILL, AND KARI CHRISTOFFERSEN

BY CRAIG GOULD



Craig Gould is the director of Youth and Young Adult Ministry for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. He formerly directed the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union, including the Catholics on Call program. He is married and the father of four.

gaged,” to categorize the young adults from whom they draw their statistics and subsequent conclusions. It is important to note that these classifications were developed based on frequency of Mass attendance, frequency of personal prayer, and self-reported importance of religious faith. While it is necessary to draw some lines for the sake of measurement, any choice in demarcating young adults will inevitably have weaknesses. A weakness of particular note to religious communities is that young adults are not measured in regard to their orientation and practice of service and social justice. Religious communities, with their history of activism and charisms that are often expressed in work with the most vulnerable, should be aware that the grouping of young adults mentioned in this book may not be the contingent of young adults from whom they would draw interest and potential new members.

With those ground rules in place, I certainly found that this book holds important implications for those who work with young adults in vocation and formation ministry. First, Smith identifies significant changes that have occurred within the larger American Catholic community. He points out the erosion of the historical system for creating Catholic identity among young adults. He notes: “no approach to effective inter-generational Catholic faith transmission had been devised and instituted to replace the old system—and indeed it is not clear that any such effective system has yet been put into place even today.”

The form of 19th and 20th century American Catholicism allowed religious communities to integrate themselves within this system of faith transmission, expose young people to their charisms, and build relationships with them. With Catholics now disseminated beyond the bounds of their tight-knit enclaves, religious communities can no longer rely on these avenues for potential vocations or “pre-formation” work.

Religious now need to look for ways to make themselves available and accessible to young adults. They must begin by asking, “Where are they?” Communities must identify where these young adults are since, as this book points out, they are gradually slipping outside the boundaries of parish and Catholic social circles.

Second, communities must partner with parish and diocesan leaders to create a comprehensive response to this relationship vacuum. The previously successful system was not created by one institution working independently but by a number of them, including schools, parishes, communities, and dioceses, operating in concert.

Reach out during transition points

One perhaps surprising insight Smith provides is that “most people’s life courses are structured by a process termed, ‘reciprocal continuity.’ That means that even in times of transition, people seek out new institutions or social relations that support their previously established identities.” Religious communities that can recognize important transition points for young adults can make themselves available during these moments. They can minister to young adults who are looking to maintain a coherence with the faith life that they possess (no matter how fragmented or infrequent that faith life may be). In so doing, religious could become the major point of connection between those young adults and their religious adherence. This type of contact could allow young adults to see religious communities as more than extensions of their own faithfulness—indeed perhaps they could see the communities as part of the fabric of their identity.

Finally the data shows this: “Although Catholics are not as highly devoted overall as non-Catholics, it is not because they are extremely unreligious, but rather because Catholics are more likely to fall somewhere in the middle levels of religiousness. They tend to gravitate more toward moderate levels of religious faith and practice.” Young adult Catholics by and large are not hostile to religious faith, and in fact many retain at least some connection to their faith practices as youths. When religious communities build relationships with young adults, and when those young people begin to show interest in potential membership, the vocation and formation directors can build upon a faith life that already exists. Young adults may still have obstacles in terms of their relationship with the larger ecclesial body beyond the religious community. However, such obstacles need not determine all of their relationship with the church.

As Smith himself notes throughout the book, while the NSYR data regarding young adults is the most comprehensive to date about the religious life of young Catholics, it is by no means exhaustive. Each piece of information should be held within the larger story of American Catholicism. Be that as it may, those in vocation and formation ministries would be wise to let the information in this book have an impact on the way they develop relationships with this age group and then work with those who show an interest in their communities. *Young Catholic America* is not a game plan for effective ministry by religious communities, but it is a basic map that can help guide and steer those communities in their outlook and activities. ■



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