



Vocation to action & contemplation

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Hope in spite of built-in trouble

HOPE IS A SLIPPERY THING. I've read that pessimists tend to be more accurate in understanding the reality around them. Are you simply a realist if you've lost hope in, say, another person, in an institution, in a difficult situation? As Kenny Rogers sings in "The Gambler," "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em." Are those who maintain hope in the midst of negative voices (such as vocation ministers, for instance) not seeing clearly, or are they seeing things differently, perhaps perceiving something that others don't perceive?

The answers to these questions have always seemed murky to me, and furthermore the answers always vary according to the circumstances. To my way of thinking *Christian hope* is a more sure bet. The hope that is promised by Jesus, that underpins our faith, is not based on vacillating circumstances, as Sister Gemma Simmonds, CJ points out (page 18).

In the midst of a world with many negative things to say about religious life, all of the writers in this edition hold onto a common thread of Christian hope—that is, a sense that no matter what, God's love and care for us is constant. Come what may with institutions, our loved ones, our health ... and, still "nothing can separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:35-39).

Apostolic religious life as we know it today was created with some inherent tensions, which Brother John Hamilton, CFX points out (page 6). That is also no reason to lose hope; the human disposition to forget why we work and whose we are was well-understood by founders and foundresses.

Sister Gemma Simmonds, CJ talks about this foundation of Christian hope in her article about signs of religious life vitality on page 18. Likewise our writers wrestle with hope amidst misunderstanding of the role of vocation directors (page 12), the thorny ethics woven into vocation ministry (page 23), and the mysteries that we can be even to ourselves (page 31). But shot through all of our articles is the sense that spring will follow winter. That resurrection follows death. That the Holy Spirit is still afoot, and she's not done yet.

So during the days ahead when winter's gloom cannot leave quickly enough, I invite you to read and share our articles here and relish their quiet pulse of hope. ■



Carol Schuck
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In the midst of a world with many negative things to say about religious life, all the writers in this edition hold onto a common thread of Christian hope.



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Summer Institute workshops set

The July 8-22 Summer Institute workshops of the National Religious Vocation Conference have been confirmed; learn more at nrvc.net.

Ethical Issues in Vocation and Formation Ministry

July 8-9 | Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D.

Behavioral Assessment I

July 10-12 | Father Raymond P. Carey, Ph.D.

Orientation Program for New Vocation Directors

July 14-18 | Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC and Sister Deborah Borneman, SSCM

Understanding, Assessing and Fostering Psycho-Sexual Integration

July 19-22 | Sister Lynn M. Levo, CSJ, Ph.D.

2015 to be “Year of Consecrated Life”

During a three-hour meeting with the Union of Superiors General on November 29, 2013 Pope Francis announced that 2015 will be a Year of Consecrated Life. The National Religious Vocation Conference hopes to use this dedicated year to call attention to religious life and the fact that young adults continue to respond to the call to consecrated life.

During the November meeting with religious superiors, the Holy Father chose to not deliver a prepared



Participants in the 2013 Summer Institute in Chicago share a light moment. Pictured here are Sisters Vera Chan, CSN; Raquel Ortez, SSND; and Rebecca Tayag, SSND.



Photo: www.OB.org

Pope Francis announced that 2015 will be a Year of Consecrated Life. at a 2013 meeting with the Union of Superiors General.

talk but rather to engage in a question-answer session, a move that was greeted enthusiastically. The conversation was wide-ranging, and the pope exhorted religious to maintain a true prophetic edge: “Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up,” he said. They should be “witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living!”

HORIZON and the NRVC website and newsletter will continue to carry news of special activities and materials related to the 2015 Year of Consecrated Life.

2014 convocation theme: “It is good that we are here. Rise and have no fear”



The biennial convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference will take place November 6-10, 2014 in Chicago and will feature a commemoration of its 25th anniversary, with a special focus on a vibrant future for religious life.

The convocation will take place at the Marriott Hotel at O’Hare, Chicago. The keynote speakers will be Father Bernhard A. Eckerstorfer, OSB, director of vocations, novice master and formation director for the Kremsmünster Abbey in Austria; Sister Colleen Mary Mallon, OP, faculty member of Aquinas Institute of Theology, Berkley, CA; and Sister Theresa Rickard, OP, former vocation director and current executive director of Renew International.



Participants hold a table discussion about one of the presentations they listened to during the “Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope” event that took place in December at St. Meinrad Archabbey, in Indiana.

On November 6 three full-day, pre-convocation workshops will be offered:

Building Intercultural Competence for Vocation Ministers | Sister Teresa Maya, CCVI

Canon, Civil and Immigration Law | Father Daniel J. Ward, OSB and Mr. Miguel Naranjo

Life Questions: Screening for Candidates
| Brother John Mark Falkenhain, OSB

On November 7 of the convocation, a panel discussion with newly professed men and women religious will examine the NRVC/CARA study “Integration of Multi-cultural and Multiethnic Candidates in Religious Life.”

Workshops to be held during the convocation on Saturday, November 8 include:

This Little Light of Mine: A Celebration of Sister Thea Bowman | Brother Michael McGrath, OSFS

Discernment in Male Spirituality | Father Dennis Billy, CSSR

Peer Supervision for Vocation Directors | Sister Beth Saner, FSPA

Ramifications of Reconfiguration for Vocation Offices | Father Chuck Frederico, SJ;
Sister Pat Twohill, OP and Brother Tom Wendorf, SM

Self-Care: Achieving Balance and Avoiding Burn-out | Dr. Timone Davis

Ten Effective Ways to Use Media in Vocation Ministry | Deacon Pedro Guevara-Mann

Men religious gather to “Move Forward in Hope”

Brothers and priests in religious orders gathered during two NRVC events in December 2013 and January 2014 to learn about the contemporary context and challenges in vocation ministry and to begin forming new membership strategies.

The first of NRVC’s two “Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope” events took place December 9-11 at St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana. Participants came in pairs, usually a religious superior with the institute’s vocation director. They listened to presentations about the foundations of religious life, changing U.S. demographics, and the impact of American culture on religious life and vocations. Participants discussed the presentations and had time to begin forming strategies to take home to their communities. Each participant also left with a tool for assessing the vocation culture within his community.

The presentations are tentatively slated to appear in modified form in the Spring 2013 HORIZON. For more information about these events, see nrvc.net. Photos are available for viewing and downloading at flickr.com/nrvc. The “Men Religious Moving Forward in Hope” project is being underwritten by an anonymous donor.

Vocation and volunteering linked

A recent study of more than 5,000 former full-time volunteers shows that 37 percent had considered a vocation to priesthood or religious life. Twenty-seven percent said they had considered such a vocation “very seriously.” A total of 6 percent had actually entered religious life or diocesan priesthood or were preparing to enter.

The 6 percent proportion who became sisters, brothers, or priests (or were in formation) represent a higher level of church vocations than is typical for the general Catholic population. Furthermore, the proportion of former volunteers who have considered religious life or priesthood is also higher than normal for Catholics. The study was sponsored by the Catholic Volunteer Network and was conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). Learn more at cara.georgetown.edu or catholicvolunteernetwork.org. ■

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Work and activity are both our means of mediating the creative love of God for the world and a way by which we are prone to forget God's presence.

The story of Martha and Mary hints at how the tension between "doing" and "being" has been with Christians for a very long time.

BY BROTHER JOHN D. HAMILTON, CFX

Brother John D. Hamilton, CFX is vicar general of the Xaverian Brothers. He holds advanced degrees in literature from Wesleyan



University and formative spirituality from Duquesne University. For many years he has taught courses in formative spirituality and done formation counseling.

The built-in tensions in apostolic vocations

WHenever a teacher of mine, Father Adrian van Kaam, CSSp. would speak of the active or mixed religious life, he would use the term "the experiment that is active religious life." From the first time I heard this, I was fascinated, if at first a bit troubled. What did he mean by this?

I think he was referring to the inherent tensions among those of us called to live this life, especially in the past 50 or so years. To maintain oneself in transcendent presence as an individual, and even more so as a group, while at the same time being fully engaged in service to a world whose needs always outstrip our responses, is a very difficult balance.

In its earliest manifestations the religious life had as a core constitu-

ent a literal element of *fuga mundi* or flight from the world. In order not to be swept up in the pre-, if not anti-transcendent activity that would lead one to become forgetful of God, some people began to separate themselves so they could remember and thus remain in communion with the Divine, with the transcendent dimension of reality. The gatherings of those so committed created what Father Adrian van Kaam, CSSp calls “centers of value radiation” that kept alive the value of transcendence in times and cultures that threatened it with extinction.

Inevitably the call, the impulse of the Spirit’s compassion for the world, moved women and men of singular love and vision to desire to manifest this transcendent love through acts of concrete service to the world and to society. Yet, work and activity are both our means of mediating the creative love of God for the world and ways by which we are prone to forget God’s presence. There is work that flows from the spirit and from the heart, work that manifests vocation, and there is work that comes from the ego as an agent of the unconscious, that is motivated out of our fears and compulsions. The monastic day is designed, at least in part, to discipline our propensity to forgetful or compulsive functioning. When the bell rings, the monks are to stop at whatever point they have reached in their project or work. They are to stop and go to prayer and pick up the work when it is time for it again, realizing that the tasks will always be there.

The monk’s schedule is a help, but all of us in religious life can readily forget who we really are and how our work can make us victims of functionalism. Human-kind has always tended to be forgetful of the dimension of spirit, and with Freud’s anthropology, which saw ego as the ultimate source of human maturity and freedom, our forgetfulness became canonized. Our secular age (even in its religious manifestations) lives out a repression of our spiritual or transcendent dimension. Note how even religious formation programs tend to be based on non-spiritual anthropologies.

“Transcendent functioning” in scripture

This tension is a central topic in the Gospel of John. Jesus is constantly, in the view of many teachers of the law, acting or working in violation of the Sabbath. In Chapter 5 we have the familiar story of the cure of the man at the pool of Bethesda. Jesus tells the man to pick up his mat

and to walk, so now both the man and Jesus are violating the strictures of the Sabbath. Jesus explains, however, that he is not violating the Sabbath because: “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (5, 17). But it is the Sabbath. Is Jesus saying that God does not rest on the Sabbath? Or is he redefining something about work and leisure, which in our pre-transcendent human experience are always opposed? In verse 19, the Gospel writer quotes Jesus as saying: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.”

The purpose of the Sabbath is to detach from the all-consuming world of work in order to remember our communion with a God who is at once Rest and Work. As the Dutch mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck says, (as quoted in the book *Mysticism*) “God according to the Persons is Eternal Work, but according to the Essence and Its perpetual stillness God is Eternal Rest.”

Jesus is not in violation of the Sabbath because he remains in communion with God, even as he works, and so is keeping the Sabbath rest. This is what van Kaam calls transcendent functioning. St. John of the Cross in his *Precautions* advises: “Do nothing except in obedience.” It is not work in itself that is a contradiction to the transcendent or spiritual dimension of our life form, but it is rather our unconscious propensity to lose ourselves, to forget God in the midst of our activities.

In his “Sermon 86” on the story of Martha and Mary, Meister Eckhart offers a most striking interpretation. Eckhart says that when Martha asks Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help, it is because Martha fears that Mary will “remain stuck” in the pleasant feeling of sitting with Jesus and not progress toward the integration of human life that can, in Eckhart’s words, “be within and without, to grasp and to be embraced, to see and to be what is seen, to hold and to be held.”

Most in religious life know that the formation required to live out a call to service in such a way that one remains within even while going without is continual and life-long. Human work and activity is inherently centrifugal. The needs we witness, the anxieties we experience, the unconscious compulsions that influence us all lead us to lose our deeper sense of transcendent self-presence when we are busy and active. While this is always the case, let us consider some cultural forces that make it even more so today. It is not only the inherent

All of us in religious life can readily forget who we really are and how our work can make us victims of functionalism.

human tension we've been considering that has brought active/mixed religious life close to extinction in the West, but rather some very specific historical and cultural influences.

How the culture is distant from God

While the need may be obvious for there to be centers that radiate endangered cultural values (and religious life is meant to be such a center), the inherent difficulty in creating and maintaining them may be less obvious. One obvious difficulty in maintaining endangered or repressed values is that all members of a culture are formed by that culture and its values. If, as we can quite readily recognize, we live in a culture that represses the sacred, that is profoundly secular, then all of us are

Increasingly in Western culture, the individual and our personal thoughts and experiences have become the center of our worlds.

products of this environment. Secularization permeates the lives of all of us, not only those who are potential candidates, but those of us who live religious life as well.

Even our understanding of religious belief and religious

practice has become less transcendent and more secular over time. And in our particular life form, our understanding of our identity and significance has become less and less transcendent. This is not a new phenomenon. I would suggest that back some decades, at the very point the active life seemed to be at its height, it had already greatly lost its transcendent grounding. We began to structure our lives not around the appraisal of our call in light of the unique and distinctive gifts (charisms) of those called but rather around efficiency and utility. Even now we are prone to think at times that the problem we have is the lack of "corporate ministries."

Types of secularism

In his extraordinary study, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes three types of secularism. There is the political sense, whereby public spaces and discourse do not refer to God or any particular religious belief, unlike the Middle Ages where the church and its teachings and the state were co-extensive. The second is the falling off of religious belief and practice, which is especially evident

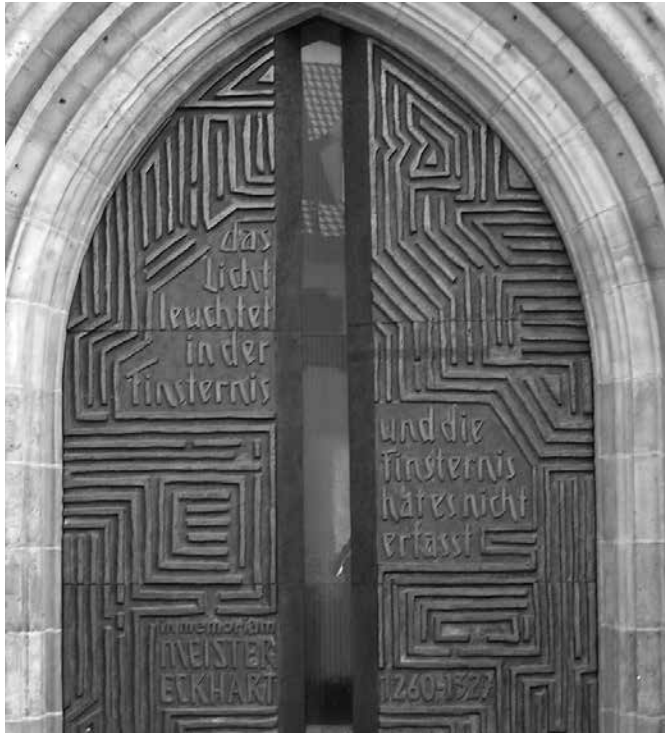
in Europe and the United States. The third, however, is the most pertinent to our considerations. Taylor says this third type focuses on "the conditions of belief." The strikingly different condition of belief in this secular age is "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, un-problematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."

In our culture we all recognize that unbelief is an option, unlike in much of Muslim society. Most of us who are older and who entered religious life some decades ago were formed in subcultures where belief was taken for granted. But for most of us, this has changed over the course of our life formation. We do not see ourselves or live in the same way, individually, as groups, as cultures, when we can no longer take for granted God's existence—and thus certainly not the interpretation of God of a single way of living out a tradition.

There is, in fact, a profound truth in the fear of Western secularism that exists in fundamentalisms of all sorts. The nature of one's religious consciousness can never be the same once one acknowledges the option both of unbelief and of a belief that is different from one's tribe or subgroup. Once consciousness has changed, in this way, it is impossible to return to the earlier state of limited consciousness, except through violence and coercion (and then it will be only behavioral).

A Christian in our time cannot have come to be aware of Ghandi or the Dalai Lama and truly believe that all non-Christians are lost. To seek refuge in a nostalgic and sentimental connection to the past is a refusal to deal with the new and present reality. An awareness of "exclusive language" offers an interesting example. When I now write or speak, it is almost impossible for me not to become aware, whenever I encounter the third person singular pronoun, of the fact that what I am saying includes the female and male of our species, with all the added diversity of meaning, understanding, and experience that involves. I become immediately aware that as a male my perspective is extremely partial and limited. I can no longer live in the comforting illusion that my perspective on the world is universal or absolute. In the religious realm we could say that once my consciousness includes the possibilities of believing differently or not believing, I become aware of the limitation and partiality of my own belief.

Karl Rahner famously said: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all." The vowed life takes its shape, its practices, its modes of formation from our tradition, but the Mystery to which it wit-



Meister Eckhart, a medieval Dominican monk and mystic, lived during a time when the norm was to understand oneself in relationship to God. Above is the door to the Protestant Erfurt Church in Germany inscribed with Eckhart's words: The light shines in the darkness; and the darkness has not overcome it.

nesses transcends all we can ever know or say of it. It is the Spirit's passion and compassion for the world that stirred our foundresses and founders and that continues to stir us in ways, to quote St. Augustine, ever ancient and ever new. It is that passion and compassion of the Spirit to which we are obedient.

This falling off in belief in God and the practice of religion, which is Taylor's second type of secularism, is a symptom of a development in Western thought over the past centuries that has brought with it some significantly dire consequences. Increasingly in Western culture, the individual and our personal thoughts and experiences have become the center of our worlds. Although it is trite, it is fair to say that as a result of this turn inward there is in our consciousness a deep and profound sense of alienation, of being lost.

The writer David Foster Wallace, who committed suicide some time ago, described this sense of being lost as "a real American type of sadness." We experience a profound disconnection from the world and often find ourselves caught up in incessant rumination that seems to get us nowhere. We experience lives of introspection, which is very different from meditative or transcendent reflection. Our self-consciousness is markedly different

from the mindset of those who lived within a taken-for-granted belief in God. The student of world religions, Huston Smith, in his introduction to the Paulist Press edition of Meister Eckhart's sermons and treatises speaks of the "cramped inferior world" we live in because that world "has been stripped of the very possibility of housing things worthier in ourselves." We have gotten here, according to Smith, who taught for many years at MIT, because of the mistake we make when we totalize the scientific method, another aspect of our cultural consciousness.

When we mistakenly apply the scientific method to all realms of apprehension and knowledge, we restrict the world to only those things over which we have power. Thus, we begin to recognize as real only "what appears through this restrictive viewfinder." What would help us out of this predicament, says Smith, "is not arguments but vision." This is, for Smith, the significance of Eckhart today.

We sense that he (this God-intoxicated man) knows so vividly what he is talking about that we experience through his words an onrush of the Real. Like prisoners, we had been straining at our bars, hoping for a sliver of light. He spins us around and shows us that the door behind us is wide open. (xii)

Opening our small self up to God

The value that our cramped inferior world desperately needs is the vision, the passion, and compassion, of God-intoxicated persons, persons who have become so by re-discovering what is their real relationship to the world and to the Mystery of God. These people do not think their way into faith, but rather receive faith from their field of formation, through opening to God, to life, to the world as small but significant participants in it, rather than as centers of the universe.

James L. Kugel, professor emeritus of Hebrew literature at Harvard, authored a book called *In the Valley of the Shadow*. Kugel wrote this book out of his experience some 10 years ago of being diagnosed with a cancer that was treatable but not curable. He was told that if he responded to treatment well, he could live another two or three years. Kugel was led to write by the experience he had after being given his diagnosis. He describes in this way on the second page of his book:

The background music suddenly stopped. It had always been there, the music of daily life that's constantly going, the music of infinite time and possibilities; and now suddenly it was gone, replaced by

nothing, just silence. There you are, one little person, sitting in the late-summer sun, with only a few things left to do.

Our ordinary consciousness is about magnifying ourselves, our work, our significance, our responsibilities, our vocations, etc. Confronted as he is at this moment with his own mortality, Kugel suddenly discovers himself in a silence in which he feels very small. He goes on to consider that for much of human history the

The vowed life stands at every turn as a counter to these pre-reflective attitudes of pride and autarchy that are part of the ordinary consciousness of all of us.

individual person experienced her or himself in this way. As we say in Psalm 8: “When we consider the heavens, the work of your hands, the moon, and the stars which you have created, who are we that you should keep us in mind?”

To be small is not to be insignificant. It is, however, to realize as Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly say in their book *All Things Shining* that “the genuinely confident agent does not manufacture confidence, but receives it from the circumstances.” Living with confidence (with faith) is not the result of personal achievement, much less of some kind of spiritual or intellectual superiority; it is rather a mode of presence to the world, to God and to oneself that recognizes one’s own smallness but that is also receptive to the light (the shining) of the world one inhabits.

James Kugel notes that somehow a God that was once seen as the unfathomable Other has come in modern and post-modern times to take up residence within our individual consciousness and experience. As a result, we do not discover what we care for—we decide it. We do not learn and follow our direction, we determine it. We do not, in an experience of smallness, stand in awe of the heavens and earth; we take it upon ourselves to master them. The vowed life stands at every turn as a counter to these pre-reflective attitudes of pride and autarchy that are part of the ordinary consciousness of all of us.

An antidote: waiting in joyful hope

Many years ago while studying spirituality, I was fortunate enough to engage in formative counseling with

an extraordinary person. The steadfast presence of this person provided for me an environment in which I could begin to raise to consciousness and expression many of the hopes and fears, desires, disappointments, joys, and griefs that I had spent those first 32 or 33 years of my life evading. More than anything this person said, although there was wisdom in what he would say, I began to experience in his steadfastness a level of faith I had never before known. It was the kind of confidence (faith) of the presence and working of Divine love, even in those aspects of life that seem most frightening or irredeemable.

The poet R. M. Rilke wrote: “Await the birth hour of a new clarity, keeping holy all that befalls, even disappointment, even desertion.” At the level of ego, of the functional dimension of our lives, we run from the unpleasant, from that which frightens us and is beyond our control. But at the level of spirit, of transcendence, we are able to “wait in joyful hope.” As Americans and Westerners we are not very good at such waiting. Before the difficult and the unmanageable we engage in fight or flight—we fight the mystery or we dissociate from it. What if instead of trying to manage and master our circumstances, we rather waited to be taught by them?

At first glance, this may seem like a call to passivity. But, in fact, it is precisely the opposite. It is the kind of rest that Ruysbroeck speaks of, the rest that is creative work in God. It is deep presence, attention and willingness. One of the results of the loss of transcendence in our modern consciousness is the diminishment in our lived understand of will. Our capacity for transcendent willing has become almost totally lost to us. Will has become for us exclusively the managing of executive will—it is what we execute and how we manage from our ego or functional dimension. It is what we do out of our own views and compulsions. But as spirit we have a deeper kind of willing (one that is not will-full or will-less). We have the capacity to discover what we care for in the world, to receive the call that is uniquely ours from the circumstances, and to uniquely and willingly respond to that call. But this requires the development of a skill, the formation to become a more finely tuned instrument of, in St. Francis’ terms, God’s peace—of God’s will. (“I do only what I see the Father doing.”)

Moving toward shared discernment

Father van Kaam used to say that if we look for those orders and congregations that have endured through the ages we find one basic commonality: they each have embedded in their lived identity a great respect for the

unique call of each member. As a friend and colleague recently said to me, “It is very difficult to trust that a shared direction will come out of such a respect for the uniqueness of each member.” It is particularly difficult for active communities. I know that my own formation, for example, was in part designed to encourage conformity and discourage uniqueness. Practicing the ongoing appraisal of a community’s direction through serious shared discernment that takes into account the unique life call of each member is not a very efficient way to manage institutions and to expand corporate influence. Again we encounter the tension between the demands of our works and the time, space, and humility necessary for transcendent presence and appraisal, for increasingly becoming servants of our Divine direction.

The foundresses and founders of our communities, although living in a very different consciousness, did not experience a contradiction between their call to participate in the compassion and passion of the Spirit for the world and the religious life form. Some did, of course, and their communities were somewhat forced into the contradiction by the canonical injunction to become religious communities. But many did not. They did, however, recognize the difficulty. The founder of my own community, Theodore James Ryken, was constantly speaking and writing to the brothers that they must first

of all remember their call to be religious, even as they were to emulate Francis Xavier in their willingness to go anywhere they were needed. Our founder fully recognized that his brothers’ dedication to and love of work could quite readily erode the heart of their vocation. In her rule for the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa in article 37 enjoined the following:

The Sister shall spend one day in every week, one week in every month, one month in every year, one year in every six years in the Motherhouse, where in contemplation and penance together with solitude she can gather in the spiritual strength, which she might have used up in the service of the poor. When these sisters are at home, the others will take their place in the Mission field. (Mother Teresa in *Come Be My Light*, p. 345)

Our founders and foundresses fully realized that forgetfulness, especially forgetfulness in the midst of work, is a basic human disposition. When a religious community becomes merely a service organization, it loses its core identity. Inevitably our work and our efforts become willful and effortful. It is only in rest, silence, solitude, and contemplation that we can remain mindful of who we are and of Whose we are, and ultimately of Whose work we are doing. ■

9 signs of a capacity to live active religious life well

1. Capacity for “relaxed-aloneness” —for healthy celibacy.

2. Capacity for solitude, meditation, and prayer.

3. Capacity for relaxation and practices that diminish compulsion.

4. Age-appropriate self-knowledge, adequate ego development, and self-acceptance that manifest in humility (as honesty with self and others and a recognition of the partiality of one’s own view and perspective), along with a willingness to learn and grow .

5. Awareness of the world and persons around her or him (as opposed to narcissistic tendencies) and a capacity and desire to accept respon-

sibility not only for him or herself but also for others and for the life and direction of the community as a whole. (This quality tends to show itself in awareness, generosity, and responsibility in the challenges and demands of ordinary day-to-day life.)

6. Willingness and ability to enter into truly inter-formative dialogue with others—to generously offer direction and to receive it from others. Also the ability to collaborate, and to generate a shared common direction through respectful and receptive listening.

7. Awareness of and comfort with his or her sexuality and the capacity for ordinary intimacy in daily life—that is, appropriate relationships and

intimacy with people of both sexes. A capacity to care for those with whom one lives and to incarnate it in acts of caring.

8. Firmness of purpose and direction, combined with genuine openness and flexibility of disposition.

9. Capacity for commitment to God, the religious community at large, and the specific persons with whom he or she lives. Is the candidate truly capable of “casting his or her lot” with these particular people and this particular community? There must be no contradiction between the candidate’s unique life call and the community’s call and charisma. A human being’s first responsibility is to the unique call she or he has from God.

Vocation ministers have stresses that simply come with the territory. But a profound belief that God continues to call young people to their way of life keeps the oil in their lamps.



The author, Brother Jonathan Beebe, CSC, takes the microphone during a vocation run.

Vocation Ministry: the most misunderstood profession?

BY BROTHER JONATHAN
BEEBE, CSC



Brother Jonathan Beebe, CSC has been a member of the Moreau Province of the Congregation of Holy Cross for 26 years. He has served as

vocation director for the past six years. Previously he ministered as a licensed clinical social worker in the areas of refugee resettlement, HIV/AIDS, child maltreatment, and mental illness

MODERN PSYCHOLOGY TELLS US that people struggle to learn new information when it does not fit easily into their existing schema, or framework, for how the world works. Our schemas—developed and reinforced over years of personal experience—can be resistant to change. Misperceptions result from our inability to adjust how we think about a new situation.

The role and responsibilities of the vocation director have evolved over the years, particularly after Vatican Council II and the downturn in the number of new entrants to religious life. But how religious women and men think about what a vocation director does—or should be doing—has not always kept pace with the times.

My exchange with Brother Joseph is a case in point. After a recent house chapter, I fielded questions about my vocation plans for the upcoming year. Brother Joseph, in his 90s and with hearing difficulties, told me about his own vocation after the meeting. He said that he began to think about the possibility of having a vocation to religious life after reading a

1931 article entitled “A Monk’s Life” in *The American Mercury* magazine. Guided by a priest, he wrote to the vocation director of the Congregation of Holy Cross who promptly responded to his inquiry. Once again the quintessential teacher, he raised his finger to instruct me, and summarized his experience of discernment, “I searched for them. No one searched for me.”

I was hooked

Brother Joseph’s journey to Holy Cross parallels my own. I vividly recall the day I first risked saying out loud that I was interested in religious life. I was in high school sophomore biology class and my lab partner and I were dissecting a grasshopper, meticulously separating and labeling each part of the insect’s body. Sister Mary walked over to our table and, leaning down to watch our work, began to chat with us, asking us what we hoped to be doing after graduation in a couple of years. I suspect she hoped we would become science teachers like she herself was. For the first time, I said that I was curious about the life of the Holy Cross Brothers who founded my school. Sister stood upright, smiled, and replied, “If you don’t mind giving up a few things, you will see the world.” What a wonderfully inspiring response, one that sent my youthful imagination into a million directions at once. I was hooked. Of course, it was only years later that I finally realized what I had to give up!

Like Brother Joseph, I searched for them. No one searched for me.

For many of my predecessors, vocation ministry was a function of “gatekeeping.” I am reminded of Brother Maurus who, over 50 years ago, had his own vocation office in this same location where I am currently writing. Young men who expressed an interest in Holy Cross would be ushered up the back staircase to have a secret interview with Brother, hoping to have done well enough in their studies to be considered for acceptance. Many were let in, some were sent away. The gate opens, but it can also remain closed. This pattern would continue throughout formation, ensuring that the community had a sufficient workforce to staff an ever-growing number of schools. We find this same dynamic in developing sectors of our congregations around the world.

The lost coin

Today, the fields are nearly empty and the gate creaks loudly when, and if, opened. I remind myself of the widow who, knowing that she once had 10 coins, franti-

cally upends the sofa looking for the one that might have slipped down into the cushions. A legacy of abundance haunts not just me, but many of my co-workers in this ministry. We search ... and then we search some more.

My searching takes me to places and events I never imagined when I worked in mental health as a licensed clinical social worker. Throughout the course of the year, I travel from California to Connecticut, visiting freshman and junior religion classes of our nine secondary schools. I orient new students to the history and charism of my congregation and share my vocation story with upperclassmen, hoping to inspire even one student to consider religious life as a viable option for his future. I beckon with the invitation that both begins and ends our Holy Cross Constitutions, “Come. Follow me.”

Back on the road, my search continues into the heartland in places such as Kansas City and Indianapolis. As a New England Yankee, I bless my GPS many times over throughout the year. “Recalculating” has come to be a comforting word as I navigate unfamiliar routes. Now I am at a convention of over 20,000 students, setting up a table and banners, hawking Starbursts and lollypops to attract any perusal of my wares—wristbands, prayer cards, a newly designed brochure. Searching. Most of my professional life as a therapist has taken place in quiet, lamp-lit rooms with adults. With Christian rock music blaring in the background, God’s sense of humor is not wasted on me! A few days later, I am stepping over exhausted teens who have literally dropped to the floor, their sugar high long gone. Even before this event ends, I am on my soon-to-become-obsolete Blackberry organizing my next trip—Hayward, CA, then New Orleans, LA. The searching continues.

A legacy of abundance haunts not just me, but many of my co-workers in this ministry. We search ... and then we search some more.

“Martha, Martha”

In spite of all of the glories of modern-day travel (you can hear the sarcasm in my voice, can’t you?), I am a homebody at heart. Be it ever so humble—fourteen bedrooms on the fourth floor of our high school in New York City—there is no place like home. The archetype of “home” is held deep within me, nurtured by two loving parents who sacrificed much to give me and my siblings



Nurturing a strong community life—through activities such as common meals and common prayer—is an essential aspect of vocation ministry. New members must experience a true sense of community when they come into our homes. Pictured at table are Holy Cross priests and the author, Brother Jonathan Beebe, CSC (front right).

an upbringing that they were not privileged to enjoy. It is my strongest and most personal frame of reference for religious life. “Home” is where God lives.

Homespun hospitality

Being a devotee of St. Martha, hospitality is the heart of my vocation ministry. It begins in community, for if I do not love my brothers whom I can see, how can I love the God whom I cannot see (1 John 4:20)? As the director of our New York houses, much of my off-road time is spent caring for my brothers and the home we share. I often joke that I plan my school visits between trips to the grocery store. I can be away for only as long as the eggs and milk will hold out!

A poignant example here might illustrate the depth to which I believe community life is essential to recruiting and retaining candidates to religious brotherhood. When I moved into my current community and became director, I learned that one of our senior brothers would soon have a birthday. Following Martha’s example, I made sure that we had his favorite dinner that night. As the meal ended, the lights were dimmed as I processed into the dining room with a candle-lit cake. The brother looked around the room, unsure of what was happening. When I placed the cake in front of him—and he saw his

name in blue frosting—it became clear to him. With astonishment in his voice, he said, “I didn’t know this was for me. No one ever did this for me before.”

As religious grow older and fewer in number, there is the tendency to let go of essential elements in our lives, particularly in smaller communities. Members are weary, both physically and emotionally. It becomes easy to say that common prayer will be in private when only two or three are expected to be in chapel that night. Dinners become “pick up.” House meetings might be infrequent. It is essential to vocation ministry that we do not let go of the center. For religious brothers, common table, common prayer, and common purse define our lives.

However, there is nothing “common” in the work I do to maintain religious life, whether I am creating a special prayer service or mopping the kitchen floor. Service in the community setting is not what I do between vocation events, it *is* vocation ministry. New members, many of whom come from disrupted family lives, must experience a warm and heartfelt welcome—“home”—as they venture through our front doors.

Identity and visibility

Every Friday night for the past 10 years, Stacey London

and Clinton Kelly have intervened in the lives of those who might be considered “fashion-challenged.” As part of TLC’s popular show, “What Not to Wear,” participants are led—oftentimes reluctantly—through a process of transformation, not only of their wardrobes, but also their self-esteem.

As a vocation director, I relate to the hosts’ struggle to educate others about the relationship between clothing and identity. Several years ago, I attended a liturgy for new families at our high school. Eleven other brothers were present in the auditorium, many of them seated alone or in small groups of two or three. Most were dressed in “business casual”—a pair of dress pants and a button down shirt with a collar. Some wore their “cross and anchors,” our community symbol, others did not. Unfortunately, during the Mass, we were not introduced as the religious congregation that both sponsors and lives at the school, a significant loss for all of us.

My desire for us to become better recognized led me to suggest a community reflection on identity and visibility. After a year-long process of discernment, my province decided to make wearing the traditional Holy Cross Brothers’ habit a viable option for public events such as vow ceremonies, jubilees, funerals, and parish liturgies. I contracted with a Jamaican Seventh-Day Adventist tailor in the inner city who seemed to know exactly what we needed when I showed him a model of an older habit. In the end, over 30 members were measured and fitted for this “new” addition to their closets.

Modern science, specifically the field of embodied cognition, posits a link between what we wear and how we interact with the world around us. Clothing doesn’t necessarily “make the man,” but it does shape how others perceive him and how he thinks about himself. Although this discussion about clothing, symbols, and identity is fraught with possible misperceptions about the vocation director’s intentions for initiating it, I believe it is one that needs to continue.

Good to the last drop

My first memory of the advertising world is of Darrin Stevens, the husband of Samantha Stevens, the fictitious star of “Bewitched.” (You can tell that I am part of the TV generation!). In many episodes, Darrin has to pitch a new slogan to a prospective client. Sometimes he

hits upon a fantastic idea, but rejects it thinking it is the work of magic.

I believe in magic. As I move into my sixth year as vocation director, I am constantly searching for the right way to explain to others who we are and what we do. Religious jargon does not connect with those whom we hope to attract. What does “ministry” mean to an 18-year-old young man? “Catholic education” belongs on the shelf with the other generic products. What makes us different? What sets us apart in the crowd? Finding the right combination of words or the perfect image is like pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

For some of my brothers, the link between vocations and marketing is not an easy one to accept. Self-promotion seems to go against the very core of what it means to be a brother. And it can be costly! Contracting with a communications agency, hiring professional photographers, and advertising in periodicals with a wide distribution are a major portion of my budget. What I produce has to be both engaging and genuine. If not, I run the risk of becoming the proverbial used (or as it has been rebranded, “previously owned”) car salesman.

“Calling Cecil B. DeMille!”

Likewise, my life as a vocation director, at certain points,



Reaching out to young people at events such as the biennial National Catholic Youth Conference (NCYC) gives young Catholics an awareness of religious life at a point in life when they are making decisions about their futures. Pictured here are an adult participant at NCYC 2013 in Indianapolis (left) with Rebecca Klohe, member of the vocation team for the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm.

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"The desert will lead you to your heart where I will speak" Hosea 2:14

morphs into that of an event planner. Dinner for 20—no problem. Founder's Day at our university—give me until next week, and I'll organize three activities for you. Pilgrimage to Montreal—do you want everything in English, or should I include the French translations? Planning can take on epic proportions.

The behind-the-scenes work of the vocation director is sometimes not known or appreciated. For those of us that are practiced, we can make it look too easy. Our community members never see the frantic calls to the

religious supply store because the rosaries for the youth rally never arrived, or witness the panic attack at 2 a.m. because you just recounted students (in your sleep, mind you) and realized that you need to rent another van. Whoever said the devil is in the details must have tried to plan a vocation event. And, sadly, despite all of our perfect planning—maybe for a "Come and See" weekend or a panel presentation—no one shows. Well, I pack up the buffet table and schlepp it back out to my car. The brothers will enjoy it tomorrow.

Changing our minds

There is no frame of reference for what we are currently experiencing in vocation ministry. We are told that the abundance of young religious in the post-war years was an anomaly, but for most of our membership it is their "normal."

In this land of ambiguity, we sojourn without a GPS, guided only by the light shining from our own vocation stories and the firm belief that God continues to call young women and men to religious life. The strategies of our predecessors sometimes prove ineffective. As such, we move with the times and create new methods for reaching those who seem just beyond our understanding. We throw it all—e-mails, Facebook, podcasts, a "Nun run"—against the wall and see which one sticks.

Lack of clarity only reinforces our long-held beliefs about how the world should work. Oftentimes, it pushes us to do more of the same. We as vocation directors must help the members of our institutes adopt new schemas for vocation ministry. Only then will they become our true partners in renewing religious life. ■

WAYS TO HELP MEMBERSHIP CONNECT TO VOCATION MINISTRY

KEYS TO THE FUTURE PROCESS

This kit, available from NRVC for \$25 at nrvc.net, includes all the components of an adaptable process that allows large or small groups of community members to learn about the contemporary context of vocation ministry and begin to take positive action.

VOCATION NEWSLETTER

Some vocation ministers send simple updates to their membership

regularly. This can help members to know what is going on and to feel connected—both of which can predispose them to take action for vocations.

INVITE YOUNG ADULTS INTO

HOMES AND MINISTRIES

A first step for many religious may be to get to know young people through meals, prayer services, volunteer work, etc. Relationships are foundational to this ministry.

RECRUIT VOLUNTEERS

Not every member will sign on to help the vocation director give talks, show up at events, etc. However, many communities do have members who are willing and able to lend a hand. Even though it takes time to train, prepare, and make use of volunteers, these tasks may help membership to understand and feel invested in vocation ministry.

My hope in you never wavers

In you, LORD, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.

In your justice rescue and deliver me;
listen to me and save me!

Be my rock of refuge,
my stronghold to give me safety;
for you are my rock and fortress.

My God, rescue me from the hand of the wicked,
from the clutches of the evil and violent.

You are my hope, Lord;
my trust, GOD, from my youth.

On you I have depended since birth;
from my mother's womb you are my strength;
my hope in you never wavers.

I have become a portent to many,
but you are my strong refuge!

My mouth shall be filled with your praise,
shall sing your glory every day.

—PSALM 71: 1-8

Early results from a British study of vitality in religious life reveal signs of hope for the future.



PHOTO: SIEGER KÖDER, THE GOOD SHEPHERD ©PAULINE BOOKS & MEDIA (USED WITH PERMISSION.)

The Good Shepherd, by Sieger Köder depicts the way that life springs forth from death. The robust life of the Good Shepherd came about through the crucible of death, symbolized by blood red in the background and by the tree in the right corner that is barren save for a small blossom.

BY SISTER GEMMA SIMMONDS, CJ



Sister Gemma Simmonds, CJ is a sister of the Congregation of Jesus. She is on the staff of Heythrop College in London and is director of the Religious Life

Institute. She has written and lectured widely on the subject of religious life and other topics.

Signs of vitality in religious life

NOT LONG AGO, I was praying in front of a painting by the German priest and painter Sieger Köder. The painting is a cheerfully colorful depiction of the Good Shepherd. The shepherd stands in the foreground, the sheep draped over his shoulders, while a group of rejoicing people surrounds him, laughing and singing. In the background stands a tree, leafless in winter, against a rolling horizon that is in fact the dead and wounded body of Christ. The path from the tree to the foreground is red, and we realize that it is the blood from Christ's wounds that leads us to the joyful scene of resurrection in the foreground. In a tiny corner of the tree, a white blossom appears, an unexpected sign of fruitfulness when everything else signals death and barrenness.

Similarly, the film *The Return of the King* (the third *Lord of the Rings* series) uses the image of a tiny blossom bursting forth from a withered branch just as a lead character is contemplating suicide. The image of unexpected new life in the midst of despair and death is particularly compelling for many in religious life today.

Signs of vitality

As director of the Religious Life Institute (RLI) in the UK and vocations director for the English province of the Congregation of Jesus I get to hear and see my fair share of the struggles of religious life in Europe and elsewhere. Speaking recently to a priest friend who is a vocations director in Ireland, I asked him how the scene was over there. “Like a wake without the booze,” was the laconic reply. Yet if experience forces me to be realistic about the difficulties we face, experience also encourages me to see many signs of hope springing up in the different parts of the world where I have been privileged to work among religious. The RLI is based in Heythrop College, the Jesuit-founded faculty of philosophy and theology in the University of London.

Together with colleagues in the Centre for Catholic Studies in Durham, England and the Margaret Beaufort Institute in Cambridge, England, we are currently leading a research project funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. The project is looking into signs of vitality in apostolic women’s congregations. The project is in its early days, as we are dealing with a wide variety of congregations in Britain and Ireland, but the responses to our questionnaire so far show that religious life is far from over in our isles.

Most remarkable, perhaps, is the determinedly upbeat outlook of the elderly sisters we have questioned, some of whom have answered from the retirement facilities of their congregations. These are women who have seen it all, and who might be forgiven, as they look around at a situation much-diminished from the one they originally entered, if they felt lost or depressed by what they see. They are certainly realistic about the difficulties, but in fact their analysis of what gives them hope at the present time is shrewdly perceptive, while the energy, interest, and optimism they show are enormously heartening. Without wishing to pre-empt the results of the research project, I will sketch out some of the things to which they are calling attention.

Collaboration affects internal culture

The lack of personnel, whether in terms of running

traditional ministries or of maintaining communities according to traditional structures has meant that religious have had to radically re-think how to maximize apostolic effectiveness. Generally speaking most of us seem to run on a model of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” It can feel

easier to go on surviving within an old model even if all the signs are that that model is no longer sufficient for the task, or if it is only running courtesy of the generous souls who allow themselves to be recycled endlessly as community leaders, organizers, fixers of all things broken, well beyond the time when they have the physical strength or moral energy for it.

Increasingly there are signs of collaboration at the structural level. Provinces are being amalgamated, not only at national level but, in the more international context of Europe, across the boundaries of language and culture. Congregations of the same

spiritual family are coming together to form new congregations. This is no easy task. The subcultures that operate even within the same international congregation can make us very closed in on ourselves. The “us” that we have become can, and often has, become unconsciously hostile and dismissive of “them.” The reasons for consolidation and restructuring are generally pragmatic and administrative, but if the moves gather a good momentum, they can have an effect way beyond the purely practical. When we start to inhabit new spaces, in new and different ways, when we have to find a new language to express our deepest values, desires and hopes, it makes of us different people. I remember years ago in the early 1970s hearing the Jesuit theologian John Coventry giving a lecture about ecumenism. Someone asked him whether he thought we would ever achieve Christian unity, and if we did, what it would look like. “Like nothing any of our churches have ever lived,” was his reply.

The significant demographic shifts within some congregations have also been a call to change. As leadership passes into the hands of those from the global south, cultures change. Culture, which I once heard described as “the way we do things round here,” can be a dominant force in the potential life or death of a congregation. Within religious life we have an almost unique opportunity to work at the deepest level of collaboration and sister or brotherhood with people of a different race

If experience forces me to be realistic about the difficulties we face, experience also encourages me to see many signs of hope springing up in the different parts of the world where I have been privileged to work among religious.



Associate members, oblates, and other forms of lay affiliation open the life of a congregation to those who are not permanent members but whose presence can be a stimulus to new growth and vitality. Pictured here is Benedictine oblate Teresa Martha Green-Couper with Father Meinrad Brune, OSB of St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana.

and culture, where we often share nothing but what lies deepest in our hearts and souls. Changes in profile that have been born of necessity are, in many congregations, giving birth to a quite different internal culture. It will be interesting to see to what extent this is able to bring about new life for the future.

Different form of membership

A further aspect of this is the growth of associate membership. I frequently get asked if I can see a future for temporary forms of religious life, as it exists, for instance, within Buddhism. There is a sense in which this is problematic, just as the concept of temporary marriage is problematic. Religious life requires a deep conversion of our desires and our sense of the particularity of vocation, as well as radical adaptation to the dynamics of community life and mission. It's hard to see how this would work if the persons involved and those around them always had in mind that it might come to an end at any moment. The many volunteer movements that have grown up within orders are, however, a chance for people

I don't believe we are experiencing a crisis of vocation. I see ample evidence around me of women and men who feel called to give their lives to God.

to do more than just engage in good works; and associate membership, for all the delicate practical negotiations that it entails, opens the spiritual and community life of a congregation to those who will not be joining it permanently but whose presence can be a stimulus to new growth and new patterns of thought.

Vita Consecrata reminds us that religious life is intended to offer to the church and the world a special gift in the form of its spiritual charisms. Both voluntary participative programs and associate membership offer lay people a way of sharing in those gifts given by God to the world through the various forms of religious life. What becomes clear, however, is that the vowed members of the congregation need to be as open to what the Spirit is saying through the volunteers and associates as the other way 'round. I frequently find myself saying in talks about religious vocations that I don't believe we are experiencing a crisis of vocation. I see ample evidence around me of women and men who feel called to give their lives to God. What I do see is overwhelming evidence of a massive crisis of culture. It is not clear to many of these prospective members how to live fruitfully within the dominant subcultures that have grown within religious orders. Our success in attracting and retaining new members, volunteers, and colleagues may have a deal to do with our awareness of and sensitivity to the ramifications of these subcultures and our willingness to be open to change and challenge where they are concerned.

New perspective on the vows

Pope Francis has been consistent in calling us to be a poor church for the poor. There is nothing new in this—it has been a call to and within the church for centuries, echoed by many saints, and at the heart of the religious impulse.

But here we don't have a charismatic figure like Francis of Assisi, supporting the crumbling church on his fragile shoulders. We still have a religious, but he is the head of the church this time, at the very center of its structures. He is calling the whole church, but in a particular way those members of it whom the Spirit has called to a vow of poverty, to take seriously what we have vowed and live it in a way that makes sense to those who still look to us to

live, for their sake, a life that is full of symbolic resonance and meaning. The invitation, which comes from the first



Pope Francis, a member of a religious institute, has called upon Catholics to be a poor church for the poor. His invitation is particularly relevant to those who take a vow of poverty.

religious pope we have had in over a century, issues from the vibrant heart of religious life itself, which has always, in some sense, been a response to an ecclesial life that has grown dull and complacent. If religious life is to survive and flourish, it will do so under the sign of poverty.

For many in the global north the most driving poverty that bites into our daily lives and consciousness is that of our own diminishment. If we can live this with hope, then we become true witnesses of the resurrection. Hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism looks at difficulties and draws energy by saying, “things are going to be OK.” Hope looks at the same reality and says, “things probably aren’t going to be OK, and that’s OK,” because in the end we place our trust and our entire reliance on God. Mary Ward (1585-1645), founder of the Congregation of Jesus and Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, lived to see the ruin of her life’s work as founder of a new form of religious life for women. At the end of her life she wrote to one of her few surviving companions (as reported in *The Mind and Maxims of Mary Ward*), “Remain steadfastly in the service of God until the end, and do not trouble where thou wilt close thy life; for it little matters whether it is behind a hedge, or in a ditch, or in thy bed, if only thou art found faithful.” That fidelity to the essentials of our life is precisely what those who witness it hope to see. It is what remains truly convincing to those who think of joining us and those among and alongside whom we live and work.

Hope for a wounded world

The Religious Life Vitality survey that we are still undertaking has begun to uncover an enthusiastic response to the contemporary awareness within religious life of the need to combine love and care for the poor with a consciousness of threats to the environment and their impact on the poorest. Britain and Ireland, like many other countries of Western Europe, are witnessing unprecedented pressure from high numbers of economic and political migrants. At one time in Europe’s history orders flourished whose central ministry was redeeming and rescuing of slaves. Those orders disappeared as slavery disappeared, at least in its overt forms. But the extent of human trafficking in the world—especially of women and children for sexual purposes—is now part of open discourse within the church.

Emerging political, social, and economic phenomena are calling us anew with the voice of the Spirit to commit our lives to service of the poor and transformation of society. The response among long-term and seasoned religious is heartening. One significant change in the life of younger generations is that they no longer feel the need to become religious in order to respond to that voice. It remains a challenge to find ways in which the attraction to religious life, community, and prayer can also be an attraction to a life of transformative solidarity and action.



Emerging environmental and social phenomena are calling religious institutes to respond. Pictured here with organic produce are volunteer Candace Minster (left) and Sister Jean Fuqua, SP at the White Violet Center for Eco-Justice in St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana. The center is run by the Sisters of Providence.

forbearance. Perhaps it is time we looked again for rituals that carry deeper meaning and help us to enact in practice what we profess in theory.

Addressing the generational shifts

It has become commonplace for vocations directors to observe that many of the John Paul and Benedict generations appear more interested in spiritual and community life (at least in the abstract) than in ministry per se. Some of this, as I have said, may be due to the “democratization” of previously religious ministries into opportunities for volunteering among the laity. But it also speaks of a more global cultural shift in terms of signs of recognition and belonging. The same phenomenon is detectable among some younger Jews and Muslims, seeking more overt and external ways of expressing their religious longings and their sense of incorporation into a religiously-identified peer group.

This sometimes sits uncomfortably with generations who have fought to liberate themselves from what they experienced as pointless externals and empty ritualism. At the same time we can detect within religious life a growing sense of what one RLI survey respondent called, “the sacramentality of everyday life.” The liberation of the sacraments, as it were, from the sanctuary, has meant for some a far deeper sense of sacramentality within the ordinary fabric of human living and interaction. In the survey there is frequent reference, as a source of joy and hope, to a community life which is “more real, human and ordinary, more dependent on God and one another.” At one time in the history of many orders it was part of the ritual of community life to have a public culpa, usually with members apologizing publicly for some trivial misdemeanor, such as breaking crockery. While that has gone, it has not generally been replaced by the enactment of repentance for real failures in sisterly and brotherly love and

While religious life is not in itself a sacrament in the same sense that marriage and ordination are, it surely belongs within the sacramental order of things, as a sign which makes real what it signifies. Philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and John Cottingham have written about the importance of praxis as a school of internalization in their books *After Virtue* (MacIntyre) and *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value* (Cottingham). We internalize and ultimately become what we practice. Insofar as this is true, there is both challenge and opportunity in the desire among many of today’s vocation seekers to embrace some of the externals of religious life abandoned by previous generations. At least this should be open to exploration and discussion rather than summary dismissal.

No one has a wand to wave over religious life itself, or over the vocations scene, to magic away the problems that face us. But within our current membership there remain vibrant signs of life and hope. Some years ago I was standing in the kitchen of our London house, watching Sister Gillian Orchard, CJ, a member of my community, gardening outside. It was a freezing cold November day and Gillian, in her 50s, was in the terminal stages of cancer. I knocked on the window and called her to come inside out of the cold. She shook her head and called back, “I’m planting bulbs for the spring!” We both looked at each other, knowing that she wouldn’t live to see the flowers bloom. Gillian died three weeks later, but in the following spring our garden was a blaze of color as the bulbs she had planted grew out of the thawing earth. If in vocations ministry we can have faith, hope, and love enough to plant for a spring that we ourselves may not see, we will have given the best witness possible to a life worth living, and prepared ourselves for the return of the King. ■



To ensure an ethical approach, it is important for vocation ministers to maintain professional boundaries and avoid dual relationships.

Vocation counseling carries with it the responsibility to exercise one's authority ethically. In this photo Sister Mary Elizabeth Endee, FSE speaks with a young woman at the Franciscan Life Center in Meriden, CT, one of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist's counseling centers.

Wield power, set boundaries

JANE HAS BEEN RECENTLY APPOINTED as the vocation minister for her community. She has been in the community for 10 years and has a reputation of being a very responsible and caring person. As an adult child of alcoholic parents, Jane did not grow up surrounded by models of healthy boundaries. In the community she is attracted to people who have problems that need to be fixed and she tends to be overly solicitous in caring for them.

Sally has contacted Jane to discuss her interest in the community. Sally is the mother of two children, divorced from her husband of 20 years, and has just recently been granted an annulment from her marriage. She has been working on the parish staff for the past five years. In that position she often works long hours, attends all church functions, and volunteers time with the youth group and the religious ed program.

BY FATHER RICHARD M. GULA, SS



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widely in moral theology, medical ethics, and spirituality. Two books relevant to this article are *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers*, which examines the theological and ethical foundations of the vocation to pastoral ministry, and its companion volume, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness*, a spirituality of pastoral ministry. Together these two volumes offer guidance to foster integrity as a Christian and as minister. After nearly four decades of teaching, Fr. Gula now serves as the Director of Personnel for the Sulpician Fathers, Province of the U.S.

After their initial meeting, Sally requested frequent meetings with Jane to discuss her interests in the community and to talk about her failed marriage. She has invited Jane to her house for dinner several times so that Jane could meet her children who are home from college for the summer and so that they could have a conversa-

In a pastoral relationship—such as in the case of vocation ministry with candidates—boundaries must be clearly defined, and the vocation minister has the greater burden of responsibility to establish and maintain them.

tion in a setting less stuffy than Jane’s office. When not meeting in person, Sally sends several e-mails a day to Jane with questions about her religious community, including its financial arrangements and living situations.

In conversation as well as by e-mail, Sally frequently asks Jane about her personal life along with questions about living in community. At the end of meeting with Sally, Jane often feels exhausted.

What boundaries are being crossed by Jane? By Sally? What boundaries should be put in place? Who is responsible for establishing the boundaries and maintaining them?

The value of boundaries

In her role as the vocation minister, Jane is in a professional relationship with Sally. Jane and Sally are not yet peers or colleagues in religious life, and they are certainly not yet friends. Their relationship is marked by the inequality of power. The fact that Sally turns to Jane for help in acquiring information and direction on how to become a member of her community puts Jane in a position of power over Sally. Since Jane is in the best position to help Sally, she is also in a powerful position to hurt her. But “power over” Sally does not have to become coercive. Healthy boundaries allow for assistance—or “power for” Sally’s best interest.

Boundaries set limits. They separate what belongs to the vocation minister from what belongs to the aspirant. By setting limits, boundaries safeguard trust in the relationship and create a safe haven for Jane to minister to Sally and for Sally to feel free to engage her discernment with the community without the fear of exploitation.

All relationships need boundaries, but boundar-

ies differ according to the nature of the relationship. In personal relationships, such as a friendship where two people seek to meet the needs of one another mutually, boundaries are flexible. Each party shares the responsibility to maintain them. In a pastoral relationship, such as in the case of vocation ministry with candidates, boundaries must be clearly defined, and the vocation minister has the greater burden of responsibility to establish and maintain them.

In the hypothetical case, both women struggle with boundaries. Sally collapses the difference between home and office, friend and minister, and Jane enables her to do so by going to her home frequently for dinner, and being over-available to her by phone and through e-mail. Jane feels the effects of Sally’s lack of boundaries by being exhausted after meeting with her. Jane needs to pay attention to this red flag raised by her emotional and physical reaction.

If Jane does not interrupt the pattern, Sally will inevitably feel confused by and disappointed in Jane. Jane needs to take the initiative to set clear limits in this relationship that will allow her to protect herself as well as Sally’s vulnerability. Jane will have to be explicit about the fuzzy boundaries, or the relationship will self-destruct in silence and confusion. Jane can be direct in communicating her limits. In a kind and gentle way, she could say, “Sally, I could be more attentive to your concerns and more comfortable with our relationship if we connected less frequently and in places that will not confuse our relationship. From here on out, let’s meet by appointment and in my office.” By establishing clear boundaries, Jane will model a healthy relationship for Sally and also lessen her own risk of burning out in this ministry.

Some in ministry resist the responsibility of establishing and maintaining boundaries because of the negative connotations associated with them, such as barriers and walls that divide and exclude. Boundaries in this sense only undermine the spirit of ministry which aims to nurture and liberate another’s growth in God’s love. Boundaries do separate us from one another. But they need not alienate, especially when they are established and maintained in the spirit of creating hospitable space wherein candidates can come in and feel safe with someone who makes room for them and accepts them. In this safe space, candidates can trust that they will not be taken advantage of and can feel free to focus on their needs and experiences.

The most common boundaries to establish and maintain in vocation ministry are of time, space, and person.

Boundary of time

Boundaries of time respect the other's best interests by starting and stopping meetings on time, by setting enough time to complete a project, and by taking on a limited number of projects in order to honor one's emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical health. Sally seems to be lax in establishing this boundary by over-extending herself at work and in the life of the parish. Her own lack of time boundaries spills over into the way she invades Jane's time as well. Jane will need to be clear about when she is available, how Sally can reach her, and for how long they can meet.

Boundary of space

Boundaries of space respect limits on where ministry occurs. Changing the setting or the environment of a meeting can confuse or distract from the purpose of the professional ministerial relationship. Place helps to clarify each one's role and the purpose of the meeting. If Jane made a habit of going to Sally's for dinner to have conversations with her, she could easily confuse her role as the vocation minister by appearing to be Sally's new social companion.

Boundary of person

Boundaries that respect the person honor physical and emotional limits that help to secure trust in the relationship and alleviate any fear of being exploited. Physical limits can be crossed by invading another's physical space by sitting or standing too close, and by making physical contact without permission. Emotional limits can be crossed by giving and receiving gifts of a personal nature, romanticizing the environment for personal meetings, meeting too frequently, getting too involved in the other's personal activities, gossiping with confidential information, and creating dual relationships that confuse roles and expectations. Jane's boundaries of person were threatened by Sally's frequent calls and e-mails, meeting with Sally at her home over dinner, and her inquiries into Jane's personal life. Jane could set limits on where and when meetings are held, and on her availability to Sally by sharing aspects of her personal life in the community to illustrate features of religious life but not to seek support from Sally about personal tensions, struggles, or fears Jane may be having in religious life.

Respecting boundaries is one of the most significant challenges in professional ministry. The goal is to maintain the hospitable space and care through healthy boundaries that are neither too rigid (appearing aloof and distant, showing no emotion, rarely sharing anything personal) nor so fuzzy as to suggest becoming enmeshed (touching in overly affectionate ways, agreeing to everything, getting too personal too soon, becoming emotionally overwhelmed).

Power adds challenge to boundaries

The challenge of maintaining healthy boundaries comes from the dynamics of power in the relationship and the threat of creating a dual relationship.

Whether a minister feels powerful or not is irrelevant. The fact is that in the relationships of vocation ministry, the minister has the greater power and must use it in the right way. Some ministers refuse to admit to their power because the very notion admits to negative connotations: corruption, coercion, being one-up on another, exploitation, to name a few. These connotations are associated with a style of ministry that is controlling, dominating, and intimidating. This kind of power opposes everything we want to stand for in being with and for others. But power has another side. It is also our capacity to influence for the good. Love is power that nurtures the goodness in another and liberates the other to be his or her best. Such liberating and nurturing power is compatible with our ministerial commitment.

Power and vulnerability are not matters of all or nothing. They are relative to our resources of role, gender, personality, competence, emotional stability, age, experience, reputation, and other characteristics. If power describes having resources to influence others and the situation, then vulnerability describes the lack of resources necessary to fulfill one's needs. We feel our power or vulnerability in the interplay of differing needs and resources relative to the context and the ministerial relationship. In the case above, some of Jane's resources of power are her role as vocation minister, her being a symbolic representative of the religious community Sally wishes to join, her experience, her security in the community, her personality, as well as power Sally may project upon her. Sally is vulnerable in her emotional turmoil after the divorce, her social insecurity of being newly single, and her uncertainty about where the

The fact is that in the relationships of vocation ministry, the minister has the greater power and must use it in the right way.

religious community stands on her suitability.

Because of the inequality of power between them, Jane has the obligation to establish boundaries that will give Sally the confidence that her vulnerability will not be exploited. Clear boundaries create a safe space for Sally to discern her call from God rather than to confuse it with Jane's needs to be a caring, supportive and accepting person. Even though Sally may try to manipulate the situation by frequent invitations to dinner and phone calls and e-mails, nonetheless, Jane is obliged to set clear boundaries because she has the greater power in this context.

The havoc of dual relationships

One of the great temptations in ministry is the lure of friendship with those whom we serve. Often the people we meet in our ministry are the most accessible and attractive ones to whom we turn in seeking to satisfy our

personal and social needs, especially for companionship and affirmation. But treating the relationship of the vocation minister and the candidate as a peer relationship of friends only falsifies its real nature.

[The] primary role as a vocation minister is to be an agent of the community.

Pastoral relationships do not enjoy the equality of friends or the mutual self-disclosure that creates the emotional bond of intimacy in a friendship.

Mixing pastoral relationships with friendships falls squarely within the domain of a dual relationship. The strict prohibition of a dual relationship is a well-established principle in the helping professions. Dual relationships generally ought to be avoided in ministry, too. They are fertile ground for clouding judgment, obscuring conflicts of interest, and exploiting the trust and dependency of the vulnerable. While Jane and Sally may one day become "sisters" in their religious community, they are not friends yet. To act as though they were would only create a conflict of interest for Jane by making her a double agent—the community's agent as its vocation minister and Sally's agent as her friend. But Jane's primary role as a vocation minister is to be an agent of the community. If she were to become enmeshed in Sally's life as her friend, then Jane could easily lose her critical distance for evaluating Sally's suitability for the community and Sally's discernment process could be impaired by her confusing what would be good for the community with what would be satisfying to her relationship with Jane.

Three tips for healthy boundaries

Jane would be at risk of violating boundaries if she were to minimize the significance of her role as vocation minister, ignore her capacity to influence Sally's discernment, or proceed unaware of her own need to be a supportive and affirming person.

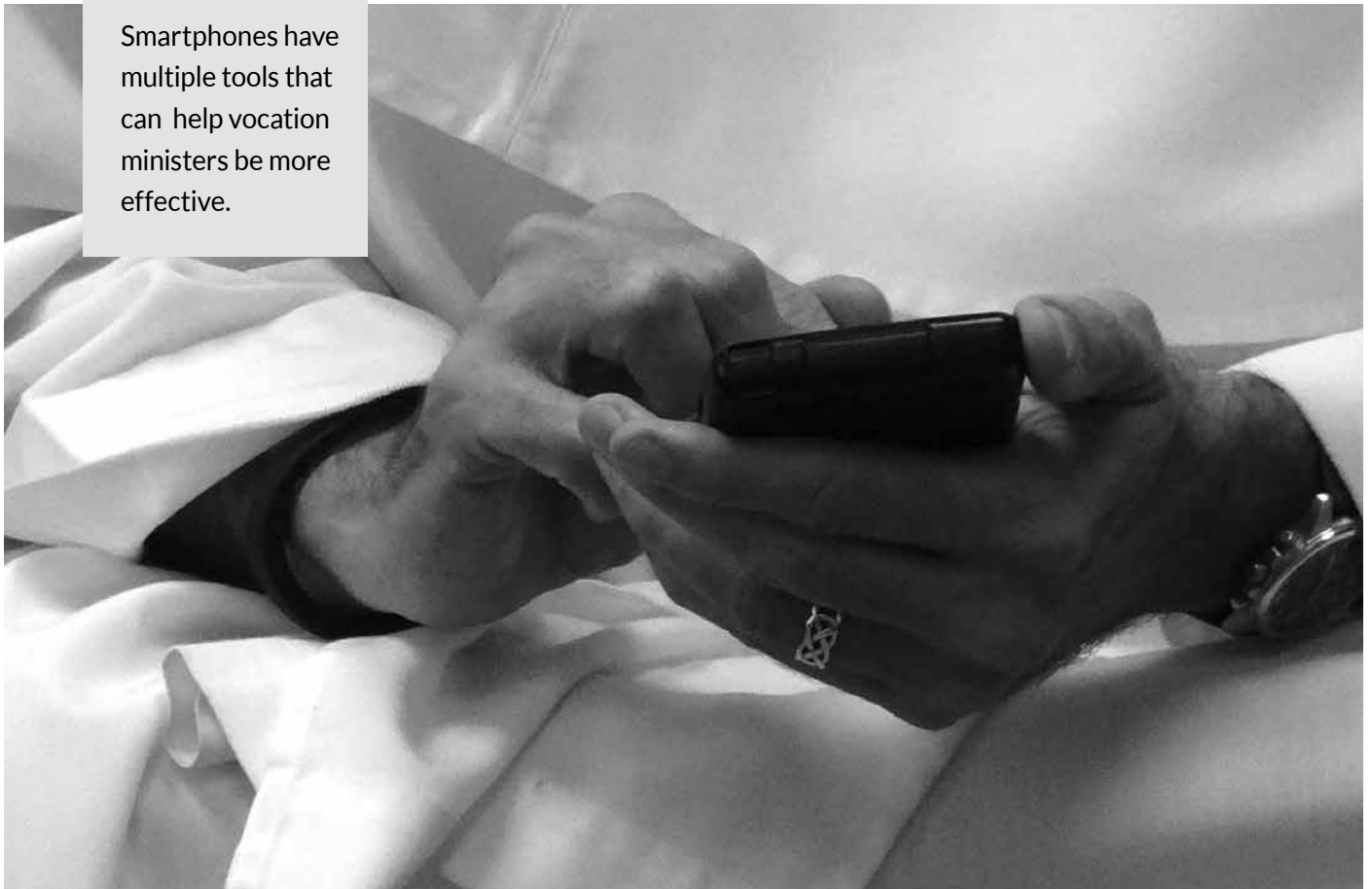
1. Self-knowledge The first step in preventing boundary violations is a critical self-examination that will bring the necessary self-knowledge that will allow Jane to recognize what she is bringing to this relationship. Jane's history of being an adult child of alcoholic parents, for example, is an influence on her behavior but it is not determinative. With this self-knowledge, and with sufficient self-discipline, she will be able to model a healthy relationship for Sally.

2. Self-care For Jane to be able to avoid mixing roles with Sally, she needs to exercise good self-care. Jane must first pay attention to her needs and then find ways to satisfy them outside her professional relationships as a vocation minister. With candidates to her community, she must keep her role as the vocation minister the primary one. Socializing with Sally and meeting often in "casual" settings feeds unconscious dynamics that will undermine her vocation ministry by contaminating the discernment that Sally needs to make.

3. Accountability Maintaining healthy boundaries also requires some structures of accountability. Without structures of accountability, we can lose our perspective on how the relationship is developing. Yet, many pastoral ministers receive no further supervision of their ministerial practice once they complete their formation program. By using a supervisor or small support group, Jane may be able to examine rationalizations for creating a dual relationship, monitor its development, and develop strategies to restore and maintain healthy boundaries.

In vocation ministry, as in other pastoral relationships, the right use of power is key to providing professional and just ministerial service. In our ministerial role, we inevitably have power over those we serve because we have something they need. We carry the greater responsibility to establish and maintain healthy boundaries. Healthy boundaries safeguard trust in the pastoral relationship, allow you to feel safe when seeking or providing pastoral service, and model what a healthy ministerial relationship is like. ■

Smartphones have multiple tools that can help vocation ministers be more effective.



Ultimately the main reason for smartphone use in vocation ministry is to better connect and communicate in order to share God's love.

Smart ways to use smartphones

ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THINGS about living the life of a vowed religious is the simple fact that we are, for the most part, forced to live in multigenerational communities. This means the stories around the table or during recreation can be incredibly interesting and naturally diverse. I often enjoy hearing the stories of how our older friars entered religious life. It certainly isn't shocking to the reader to know that the word "smartphone" is never uttered in these conversations. In some cases, the classic telephone wasn't even used in the discernment process. The normal means of discernment and vocational exploration came about through actual human contact and conversation. Very often the limits of technology use were the U.S. mail system and a train trip.

Things have changed! They have changed so much that some people giggle at the sight of a flip phone (since they've long been replaced by phones with more features). That said, I invite readers who are still

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Discussing smartphone features are (left to right) Sisters René Daigle, MSC (vocation director of the Marianites of Holy Cross) Vincent Dornbush, MSC and Margaret Cronley, MSC.

getting used to smartphones—or who are considering using them—to join me on this journey into the smartphone world.

An indispensable tool

If I had one tool that I cannot do without in my ministry as Promoter of Vocations for the Dominican Province of St. Albert the Great, it would be my smartphone. I use an iPhone 4S, but this is no advertisement for Apple. I have had one other smartphone from the Android world before acquiring the iPhone, and it was a fine phone. The key reality for this article is the world of the smartphone.

A smartphone is simply a cellular phone that is capable of operations that are similar to a computer. It runs programs, or applications, also known as “apps.” In other words, it really is a mini computer that also functions as a phone. Most of the time it’s something other than a phone. It is this reality that can make it very valuable to the vocation minister.

I do not carry around paper and pen much anymore. That’s because I can write anything I want on my smartphone. The notes app that is native to the iPhone operating system is a handy tool to type in notes quickly. But there are dozens of other apps on both iOS (the Apple operating system for mobile phones) and Android operating systems that allow you to take simple notes or create elegant documents that you can later download to your office computer. Of course, it’s also helpful to be able to record quick messages. The app that is really easy to do that with is any voice-recording app. The one I use is iRecorder. It’s very simple and it will even create a webpage with your recording on it so you can down-

load the recording to your computer. This could come in handy for candidate interviews or reminders of people you need to contact or any contact information you want to record quickly and then reference later when you are updating your contact database.

Speaking of contact databases, I use one equipped with a feature that allows the whole database to be transferred to my smartphone. This might be overkill for many of you, but if you want all of your contact info and details at the tip of your fingers, having a contact database on your phone is a nifty way to have easy access when you are out of the office. On my computer I use Vocation Tracker (a web-based software from vocationsupply.com), which allows me to either share my database with others or download it to my smartphone. Again, this may be too much for some, as most ministers will get plenty of use out of a simple contact file.

The database is different from the contact file in that the database has a large amount of information that is needed for assisting the vocations contact/discerner. The contact file (formerly known as the Rolodex) is the address, e-mail and phone number of the contact. I believe it is important to enter these pieces of information into my smartphone as soon as possible, because I want to know who is calling me. When they do, their number comes up with their name and I can answer the phone saying hello to the caller using his name. The personal touch is always encouraged in our line of work!

Along with contact information, the calendar is very important to vocation ministers. Having the calendar on the smartphone allows you to make appointments while away from the office or out on the road. But wait, there’s more! Because these smartphone calendars are easily linked to your calendar on your computer in your office, all versions of your calendar are automatically updated. This is the beauty of the “cloud” within the computing world. The cloud is the new term for keeping all of your data offsite and available on any computer, tablet or smartphone that you may use. All data is in this mysterious cloud is actually housed on computer servers and connected to the Internet. It is safe and it is reliable. It’s rare that you would be unable to access this data, which means your technological uptime as a vocation minister will be at a high level.

Timely responses

Smartphones today have native calendars and e-mail apps that can be formatted to whatever e-mail program you use. It can be Gmail, Yahoo, AOL or Microsoft Out-

look with a unique e-mail address for your community. This versatility is a wonderful reality in a world with so many choices of e-mail clients. Having your e-mail available on the road is quickly becoming a non-negotiable in dealing with young people who expect instant answers to their inquiries. While patience is an important virtue to instill in our future members, a speedy e-mail reply to these folks tells them that we are serious about the future of our orders and congregations.

Smartphones allow us to make a response in a timely manner, even if the reply is telling the inquirer that you are out of the office and will respond as soon as possible. Even in my short time as a vocation minister, I have heard many stories about how men and women seeking information about various orders and congregations have received nothing in reply, neither from a phone call or an e-mail. Smartphones used properly can help eliminate this pitfall of our ministry.

Along with the apps mentioned above, I find myself using the text messaging capability of my smartphone in communication with candidates. Young people are adept at texting, and I find myself using it more and more in just brief contact with an inquirer to let him know I am thinking about him and praying for him. Inquirers also use texting to let me know when they will arrive for a visit to the priory or office.

As technology continues to move forward, it is important to know what the latest and greatest things are that you can do with your smartphone. As I was writing this article on my office computer, I received a Skype call from a candidate in Canada. Skype is a free videophone application that is very popular. This Skype call from Canada let me see and hear this candidate for free! No plane tickets or long car rides. I can do an initial quick assessment for the investment of nothing more than a little time. The good news for the smartphone user is that Skype has apps for all smartphone operating systems, so you don't have to miss a call while you are away from your office computer.

Staying current on social media

On a final note, it is important to know that social media sites are becoming a necessary reality for vocation ministers. There are two social media sites where you will find both an abundance of searchers and vocation ministers: Facebook and Twitter. These two technologies are fast becoming the go-to places for those seeking up-to-date information about vocation events and contacts. I have my Twitter account linked to my Facebook account so

that every time I post something new on Twitter, whether it is a pithy and inspiring quote from a saint or Pope Francis, or a reminder about our upcoming Come and See weekend, it automatically gets posted on our Facebook page also. These social media sites are necessary on your office computer, but they are fast becoming a must-have on the smartphone. Being able to update your status from the road is a powerful tool—especially when you are attending regional or national conferences and you can let people that follow you know right where you are located so that they can drop by to see you in person.

Sharing the love of God

This kind of contact is the reality that the smartphone should bring us: the face-to-face meeting with the future members of our communities. There is no other reason to use a smartphone in our ministries. Ultimately smartphones should bring us together so that we will share our love of God with one another. Modern technology is a good only in that it brings us closer together and enhances our personal relationships in new and better ways. Impersonal technological gadgets will never replace the beauty of sharing a moment of prayer or an intimate conversation with a candidate who is seeking to serve God and the church. A smartphone is simply a tool that helps get us to that wonderful encounter with those seeking to join us in our ministries. ■

SMARTPHONE BASICS

Portable Fits in a pocket or purse.

Multifunction Use it to make phone calls, text messages, search the web, update your calendar, write and store notes, navigate new places, take video, take pictures, post online, read social media feeds, conduct e-mail correspondence, etc.

Main types Apple iPhone, Google Android, Blackberry, Windows.

Youth communication tool of choice
Used by 80 percent of adults 18-34.

Join us this July in Chicago for Summer Institute 2014

Each year NRVC provides vocation ministers opportunities for professional growth through its comprehensive Summer Institute. The workshops are designed for those who wish to deepen their understanding of the complex theological, spiritual, psycho-sexual, ethical, and diversity issues often present in contemporary vocation ministry.

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and Formation Ministry**

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Ph.D.

Behavioral Assessment I

July 10-12 | Father Raymond P. Carey,
Ph.D.

**Orientation Program for New Vocation
Directors**

July 14-18 | Brother Paul Bednarczyk,
CSC and Sister Deborah Borneman,
SSCM

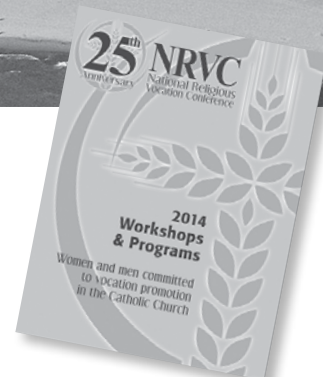
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In the life narrative of every person, we discover who we are. It is in this narrative where God is found and where we find our true self.

Being at home in your own story

STORYCORPS ON NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO recently commemorated its 10th anniversary of recording stories of ordinary people from around the country. In an interview on NPR, its creator, Dave Isay, said StoryCorps “is about giving two people the chance to have this conversation for 40 minutes, and it tells them their lives matter and they won’t be forgotten.”

The genesis of StoryCorps, according to Isay, happened when he was a freelance radio producer working on a documentary about the homeless in the Bowery in New York. The documentary became a book and Isay recalls “bringing the galley of the book into the flophouse,” and handing it to one of the homeless men he interviewed. The guy opened the book to his page and “held it over his head” and then “ran down the hall shouting, ‘I exist! I exist!’”

Every person tells a story. Each of us has a narrative that includes family, friends, foes, community (however we define our “tribe,” whether it is a cloister or coworkers who gather on Friday afternoons at the corner

By FATHER JOSEPH NASSAL, CP



Father Joseph Nassal, CP 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, Father Joe 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, MO.

pub after work), loves, losses, vocation, and vision. Every experience of our lives holds seeds of stories. Some are discarded almost immediately after they happen; but others take root in the rich soil of our lives and gradually grow to cover the landscape with memories, markers, and milestones. In the life narrative of every person, we discover who we are. It is in this narrative where God is found and where we find our true self. God exists and so do we.

One of the primary tasks of the vocation minister is to tell the story of the congregation. In being able

A primary task of the vocation minister is to tell the story of the congregation. . . . But to be an effective storyteller, vocation ministers need to be in touch with the stories of their own lives.

to place oneself within the context of the larger story of community life—the founder’s initial inspiration, the charism, the spirituality, the growth, and yes, the diminishment, the response to the ever-changing

“signs of the times” and the challenges religious face today—the vocation minister becomes the narrator of the congregation’s narrative.

But to be an effective storyteller, vocation ministers need to be in touch with the story of their lives. Every spiritual practice that helps to tap this sacred center of our truest self, that helps us scrape off the rust or the dust of that tarnished image of God within, or that calls forth fidelity to our authentic self, helps to honor our story. When we find this sacred center through a daily spiritual practice—such as meditation, recitation of the Divine Office, waking before dawn and watching the sunrise, journaling, or walking in the woods—we make ourselves at home in our bodies, minds, and souls.

In exploring our own story, two questions posed by Thomas Merton are helpful: “If you want to identify me ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I’m living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between those two answers you can determine the identity of any person.”

Living the answers to those two questions reveals the core of my authentic self that is then given shape and substance in the narrative that composes my life. The poet Mark Nepo calls this authentic self the “unencumbered spot—free of expectation and regret, free of ambition and embarrassment, free of fear and worry” that

comes to each of us in birth, “an umbilical spot of grace where we were each first touched by God.” Our spiritual journey seeks to reclaim this sacred space in our own lives, to recognize this place in the other, and to work to restore this place in all peoples. This is the place where we are connected as children of God.

Placing ourselves in the divine mystery

Being in touch with our sacred story does not erase the pain, ease the suffering, or lighten the burdens we carry in life, but it enables us to place all experiences of our everyday lives in the divine mystery. This doesn’t make the cross we carry any less heavy; doesn’t make the loss that leaves a hole in our soul any smaller or the scar upon our heart any less tender to the touch. But without entering and embracing the truth of our own story, we will feel isolated and alone, more likely to teeter on the brink of despair than balancing our life on the edge of possibility.

Entertaining and embracing the possibilities of life is reminiscent of something the late Anthony DeMello said: “Life is like a bottle of wine. Some are content to read the label. Some drink the wine.” Vocation ministers are not content to just read the labels of their lives or those of the people with whom they discern a call to religious life. Rather, they are people who drink fully their own life experiences and drink in the stories of others. The challenge is not to let the labels (progressive, traditionalist, liberal, conservative) get in the way. This affords us the opportunity to see each of those with whom we are in relationship as a lifeline to the deeper mysteries of life where all are connected.

We need others to help us embrace our true identity, our true self. If we only listen to our own story in a kind of solitary flight from the world, we can become so self-absorbed that we also become sick to our soul. This is why we need others to listen to our stories and we need to listen to the stories of others. “The beginning of love,” Thomas Merton wrote, “is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to find our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.”

Vocation ministers seek to accompany those discerning God’s call in their lives to his place where they first heard the voice of God. It is a journey inward, a journey to reclaim the soul. We all take different paths to arrive at this sacred space, but the goal of all spiritual companionship, education, formation, even therapy is to restore and recover this sense of the true self, this sacred space of grace deep within our being. ■

Wise counsel for discerners

WITHOUT RESERVATION, I would say that every candidate preparing for priesthood, whether diocesan or religious, who reads *To Save a Thousand Souls* will be helped and so also will be the vocation ministers, the spiritual directors, pastors, and others who accompany these candidates. Female candidates and their vocation ministers will not find all here applicable to their journey, but making the necessary adjustments, they too will likely find this work worth their time and effort. It is an extraordinary achievement.

I was uncertain what I would find when I first received *To Save a Thousand Souls* from the Serra Club of Houston (which has distributed hundreds of copies of this book to formators, vocation directors, men in discernment, and others). Once I started to read this book, it had such a ring of truth to it—and the book's advice was supported with such a myriad of examples—that I could hardly put it down.

It may be surprising for vocation ministers coming from religious communities, whether men or women, to discover the incredibly important role the vocation director has in the diocesan model. The practice in religious communities is for the vocation minister to recruit, discern with, and nurture the candidates for their community. Once a candidate is accepted into the community, the vocation minister steps out of the picture, and either the formation director or the pre-novitiate director takes responsibility.

In the diocesan model, the vocation minister accompanies the candidate all the way through studies until ordination. It is an awesome respon-

TO SAVE A THOUSAND SOULS



*A Guide for Discerning a
Vocation to Diocesan Priesthood*

FR. BRETT A. BRANNEN

BY FATHER KENNETH
O'MALLEY, CP



Father Kenneth O'Malley, CP was the library director and archivist at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago for many years. An experienced retreat

leader and university instructor, he now serves as formation director and local leader for the Passionist community in Houston, Texas.

sibility for one person to carry. This volume will help readers to appreciate even more the importance of the role of the vocation minister. It will also give religious vocation ministers an appreciation of how fortunate they are that this serious ministry is shared with several others on the vocational journey of their candidates.

There are 20 chapters to this book, and here are a few of the topics they address: What is a Vocation?; Signs of a Good Vocation and Characteristics of a Good Candidate; Developing a Spiritual Plan for Life; Importance of a Spiritual Director; Seven Stages of Diligent Discernment; The Blessed Virgin Mary and Discernment Fears; and Celibacy, Chastity, Charity, and Cheerfulness.

Within these chapters are hints about how to foster a deeper sense of vocation. The author gives practical, helpful suggestions, such as these: start by trying to teach your faith to others, e.g. RCIA; develop a routine of prayer; take advantage of spiritual direction; attend discernment retreats; make habits of Mass and devotions such as rosary and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Another chapter deals with stages of discernment: 1. initial call, 2. latency period, 3. assessment period, 4. discernment shift, 5. consistent peace, and 6. certitude. The author not only spells out the significance of each of these phases, but he has laden each chapter with suggestions and examples. He also explains the force each stage has and suggests how these stages are helpful for those in discernment.

The chapter on vocation spells out the difference between an occupation and a vocation. The author posits without hesitation that every vocation is a call to holiness. Furthermore, it is a call to mediate between God and God's people.

Without doubt Chapter 13: "Celibacy, Chastity, Charity, and Cheerfulness" is one of the most valuable chapters of the 20. It is a marvelous treatment of a sensitive and sometimes difficult topic. This chapter alone is worth the purchase price of this book.

Besides the topics covered in each chapter, there are features in this book that each reader will find helpful, whether one is a candidate or a vocations director. Technically this book does not have an appendix, but at the end of the text there are several "reading aids." For

The author's insightful understanding of the discernment process, the accompanying fears and concerns, the spiritual ebb and flow of candidates, and so much more make this a book worth seeking out.

example, at the back of the book is an index of questions. This index contains 109 questions that can be used to accompany each one of the chapters, a helpful tool for both candidates and vocation ministers. The book also has a series of scripture passages for meditation on discernment. Embedded in Chapter 5 is an exercise on discernment composed of 20 statements to be rated on a 0-5 scale, a good tool to spur discussions between candidate and vocation minister or spiritual director.

In another chapter readers will find a checklist of questions about spiritual direction. Yet another chapter includes a list of 16 observations about prayer.

One more helpful list is the one about 36 fears that men have in considering priesthood. When one young man was asked which of these he thought would apply to him, he answered: "All of them!" Some of the "Litany of Fears" may be common to all candidates contemplating religious life and/or priesthood: celibacy, loneliness, family, disappointing others, lack-of-faith, overwork, scandal, poverty, obedience, hypocrisy, discernment, prayer, lack of courage, solitude, administration/leadership, lack of intelligence, dealing with suffering and death, counseling others, sacrifice, unworthiness, being a public person, sexual orientation, unhappiness, returning to school. Many fears that the author unravels apply to men and women considering religious life, too.

The author's insightful understanding of the discernment process, the accompanying fears and concerns, the spiritual ebb and flow of candidates, and so much more make this a book worth seeking out. The author has the voice of experience and is obviously someone who loves the church dearly. *To Save a Thousand Souls* is a very readable book, both for style and content, and it has examples galore. I enthusiastically recommend it to all those involved in vocation ministry of any type. It could well be considered a *vade mecum*, or ready manual, for vocation ministers preparing candidates for priesthood—diocesan and/or religious. In addition, there is much to recommend it to those who accompany women on their vocation journeys. ■



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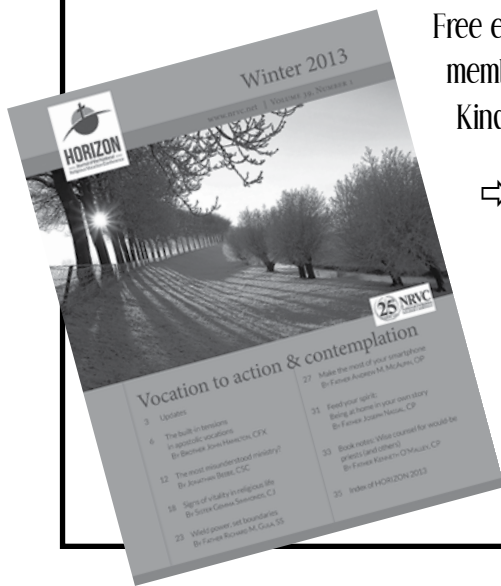


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