

The concepts of sustainability, niche and diversity offer a helpful framework for thinking about the future of religious life.

Sustainability: new membership through an ecological lens

by Mary Pellegrino, CSJ

See, I am doing something new, even now it comes to light. Can you not see it? Do you not perceive it?

—Isaiah 43: 19

We know now more than ever before the interconnected complexities of the life and well being of the universe. Scientific discoveries and the development of human consciousness have placed at our disposal new insights, awarenesses and understandings of the nature of relationships between and among all life forms in the universe. This awareness awes and humbles us almost daily as we consider the role of the human community in helping to sustain and preserve the delicate balance of life on this planet.

More than ever before, too, ecological principles—those principles that describe and govern the natural world—have become integrated into human thought, discourse and behavior. Religious communities that have undergone building renovations in recent years have had eye and heart inclined toward the ecological implications of design, efficient use of resources and the impact on surrounding ecosystems. Care of water, air and land have emerged as increasingly urgent agenda items for the global community. We know that the same principles that describe and govern patterns and cycles in the natural world describe and govern patterns and cycles in our own lives as well.

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It's not a stretch then to reflect on our personal and communal lives as religious in light of universal ecological principles in order to discern our place in and particular contribution to God's grand design of life.

In this article I hope to reflect on three key ecological principles that contribute to the sustainability of life in all its forms. The concepts of *sustainability*, *diversity* and *niche* provide a context from which to consider the future of religious life as a particular life form in relationship to the broader human community and to all of creation. It's possible that these ecological principles can provide us with images, metaphors and concepts that might help us grapple with our practical, communal circumstances that we may have tended to view as threats to religious life. These circumstances are the diminishment of resources, an aging membership and few new members. It's possible that the language that we use to articulate concepts of sustainability in the natural world can help us to engage our emotionally-laden realities in ways that have the potential to unleash a new creativity, itself necessary for sustainability. Interspersed throughout this article are questions for individual and communal reflection and discernment.

I'd like to note here that I write, not from a studied background in science, but from an interest in finding ways to reframe the questions that religious communities grapple with today in our attempts to discern the call of God in our communal lives.

I write, too, from an interest in supporting vocation ministers in their service to their congregations and to the whole of religious life. We have in recent years become more and more clear in establishing criteria for readiness for potential candidates to enter formation processes in our congregations, and we have become

far more realistic about what we need to see in potential candidates in order for them to be able to live this life fruitfully and healthily. We know that an authentic call to religious life is made up of a mysterious constellation of desire, aptitude and particular life circumstances, and that not one of these alone will suffice in sustaining one in this life and commitment.

As we companion potential candidates through this deep discernment, we also need the skills and the language to companion our congregations through similarly deep discernment and reflection on the call of God in our communal lives, revealed through our collective and communal desires, aptitudes and particular

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life circumstances at any given time. It is nothing less than turning a discerning eye and heart toward the interior landscape of our individual and communal lives, just as we companion potential candidates in turning a discerning eye and heart toward their own interior landscapes.

While numerous ecological principles could aid in our view of the landscape, I find niche and diversity particularly compelling. Each of these contributes to the sustainability of life in all its forms and systems, and each provides a lens through which we can consider the sustainability of religious life.

A word about sustainability and religious life

The energy of the natural world is essentially directed toward balance. This is true both within and among systems and all life forms in order to continually achieve and safeguard patterns or relationships that allow life to be supported in various forms, to thrive and

to be generative and fruitful. Fundamentally the energy of the universe is directed toward right relationship, and sustainability is the fruit of right relationships.

We find Scriptural foundations of sustainability—of right relationships between humans and between the human community and all of creation—in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The creation story itself is the story of God’s original vision—one of reverence, respect and right relationship among all of creation. And the Hebrew practice of jubilee, which calls for the periodic “balancing” of human relationships as well as the human community’s relationship with the land, is rooted in God’s original vision of creation. The reign of God, which is the heart of Jesus’ life, message and ministry, continues to call the human community back into right relationship with God, with one another and with all of creation.

In an ecological context, “sustainable” could describe any environment or habitat in which a variety of life forms co-exist in a web of mutual relationship over time. For our purposes, as we look to the sustainability of religious life, a human form of community, I offer the following definition: “Sustainability, in the sense of community development, is the act of one generation saving options by passing them to the next generation, which saves options by passing them to the next generation, and so on.” (See *Sustainable Community Development: Principles and Concepts*, by Chris Maser, St. Lucie Press, Delray Beach, FL, 1997, p. xv.)

With this in mind, it seems indisputable that religious life is and has been sustainable over centuries and across cultures. Born in the early centuries of the New Testament era from the urgings of the Holy Spirit coupled with human longing, religious life as we know it today has adapted to culture and time and has contributed enormously to the well being and life of not only the church but to civilization as well. Generations of religious have created and provided options for future generations since the early centuries of the church.

Throughout history, men and women inspired by Jesus responded to elements in the culture hostile toward the Gospel with a consciously adaptive and transformative creativity. The history of religious life in Christianity is a remarkable story of intentional and conscious adaptability and sustainability, and

each of us and our congregations are part of that story at a time in history when another fervor of transformative creativity is called for.

Niche: our role in society

In the Fall 2001 issue of *HORIZON*, Catherine Bertrand, SSND, then Executive Director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, identified 10 elements that she found evident in congregations that were attracting and sustaining newer members. Several of these elements are related to identity and purpose.

From an ecological perspective, identity and purpose, as they contribute to sustainability, are related to the concept of “niche.” Niche could be defined as the particular role which a species performs within, on behalf

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of and for the benefit of the larger or whole life system. Each species participates in the cooperative and reciprocal life of the whole by contributing according to its particularity and its nature. In *In The Service of Life: Widening and Deepening Religious Commitment*, Elaine Prevallet, SL notes that “our human place in creation, able as we are to move around and manipulate the environment, requires conscious adaptation and cooperation. That means we must develop skill in discerning where our own particular gift fits with the earth community.” (p. 37). In that sense we’re called to develop our skills in discerning where our particular gifts, *precisely as religious*, fit not only with the earth community, but with the cultural and ecclesial communities as well. Both internal and external influences have, over time, helped to shape and continue to help shape our identity and self-understanding, or our niche, in relationship to all of creation.

In every era and culture “religious life,” in its most generic sense, has existed as a liminal state serving a distinct and necessary role. Diarmuid O’Murchu, notes that “every society has a structure, and a liminal community both clarifies the structure of society and can be instrumental in changing it.” (*Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*, p. 37).

O’Murchu notes that while society needs liminal groups in order to reflect back to the culture its deepest values, it is at the same time ambivalent or resistant toward these liminal groups because the reflection they provide is often challenging, serving as a corrective to what is actually taking place within the culture. Consider here the prophetic tradition in our Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as our own prophetic identity, presence and role that religious communities possess in the church and in the world. “Human civilization needs the values of the vowed life, but in a manner that challenges and inspires in the context of each new age,” writes O’Murchu (p. 38).

In the history of my own congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph, this cultural ambivalence was evident at our founding in 17th century France when the civil and ecclesial structures were unable to care for, provide for or safeguard ongoing social development. At that time, the male population had been significantly reduced and nearly decimated because of cultural stressors, such as war, disease and famine. Works ordinarily performed by men in service to the whole society were taken up by women, not by cultural or ecclesial design, but because of the urgency of the need for the culture and the church to seek stability and balance. Inspired by both their belief in God and the dire needs that were going unmet in their midst, six women from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds came together to live into what eventually became a new life form in the church and culture, “doing all the works of which woman is capable.”

While both civil and ecclesial authorities were reluctant to have women perform the works that had until then been reserved for men, the needs of the whole for stability, balance, health and wellness outweighed social convention, and apostolic religious life began to grow in that era and culture.

In *Finding the Treasure*, Sandra Schneiders notes that religious life within the Judeo-Christian tradition is related principally to the “God-quest.” She writes that “religious life is distinguished by the fact that it has no other legitimating finality except holiness, personal

union with God.” (p. 35). While for some religious communities the God-quest is engaged through apostolic works and ministries, Schneider suggests that clarity of relationship between identity and works could help to allay our fears and anxieties about an aging membership and few new members.

“If ministerial communities could re-examine the relationship between their identity as religious communities on the one hand and their ministries and finances on the other, they might discover that the felt need for numbers is, at best, exaggerated.” (pp. 83-84)

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Fewer entrants is normal

A long view of the history of religious life in Western culture, particularly in the United States, reveals that large numbers of religious or large congregations is, in fact, an historical anomaly. Sisters in my congregation who are in their 80s and 90s tell stories of entering the congregation alone or with two or three others. It was not until the 1950s or so that religious communities began to see “crowds” or “bands” or “parties” of 30, 40 or 50 or more people entering at the same time. What is happening now in terms of the numbers of men and women entering religious communities in the Western culture seems to be far more normative within the broad history of religious life than we might experience on an emotional level.

The practical dilemma that many religious communities are faced with now is fundamentally one of care of our members and stewardship of resources. It becomes a crisis of identity only if our identity is wed to a par-

ticular level of activity or to particular corporate works, both of which have natural life spans over which we may have little or no control.

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For example, nearly 100 religious congregations in the United States have non-governmental organizational (NGO) status in the United Nations, and have formed the Religious Orders Partnership, influencing the moral, economic and political climate of our global community. The language of the United Nations Charter and the UN Millennium Development Goals, clearly reflect the values of Catholic social teaching, and have indeed been significantly influenced by women and men religious serving on various UN committees or in advisory capacities. More locally, justice offices of many of our congregations engage in similar works of influence when we educate and inform our members, associates and others about what is taking place legislatively and politically in our country and around the world.

“We can’t participate in protest marches; they just don’t happen here,” noted Carol Ann Wassmuth, OSB from the Benedictine Monastery of St. Gertrude in Cottonwood, ID. The community, though, undertakes “lots of letter-writing, lots of phone calls to legislators on the federal level,” and has educated itself extensively, formulating a corporate stance on human trafficking. (“Women Religious Find New Paths,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Feb. 24, 2006.)

In addition, we are learning that the use of our economic resources, either as individual congregations or as collectives, has an enormous potential to transform the economic landscape wherever we find ourselves. In the Pittsburgh area, seven congregations of religious women participate in a program that aids them in purchasing meats and produce from local farmers, thus allowing these congregations to shift a percentage of their food dollars to the local market. The shift in food dollars allows the congregations to positively influence the practices of large corporate food service providers regarding food security and sustainable agriculture. While we may not be farming the land or managing corporations, our economic actions are educating, informing and transforming aspects of the culture.

In “Continuing the Conversation,” the Winter 2006 edition of *The Occasional Papers* of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), various women religious from a variety of backgrounds were asked to reflect on a number of questions related to critical concerns confronting religious. Nearly every responder, many of whom are congregational leaders, either directly or indirectly, addressed the need for contemplative and apostolic religious today to reclaim our contemplative and prophetic roots and identity in order to discern our purpose and meaning for this moment in time—or, as Maser notes, to save options for future generations.

Because of the decline of resources—both human and financial—we might be tempted to skip the contemplative moment or the contemplative dimension of our lives in favor of more actively generating resources. I believe that the tension here is critical, and the temptation is great to sacrifice sound formation processes and the resources needed for them.

Upholding our contemplative roots

“Perhaps our circling back to fewness is both a gift and grace,” writes Margaret Brennan, IHM. “Perhaps the religious life of the future will hold the call to be more radically contemplative in its commitment to that kind of transforming action which is the meaning of the church’s mission to further the *kingdom* of God within the processes and movements of history” (from *The Occasional Papers*, Winter 2006, LCWR).

In his address at the Religious Formation Conference’s 2005 Congress in San Antonio, TX, Donald Goergen, OP also called for religious communities to reclaim, retrieve and rethink the contemplative dimension of religious life. “We can’t,” he says, “skip in our lives or our formation the contemplative moment that grounds us. . . The more active I am, the more contemplative I must

be.”

Because of the decline of resources—both human and financial—we might be tempted to do just that, to skip the contemplative moment or the contemplative dimension of our lives in favor of more actively generating resources. I believe that the tension here is critical, and the temptation is great to sacrifice sound formation processes and the resources needed for them.

Finding ways to live creatively, contemplatively and hopefully in the tension between our deepest and most authentic identity and our very real, concrete needs is a profound and prophetic gift that religious life offers to both our culture and our church.

Consider your own congregation in the grand story of religious life. What was its original vision, its inspired impulse? At its origins, what societal or ecclesial values did your congregation reflect back to the culture and the world of the time? What values might our contemporary culture or world need to have reflected back to it now? Are any of these values connected to your congregation’s original vision or inspired impulse?

In what ways are you and your congregation’s apostolic and contemplative energies being transformed in response to both your interior and exterior landscapes? What are the options that you desire, feel called to or want to place your energies into in order to provide options for future generations? What else needs to be happening in the living systems or processes of your congregation in order for those options to become realities and to be sustained? What needs to be cultivated in both the interior and exterior landscapes of your individual and communal lives in order for your life to continue to be generative and sustainable?

Diversity: mix of ages keeps us strong

From an ecological perspective, the greater diversity an ecosystem holds, the greater its sustainable capacity. Each species within the system contributes something essential to the vitality and vibrancy of the entire system. Each performs a particular function, each plays a part in the longevity and adaptability of whole systems. Ironically, diversity serves the stability, unity and integrity of the entire system. It is one of the benchmarks of an integrated and healthy system.

Because religious life has been sustainable throughout

the centuries and across cultures during times when, by all intents and purposes, one religious congregation looked like every other congregation and everyone, by and large, did the same thing, we have to conclude that the diversity that sustains is related to something other than what we look like or what we do.

In addition, many religious congregations that would be considered “mono-cultural” with regard to ethnic or racial origins, have thrived and continue to be fruitful with no discernible cultural diversity among their members.

And while contemporary religious life itself has a diversity of expressions, historically religious life proved to be sustainable over a long period of time prior to the development of diverse expressions.

It seems that the diversity that has proven to be constant and sustainable over the centuries and across cultures is related to a diversity that successive generations bring to the whole. With persons from a variety of generations at various ages across the life span of a community, the collective consciousness of that community is shaped in such a way that it is continually informed and transformed by new experiences, perspectives, world views, consciousness and thought. And its response in and to the culture and the world is shaped by that ever-evolving collective communal consciousness. In the natural world we might call this a “feedback loop,” which provides the mechanism for a life system or form to balance itself, to adapt when necessary, and to continue to remain healthy and sustainable.

Mysterious zeal

As an indicator of religious life’s capacity for sustainability, generational diversity appears to present quite a challenge—at least in the Western world—as younger generations are largely underrepresented in our congregations. In the life cycle of human development we could conclude that the developmental energy of the majority of our members and therefore our congregations on the whole, is directed toward end-of-life issues and concerns. We could also conclude that because most religious are beyond the developmental task of generativity, that our efforts at providing options for future generations are all but passed. We *could* conclude all these things and yet, many of us are reluctant to do so, I suspect, because age reflects only one dimension of our personal and communal lives.

“It’s a very mysterious thing when all is said and done,” noted Schneiders (*National Catholic Reporter*, Feb. 24, 2006) “These people are living out the spiritual resources they’ve been developing over a lifetime. When you are living for Christ, whom you know and love, you don’t throw in the towel.”

While we experience the effects of the imbalance of few new members and aging membership in very real, practical ways in our personal and communal lives, I believe that with regard to the spirit of many of our

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congregations, the lack of generational diversity is somewhat mitigated because of the adaptability and capacity of our members, regardless of age, to continue to engage in ongoing formation, theological updating, life-long learning, critical thinking and analysis, reflection and prayer. All of these serve to inform and transform our individual and communal lives.

So at a time when it appears as though some congregations should just about pack it up, they are exhibiting remarkable zeal, energy and adaptability for the sake of the Gospel. In response to, or perhaps in spite of, a variety of internal environmental “stimuli,” such as fewer resources, greater demands on members, aging members and few newer members, some congregations have directed their energies toward balancing these realities in new and creative ways. While some congregations or provinces have reconfigured and merged, forming new congregations, other communities have chosen to “refound” themselves, “reconfiguring” themselves interiorly in relationship to their resources, their property and the focus of their energies.

With that said, I do believe that the diversity of thought, consciousness, life experience and world views that generational diversity ordinarily brings to any human community must be tended to intentionally and objectively if we're to continue to allow ourselves and our energies to be transformed for the sake of the Gospel in our culture today.

"We need to be intentional about creating spaces and conversations which include the passion and imagination of the women who have come to religious life since Vatican II so that their voices, although few, do not go unheard or dismissed.," writes Kristin Matthes, SNDdeN. (*The Occasional Papers*, Winter 2006, LCWR). Clearly, Matthes' insight is applicable to men's congregations as well, as they, too, consider issues and concerns arising from the lack of generational diversity.

While many congregations have made what has often been described as a "preferential option for the young," there remains, I believe, some ambivalence toward younger generations in the church that religious communities need to acknowledge, address and clarify if we are to continue to create options for future generations.

Recently I had the opportunity to work with a congregation that was attempting to restructure its vocation/formation team, as well as assess the efficacy of its formation process. One of the sisters in the study group, a college professor, noted that she wouldn't encourage any of her students to consider religious life or her congregation because they were "too conservative," the inference being that they would set the congregation back from the advances that it's made in recent years. In my conversations with members of many religious communities, I don't think that this is an isolated opinion, but I do believe that it continues to perpetuate labels, stereotypes and polarities within the church which are counterproductive to our efforts to establish mutually respectful relationships across generations in the church and in the culture.

Rigidity is a problem

Fundamentally I don't believe that ecclesiology, theology or spirituality are really at issue here at all when we consider the differences among generations in the church today. I believe that it's the rigidity and unyielding nature with which any one of us—young Catholic or seasoned religious—holds our personal view that causes the polarizations and rifts that we

might experience. In *Turning to One Another: Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Margaret Wheatley notes, "It's not differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do" (p. 36).

One of the soul-searching questions that I believe religious, particularly in North America, are faced with today is whether or not we can imagine and will allow the charism and vowed expression of religious life and our congregations to be carried on by those who have different experiences of church and culture from the dominant experience or views within our congregations. There are diverse ecclesiologies and expressions of faith within the Catholic tradition that are alive and well both within our congregations and among young people today. I believe that the invitation this reality offers us is to find ways to establish and cultivate relationships with persons whose ecclesiology, experience of church and life experience are different from our own, but who, like ourselves, may also be called to the vowed life by a generous and mysterious God.

Religious today must be willing and able to enter into relationships with younger Catholics, and to be curious about their religious experience and the expression of their faith. We must allow them to be young as we were once allowed to be young, to be unfinished in their spiritual development as each of us was unfinished in our spiritual development at their age and as we remain unfinished even today. We must mentor younger generations of Catholics and potential members into the depth of our faith and the breadth of its expression in ways that we have been mentored by our forebears.

To dismiss a potential candidate or to refuse to extend an invitation merely because we perceive someone to be too conservative or too liberal, stifles the transformation that could take place for both the individual and the congregation during discernment and formation.

We must be able to perceive with the eye and the heart of the prophet the "something new" that God is doing in, among and through us in relationship to the larger life of the culture and the church. We must enter into relationships with those who may be different from ourselves for the sake of mutual transformation that serves a greater life.

Congregations that are able to respectfully make room for and dialogue with different and diverse perspectives, ecclesiologies and expressions of the faith

within the Catholic tradition, I believe, are far more poised for sustainability than those whose members are not able to do that or who judge the differences based on their personal experience or perspective.

I find the recent work and study in the area of spiral dynamics, a theory of human consciousness, to be particularly helpful in moving toward the type of transformation that seems to be necessary in order to embrace our current realities in fruitful ways that will continue to set a course for sustainability.

The pioneering work of Clare Graves in the area of human consciousness development, as well as more recent work with Graves' findings, provides compelling research that indicates human development proceeds through eight successive stages, called memes, which interweave, overlap and flow in waves, resulting in a dynamic spiral of unfolding consciousness. In order to more readily grasp the concepts contained in the theory each successive stage, or meme, is assigned a color. These colors identify each of the eight stages which theorists believe comprise two tiers, and "each successive stage, wave or level of existence is a state through which people pass on their way to other states of being" (*The Theory of Everything*, Ken Wilbur, p. 6).

These stages guide the development of both whole cul-

tures and individuals through stages whose primary concerns range from survival to the presence and use of power and authority, to order, to life's purpose and meaning, to the inner world and to integration of all.

I find that this theory accounts in compelling ways for the tensions that exist within the ecclesial community – and perhaps in our own communities as well – around concerns related to the function and role of authority, the relationship between church doctrine and pastoral practice, orthodoxy and fundamentalism and other concerns that represent what appears to be competing values.

In his address to the RFC Goergen playfully notes that "all hell breaks loose" when "blue" persons who are fundamentally oriented toward order and absolute truth, enter "green" communities, who are fundamentally concerned with relationships, communitarian good, and will most likely have a relativistic value system determined by fluid and competing values within a broad framework.

The momentous leap that propels an individual, a community or a culture from the first tier of consciousness to the second tier of consciousness is that capacity to grasp the inherent and functional value of each stage and level and to understand that each wave

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is “crucially important for the health of the overall Spiral.” (Wilbur, p. 11) This capacity to “transcend and include” enables each stage to go beyond its predecessor, while embracing or including it in its makeup. Until second-tier thinking is achieved those at each stage find themselves using energy to compete with those at other stages, thus diminishing energy that could be directed in more sustainable and fruitful ways and inadvertently and unconsciously providing resistance to the progressive transformation that will allow for greater understanding and relationship.

Questions to ponder

What resources do we have available to us—as individuals, congregations or constellations of congregations—for ongoing formation, life-long learning and authentic transformation and growth? In what ways are our congregations open to diverse thought, ecclesiologies, expressions of faith within the Catholic tradition—both within our congregations and from younger Catholics in the Church? How can the energy of the all the generations, but particularly the younger generations within religious life be harnessed for the sake of the Gospel, the mission of Jesus Christ, and the gift of religious life itself? When we gather with one another to discern or to make decisions, to whom could we expose ourselves or whom could we include

around our table in order to help us to think, reflect and discern more holistically?

In the interconnectedness of all of life, any single act influences the whole and is an act of both faith and hope in the fidelity and generosity of God, the source and summit of the mystery of life.

The single acts of deep listening and discernment in which many religious communities are engaged with regard to their futures, the health and well-being of their communal lives, the prioritization of their values and the focusing of their energies and resources within those priorities, I believe, is a great and prophetic service that religious life offers the church and the world at this time.

In this article we’ve considered just three ecological principles—sustainability, niche and diversity—that can serve as a threshold for our ongoing reflection on the future of religious life and our unique role in life-giving relationships.

There are other principles that can serve us in similar ways, and my hope is that in our ongoing work of transformation, we each find those avenues that can open before us new vistas of consciousness and action in response to the call and promise of God ✚