

The gifts of old and young, faithfulness, and awareness that we are not alone in our demographic challenges are among the key themes from the 2020 Study on Recent Vocations that resonate with young religious.



Brother Kyle Mena, F.S.C. (center) with members of his community. On his left is Brother Joseph (J.D.) Macioce, F.S.C. and to his right is Brother Richard Buccina, F.S.C.

Younger members reflect on the study



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Backbone: cultivating a culture of mission and creativity

By Brother Kyle Mena, F.S.C.

SIT UP. KEEP YOUR BACK STRAIGHT. Pay attention. Please don't slouch. Stay grounded. Remember your roots. Like many educators and parents, I find myself often thinking and stating any one of these phrases in my classroom whenever I see a student slouched over or with a head down. Just when I think the message is not getting through, a fellow student taps his or her peer, encouraging that person to arise. In the process, my students and I are taught a lesson that goes deeper than outward appearances. What is cultivated through these peer interventions is self-awareness and, more important, the support available in a community. For those of us in religious life: What does it look like when we are tapped by our peers in community?

GROUNDS FOR A NEW BEGINNING

In the NRVC-CARA 2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life, superiors speak in depth about a lack of support for the newest members due to the age gap between old and new members. There is a deeper

concern that younger members may be less committed and less able to absorb the charism and heritage of the order—and thus there will be a lack of future leadership. Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., in *The Fire in These Ashes*, eloquently states, “Religious in large numbers are growing daily more disillusioned by the endless historical view of past forms of religious life and long excursions into futuristic speculation.... Our task is to live in the here and now.”

Chittister suggests that within the delicate balance of the here and now lies an opportunity for the older generation to connect with the younger generation while allowing newer members to be connected to each other and to the charism. The old cliché is that you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. As a new member of the De La Salle Christian Brothers, I am tapped on the shoulder daily and reminded of our honorable and valiant mission! More important, genuine humility and zeal for the mission of education has led to connections and relationships with older brothers over the years. I continue to experience a great deal of fraternal support from the older men simply in that many are ready and willing to listen to my practical questions about things like how to set up and maintain

an orderly classroom, how best to embrace moments of solitude, and techniques on strengthening and maintaining my spiritual life.

In my case, young brothers are blessed to be surrounded by young brothers who connect on a semiannual basis for what is referred to as a Brothers In Formation (BIF) weekend. At these BIF weekends, young brothers can reconnect and share their experiences both in the classroom and in community. While these weekends provide vital and immeasurable peer support, it is understood that many of the newer members in formation have no peers in their formation “class” within their community. True for some communities more than others, this lack of a peer group contributes to the overarching concern for a lack of peer support. Within this context, intercommunity gatherings take on an instrumental role as they provide grounds for fellowship, communication, and a wider scope of our universal mission of evangelization.

PERSONAL, SUPPORTIVE, WITHOUT JUDGEMENT
In her book *Catholic Cultures: How Parishes Can Respond to the Changing Face of Catholicism*, Sister Patricia Wittberg, S.C. expresses the following, “Not

It takes a community to grow a vocation



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only do our parishes need to speak the Good News to various ethnic cultures, we also need to address different generational cultures.” The same difficulty remains for both seasoned veterans and newer members to religious life: What is the allure of religious life and how can it be conveyed in the here and now? One can argue that what draws young people to religious life and a life with Christ is a personal, authentic encounter with someone filled with missionary zeal. In my case it was an encounter with Brother Edward Shields, F.S.C. that led me to join the “contact program,” whereby I met a cohort of young men also interested in discerning a life with the brothers. I was also personally invited to reside with a community of brothers. There I had firsthand experience with the tremendous support and respect the brothers have for one another. Last, I received a personal invitation to work as a high-school service coordinator, and there I could see the brothers’ passion for and dedication to working with young people.

At my current ministry in urban education, I often turn to older brothers and experienced faculty members for wisdom and insight into creating a vibrant classroom. As daily questions from curious students arise from the depths of their hearts, undertones of commitment and integrity fill the room—indicating that we have much to learn from the younger generation. Who do you live with? Are you allowed to have money? Do you want to be a brother for the rest of your life?

We are reminded by Pope Francis in his post-synod apostolic exhortation that “we grow in wisdom and maturity when we take the time to touch the suffering of others. The poor have a pearl of hidden wisdom and, with a few simple words, they can help us discover unexpected values.” These pearls of hidden wisdom, present in exuberant student questions, creep into the classroom each day and help fortify my vocation. Young people need someone genuine who will listen to their concerns, be present when they’ve made a mistake and need help, hold them accountable for their actions, and lead them to Christ. King David preaches this exact message in the Psalms, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”

Catholicism is changing, and teaching in an urban environment has reinforced that reality. To this end, Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B. calls all religious brothers and sisters to experience “fire in these ashes, not [the] smoldering embers” of the past. As stated by young brothers, “We are teachers [and ministers of justice] in a world that needs risky and bold responses. Let us open our horizons of creativity in order to ensure that

the mission deploys its strength in the promotion of a world that is more just and in solidarity with others” (45th General Chapter, De La Salle Christian Brothers). Let us all sit up, keep our backs straight, pay attention, remember our roots in Christ, and live in the here and now.



The author with her mentor, Sister Rita Prendergast, C.C.V.I.

Enthusiastically faithful to the call

By Sister Adriana Calzada Vázquez Vela, C.C.V.I.

Calzada is a campus minister in San Antonio, Texas and belongs to the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.

I recently experienced for the first time the death of a sister I had lived with for four months, Sister Rita Prendergast, C.C.V.I. Yes, a lot of dear sisters have died and it has always been painful. Nevertheless, this was a whole new experience. As I read through the collection of emails Rita sent me (10 years of them), it was easy to identify two themes: “God loves you” and “just surrender to God’s will.” We lived together when I was a novice and she was 78. She was 88 when she passed. Her centeredness and hopefulness make a good lens from which to read the *2020 Study on Recent Vocations to Religious Life*.

I am moved by the hopes for the future in this report. That is where my heart immediately went as soon as I received the report, probably because I do recognize my agency in creating the future of religious life.

A word that stands out for me in the report is faithfulness. Newer members desire to remain faithful to the call, to prayer, to God, to the people of God whom we want to serve. The report makes me smile and connects me to the initial innocence I brought to

religious life: the desire to respond to a call which can be defined in various ways, the overwhelming love of God experienced in a way that could only lead me to give my life “back.” I have not lost any of these desires; the expression of them has been transformed over the years, though.

Reading all the different voices energetically expressing joy, hope, and enthusiasm for religious life should erase any worry or doubt that we will be fine. We religious sisters, brothers, and priests will continue to respond to our call faithfully. Newer members will continue to serve and journey with different communities, such as young adults, L.G.B.T.+ people, and migrants and refugees. We will continue to do it with strength, passion, commitment, and a lot of energy. We will continue to do it professionally, with “outside the box” thinking. We will continue to discern the best way to do what we are doing, just like our predecessors.

In my case, and I know I’m not the only one, I will continue to do so relying on my profound desire to remain faithful to God, until one day, finally, I not only “know” but embrace the fact that the faithful one is God, the one who loves me and to whom I need to surrender, just as my dearest Rita reminded me time and again. She fully understood what I hope to someday.

Together let’s address issues of aging and vibrancy

By Father Daniel Kim, M.M.

Kim lives and works at his community’s headquarters in Maryknoll, New York.

As a member of a society of apostolic life, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, who was ordained in 2017, I have been tasked to provide personal feedback on whatever I found most intriguing in the latest NRVC-CARA study. I found the section titled “Greatest Concern/Worry for the Newest Members” (46-48) the most striking. Many concerns listed by major superiors in this section resonated deeply with me, with the following two being the most notable:

Finding the support, encouragement, and life they need to be sustained in an aging, retired community. Helping them to experience the fire of mission, not smoldering embers (47).

New members are entering at a time when it seems we are constantly seeking clarity about the life—it is not a time of clear and direct



Father Daniel Kim, M.M.

understanding. Attending to their “future” in the midst of aging and diminishing members (48)!

The aforementioned comments highlight well the growing concern and worry for younger members such as myself. For instance, I am currently residing and working at our headquarters in Maryknoll, New York, and until recently the age-gap between myself and the next youngest member was 31 years. Furthermore, my community’s demographics by age are very top-heavy, meaning a vast majority of our men fall within the 80+ age group. So it is easy to understand that much of our leadership’s time and energy are spent on caring well for our elderly and ailing members—a very important and necessary undertaking. Unfortunately what suffers is the vibrancy and fire behind breaking new missionary inroads.

What the NRVC-CARA report seems to say is that the realities and concerns I mention here are widespread. In other words, my community is not unique in dealing with the issues of aging religious and the associated challenges (at least in North America). Therefore, any push to resolve this matter, in my humble opinion, needs to be done on a national, intercommunal level. Additionally, in that effort I would like to see the voices of younger religious expressed alongside the major superiors. That way a more balanced discussion can take place. These are a few simple suggestions gathered from not only the section that I found intriguing but the report in its entirety.

The data and the statistical analysis of this report are comprehensive and invaluable. I extend my sincere appreciation to all those involved with this project. Furthermore I hope people of all ages who belong to religious institutes will work together to ensure that our charisms not only survive but thrive today and on into the future. ■

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