

# HORIZON



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

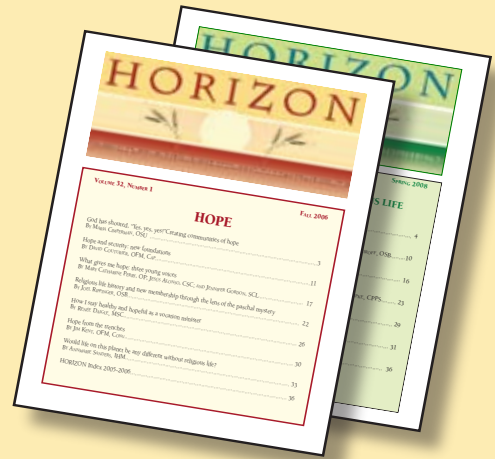
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## CALLED BY ONE, INVITED BY MANY Convocation 2008

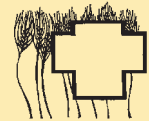
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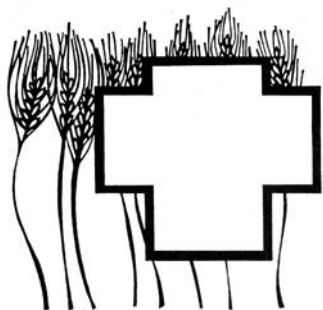
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# HORIZON

*HORIZON* began as a vocation journal in 1975. Today, as a quarterly publication, it serves a readership of more than 2000 in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries.

*HORIZON* serves as a resource:

- To assist vocation directors in their professional and personal growth as ministers;
- To educate and engage educators, directors of retreat centers, formation personnel, community leadership, bishops, campus ministers, librarians, priests, religious, laity, and anyone interested in vocations and their role in vocation ministry.

*HORIZON* has a threefold purpose:

- To provide timely and contemporary articles relative to vocation ministry;
- To provide an opportunity for the exchange of ideas on pertinent issues in the field of vocations;
- To highlight some of the current resources available.

## National Religious Vocation Conference

*HORIZON* is published by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The NRVC is an organization of men and women committed to the fostering and discernment of vocations. It provides services for professional vocation directors and others who are interested and involved in vocation ministry. It proclaims the viability of religious life and serves as a prophetic, creative, life-giving force in today's church.

To accomplish this, NRVC provides opportunities for professional growth and personal support of vocation ministers; facilitates regional, area and national meetings for its members; sponsors workshops, seminars, conferences and days of prayer; publishes materials related to vocations for a wide variety of audiences; engages in research, study and exchange on issues of current concern; publishes a quarterly professional journal, *HORIZON*; maintains a Web site; and cooperates with other national groups essential to the fostering of vocations. For further information, contact: NRVC, 5401 S. Cornell Ave., Suite 207, Chicago, IL. 60615-5698. E-mail: [nrvc@nrvc.net](mailto:nrvc@nrvc.net). Web: [www.nrvc.net](http://www.nrvc.net).

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

## Come away with us

**I** REMEMBER OPENING MY CALENDAR one time to write down a routine medical appointment. The scheduler took one look at the chicken scratches all over the page and blurted, “Wow!” with a tone of sympathy.

The calendar gave the illusion of frantic activity, but since it represented five people, five jobs, four schools



and the sports, volunteer and social activities for five, it really wasn't so bad. (I'm actually a firm believer in down-time.)

It's a new year, and no doubt, your

calendar is already filling up, and your to-do list is getting long. With so many diverse responsibilities, vocation ministers can indeed become worker bees, with days and evenings filled with meetings, e-mails, phone calls and events.

Yet our spiritual tradition has always valued reflection—emphasizing the importance of retreats, meditation and prayer time. Indeed, vocation ministers consistently tell discerners to take time for prayer and reflection. So while there is much to be done, vocation ministry also needs to flow from a grounded center, from union with the One who calls.

All of us who work on *HORIZON* hope this edition

can help move you and your community toward that grounded center. We've put into written form all the major addresses of our 2008 convocation, held in Louisville, KY this past October. These articles invite you and your community to step back from your day-to-day labors and reflect on the larger context of your life, to renew your connection with the One who calls.

NRVC's leader, Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC asks you to consider your own sense of mission and your spirit of unity with the larger church. Father Donald Senior, CP invites you to explore the life of St. Paul and to examine the themes and patterns of the Gospels. Both St. Paul and the Gospels provide insights that you might apply to your own stance toward faith and ministry.

Sister Maria Cimperman, OSU names this point in religious life a “threshold” moment. She encourages you to reflect individually and with members of your community about the thresholds you may be approaching.

Serious business, yes. But Father James Martin, SJ reminds everyone that humor and joy are signs of the kingdom. Joyful priests, sisters and brothers attract others; and levity, while serving many purposes, is also just plain fun.

So if your calendar is getting crowded and you can tell that the year ahead will be hectic, I encourage you to take the time to use this edition for reflection and renewal. Come away with us and return to your ministry refreshed.



—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor, [cscheiber@nrvc.net](mailto:cscheiber@nrvc.net)

With the Holy Spirit inspiring and guiding us, we can create a vocation culture in our church in spite of its tensions. We can seek common ground and move forward together.

# Empowered by the Holy Spirit, let's work together to build our future

BY BROTHER PAUL BEDNARCZYK, CSC

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*Following is the opening address of the 2008 Convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference. It is based on the reading used during the convocation's opening prayer service about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: Acts 2:5-13.*

"All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, what does this mean?" (Acts 2: 12)

**Y**ES, EXACTLY WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN? A group of devout believers are gathered together in a room, and then all of a sudden they hear a sound like a powerful wind. The noise fills the house, and suddenly their eyes, ears and hearts are opened in a way they have never experienced before, for they are filled with the Holy Spirit. And in the midst of their wonder and amazement in this graced moment, they realize their capacity to preach and to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ in a language that is understandable to all people. Their zeal and desire to proclaim the marvels of God's work was palpable. Truly it was the Spirit that left its distinguishing mark upon this community.

Sure there were skeptics who doubted the authenticity of the experience and cynically attributed this newfound passion to the intake of too much wine. The believers, though, were undaunted. They knew they were not drunk, because they understood the message communicated to them by the Spirit.

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*Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC is the executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference. A member of the Congregation of Holy Cross, Eastern Province of Brothers, he has worked in vocation ministry in various capacities since 1993.*

The message, though, was too good to keep secret. This common experience compelled them to share their good news with others, and so they went out to the world, preached about the Lord, Jesus Christ, and a church was born.

What does all this mean for us today who are gathered in this "upper room" of the Galt House Hotel in Louisville, KY? What does it mean for us as men and women committed to building a culture of vocation within our church today? We may not be Parthians, Medes or Elamites, but we are Franciscans, Dominicans and Carmelites, who have come not from Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, but from the United States, the West Indies, Guam, Canada, Ireland and Belgium. We are consecrated, married, ordained and single. We are vocation directors, formators, communication directors, campus ministers and major superiors.

Although we are many, we have been called by one God, not just to our own respective vocation, but we have been called in a special way for a particular mission—to promote the life of faith and service in the church as priests, sisters and brothers. Whereas the devout believers of Pentecost wondered what their experience had all meant, we too wonder at times what it all means to preach a message in a society and culture that often speaks a different language, but yet yearns and groans for deeper meaning. Like them, we may wonder where it is all headed and where it is all going.

If anything, this evening's reading from the Acts of the Apostles reminds us that during these bewildering times, those of us who share in vocation ministry need to be first and foremost men and women of the Spirit. If we are not attentive to the movement of the Spirit in our own lives and communities, how then will we be able to recognize it in the men and women with whom we work? Our own

preoccupations, however, often block us from realizing the Spirit in our midst.

Let us imagine for a moment that we are the ones who were gathered in the upper room on that Pentecost night. It's October 2008 and a powerful wind blows through; the Holy Spirit descends upon us, and we are charged with the building of a church. Immediately, as a result of this spiritually profound experience, we begin to create our focus groups; we formulate our goals and objectives; we call in the experts to help us ascertain a five-year strategic plan; we try to agree on a common logo; we take a few workshops on membership recruitment, and—God forbid if we didn't—we hire a twenty-something Web designer to develop for us a savvy interactive website without too much download time that will draw in a younger generation of believers.

What just happened to the powerful moment of conversion that we all experienced? Although I am being facetious, I think you know the point that I am making. Sometimes we become so focused on the business of vocation ministry, that it is as if the Spirit has taken a detour, and we lose sight of its very presence. In our vocation world of meetings, marketing plans, tag lines, interviews and airports, we must never forget the power of the Spirit of God working in us, through us and among us. If our work is to be of God, it must be of the Spirit, not of ourselves.

How Spirit-filled are we in our own passion and commitment to religious life, and how is that witnessed to those whom we meet? Where do we see the Spirit working in the hopes, dreams and desires of those who come to us? Where is the Spirit in the church today with the empowerment of our laity as co-workers in the vineyard and as our co-workers in vocation ministry?

It is true. The Spirit blows where it wills, which is all the more reason that we need to be especially, as St. Paul said, *discerning* of what is of the Spirit.

For the believers in the upper room, that Spirit was manifested in a strong, driving wind. On the other hand, for Elijah, the Lord was not in the wind, nor in the earthquake or the fire, but rather in a tiny whispering sound (1 Kings 19: 11-12). The Spirit is in the drama as well as in the mundane. It is not outside of us; nor is it in a far-off place. God is as close to us as our own breath. We only need to breathe to realize that because of the Pentecost event, it is God's breath that breathes through us today. We can only breathe that life into others when we recognize where the source of that breath and life comes from. It is my sincere hope that our eyes, ears and hearts will be opened during these next few days so that we will be touched by the Spirit and its movement that awaits us.



**Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC**

## Men and women of mission

And so we wonder, what does it all mean for us in vocation ministry? This year the church commemorates the year of St. Paul, who has often been referred to as the missionary *par excellence*. If we are to be a Pentecost people, then, like Paul and those early followers of Christ, we must be men and

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women of mission. The Pentecost experience did not just end in the upper room. The early followers immediately began their journey to bring the message of Jesus Christ to other lands and to other people.

Although this Pauline year calls all of us to be missionaries of the Gospel, for those committed to promoting vocations, it calls us in a special way to speak and to witness

Only when we are on fire  
with our own vocations  
will we be able to pass  
the flame on to others.

to our vocations  
with a missionary  
zeal characterized by  
unbridled courage  
and fierce conviction.  
Like the Gospel, the  
message we have to  
share about our lives  
is also good news. We

have lived it faithfully in the midst of tremendous change, uncertainty, and most recently, public scandal, while still finding a sense of fulfillment and peaceful transcendence. Our commitment and fidelity to the Gospel should enflame us. It is only when we are on fire with our own vocations that we will be able to pass the flame to others.

While we must not underestimate the power of this witness, at the same time, we must be realistic, knowing that the message we preach may well be heard with a lack of understanding and a great deal of suspicion and skepticism. To be missionaries in vocation ministry means to be invited to take risks, to go where we are not comfortable, to realize that we may not always be warmly received, and to know that we may not always be successful.

If priesthood and religious life are to be evangelizing and transformative forces in creating a vocation culture, it is presumed that we who live the life are rooted in our relationship with Jesus Christ in the church, are attentive and open to the activity of the Holy Spirit, even in our crosses, and are serious about living the Gospel values we profess. It is our integrity, not necessarily our words, which will shape our future and our congregations.

Much like it took many people with many gifts and talents to create a church, similarly, it takes much of the same to create a vocation culture. That is why our chosen theme of this convocation, “Called by One, Invited by Many,” is so timely. As we all know, it is not about us, it is about God. And God calls all of us with our unique gifts to share in the building of this vocation culture in which each Christian is empowered to identify and respond to the mission to which he or she is called as a member of the Body of Christ.

The church exists today because of the contentiousness of Paul and the impetuosity of Peter. It exists today because of the gentleness of John and the passionate love of the Magdalen. It exists because of the diplomacy of Timothy and the generous hospitality of Lydia. It exists because of the capable leadership of Phoebe and the eloquent wisdom of Stephen. As the early church had them and their contributing gifts and charisms, today it has us. St. Catherine of Siena wrote in her *Dialogues* that God said to her: “I could well have made human beings in such a way that they had everything, but I preferred to give gifts to different people, so that they would all need each other.”<sup>1</sup>

And we do need each other, now more than ever. During his recent historic visit to the United States, Pope Benedict in his homily at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York eloquently used the metaphor of a Gothic cathedral to reflect on our particular vocations within the Mystical Body of Christ. He used the symbol of stained glass windows and how from the outside they may appear dark, but from the inside they are resplendent with beauty. As he said, “it follows that we who live the life with grace within the church’s communion are called to draw all people into this mystery of light.”<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Father then prayed that our Lord Jesus Christ would “grant the Church in America a renewed sense of unity and purpose, as all—bishops, clergy, religious and laity—move forward in hope, in love for the truth and for one another.”<sup>3</sup>

## We need each other

In the spirit of Pope Benedict, there is only one way to move forward in hope and love. Like the early disciples of Pentecost, we need to move forward together. This same theme of unity was similarly endorsed at the 2002 North American Congress, when Archbishop Giuseppe Pittau, then Secretary for the Congregation of Catholic Education, reminded delegates that the vocation crisis we are experiencing “is a *kairos*, a great opportunity for conversion, repentance, and purification.” If this is so, he added, then “a new flourishing of vocations for the ordained ministry and consecrated life will be forthcoming only if we work together to create a new culture of vocations.”<sup>4</sup>

To move forward together, however, is easier said than done. Tensions exist. We see this in the polarization of our church today, including religious life. Whether it is ecclesiology, feminism, Christology or the ideology of religious life itself, as John Allen told us at our 2006 convocation, we have different “tribes” in Catholicism “and quite often they are not on speaking terms.”<sup>5</sup>



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This evening's reading presents us with the *kairos* moment experienced by the people of Pentecost when the Spirit filled them with a unified heart and mind. But as our church history attests, factions began to whittle away at the common understanding of Christ and his mission. There was Peter, who wanted Christianity to remain as a Jewish sect, while Paul wanted to expand it to the pagans. There were the various subsequent ecclesial councils that argued over the dual nature of Christ, his divinity and humanity, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Controversy has never been a stranger in our church history.

Whether you believe that it was in spite of these tensions or because of them, the reality is that our church has survived, and like religious life, continues to exist in the midst of tension. Pope Benedict in his homily at St. Patrick's gently referred to such tensions. Continuing with his image of a Gothic cathedral, he said that the "unity of a Gothic cathedral ... is not the static unity of a classical temple but a unity born of the dynamic tension of diverse forces which impel the architecture upward, pointing it to heaven."<sup>6</sup>

Focusing solely, though, on the tensions that result from our differences—be they our charisms, vocations or beliefs about the church or religious life—will not necessarily move us forward in hope and love. Our tensions exist because, like Peter and Paul, our early church fathers and mothers, and even our early ancestors in community, we may not always share the same mindset. But we all share in the same passionate love for Jesus Christ, the church and religious life. Deep down we all simply want what is best for us, for our institutes and societies, and for those who will follow us.

We only need to recall the famous epiphany experienced by Thomas Merton only blocks from this hotel on Fourth and Walnut Streets. It was on that street corner that Merton felt as if he were "waking from a dream," when he suddenly realized that he loved all people. "My vocation," he said, "does not make me different from the rest of people or put me in a special category... I am only a member of the human race, like all the rest of them."<sup>7</sup> Merton well knew that it is so much more advantageous to begin a conversation by focusing on what we share in common, as opposed to focusing only on the ways in which we differ.

I have always believed that it was not a coincidence that the church in its wisdom has set aside one common day to commemorate the great feast of Saints Peter and Paul. In so doing, it not only recognizes their holy lives and martyrdom, but it also, in a unique way, celebrates the life-giving tension that has always been a part of our church.

And so my brothers and sisters, what does it all mean? It simply means that the Spirit breathing in all of us contributes in its own individual way to the building up of the Body of Christ, which is a living body composed of many different members, each with its own role and purpose.

Our church is a wide and embracing one. There is room for everyone at the table. Isn't that what makes us catholic, after all? Let us not fear this, but let us rejoice in this, and let us pray that the fruits of the Spirit of God—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)—guide us during these coming days and

in the future. As we strive together to be missionaries of vocation ministry in the midst of the many dynamic tensions we encounter, let us breathe deeply and with one united breath pray: Come, Holy Spirit! Come! ■

We may not always share the same mindset. But we all share in the same passionate love for Jesus Christ, the church and religious life. Deep down we all simply want what is best for us, for our institutes and societies, and for those who will follow us.

1. As quoted by Father Timothy Radcliffe, OP, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), 140-141.
2. Pope Benedict XVI, homily at St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City, April 19, 2008. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20080419\\_st-patrick-ny\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20080419_st-patrick-ny_en.html) (accessed October 24, 2008).
3. Ibid.
4. Archbishop Giuseppe Pittau, address to Continental Congress on Vocations, April 21, 2002. Quoted by Father Raymond Lafontaine, *Conversion, Discernment, Mission: Fostering a Vocation Culture in North America* (Ottawa, Ontario: CCCB Publications, 2003), 56.
5. John Allen, "The role of religious in the church and world," *HORIZON* (Winter 2007): 36.
6. Pope Benedict XVI, homily at St. Patrick's Cathedral.
7. Father Thomas Merton, OCSO, *Private Journal*, March 19, 1958.

The life of St. Paul has much to teach us about vocation, faithfulness, commitment and collaboration.

# Consider Paul, our brother

BY FATHER DONALD SENIOR, CP

*This is the first of two addresses given by Father Donald Senior, CP at the convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference in Louisville, KY in October 2008.*

**T**HANK YOU FOR THE GREAT PRIVILEGE of addressing you in my hometown of Louisville, KY, noted for those perennial vices of racing horses, distilling bourbon and making cigarettes. But also—and maybe there is a connection—noted for its warm hospitality, which I hope each of you experience in abundance while you are here.

I also want to say, as president of Catholic Theological Union, how honored and pleased we are to have the office of the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC) located on our campus—a newly renovated campus at that. It is a great joy and privilege to welcome so many of you when you come for workshops sponsored by NRVC. Your organization—its staff and members—are a great gift to the church, and I truly feel that being with you here is being on holy ground.

In that spirit I thought it might be worthwhile to reflect along with you on your sacred ministry in the light of two fundamental sets of texts in the New Testament—this morning by considering the Apostle Paul and this afternoon

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*Father Donald Senior, CP is a Passionist priest and president of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. In addition he has served there as a professor of New Testament studies since 1972. A member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, he is general editor of the Catholic Study Bible and author of the four-volume The Passion of Jesus in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.*

turning to the form and message of the Gospels. My intent in particular is to address you, out of respect for your difficult and vital ministry, rather than talk solely or directly about vocation or about the men and women you serve in helping discern their call from God. I want to keep in mind as well your evocative theme for this convocation: “Called by One, Invited by Many.”

This year, as you know, has been declared the 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul the Apostle’s birth. This morning I want to reflect on the life and teaching of that great apostle. In June of this year Pope Benedict officially declared the anniversary year in the Basilica of St. Paul’s Outside-the-Walls in Rome. No doubt some of you have visited that great church. By the way, this coming January 25<sup>th</sup> marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of another famous declaration in that basilica—when Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convene the Second Vatican Council!

If you have visited this great church, then you may remember the striking, colossal statue of Paul that stands in the courtyard of the basilica. It is a dramatic and unusual portrayal, I think. Paul stands in a reflective mood, with what seems to be a prayer shawl hooding his brow, the sword of God’s Word grasped firmly in his hand. I had the sense of a Paul somewhat fatigued, his fierce zeal still strong but tempered, a man taking stock at the end of a passionately committed and wonderfully turbulent life.

Both personally and in the wider social and religious world of his day, Paul witnessed an old world die and a new one born. I find extraordinary comfort in Paul these days—not just in the depth and power of his theology but, as the later New Testament writings did, in the example of his apostolic life. Although the Bible presents us with many

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stories of the call of great personages in the history of Israel and the early community, no one gets more space than Paul of Tarsus. No vocation story is told with more detail and passion than of that great figure. Perhaps more than any other figure in the early church, Paul embodied profound conversion and transformation for the sake of the Gospel—both on a personal level and within the religious tradition to which he was passionately committed. It struck me, therefore, that you who are devoting your time and energy to assisting men and women to discern their call might well turn to the example of Paul as source of wisdom and inspiration for your work and for this assembly that is getting underway.

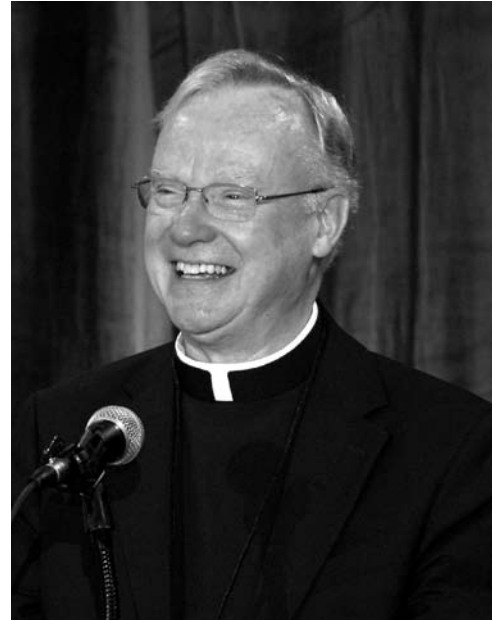
We hear over and over that we and the church we serve are in a time of transition, and, of course, this is true. But think for a moment of the changes Paul experienced in his own lifetime. Sometime around 8 A.D., Paul was born in Tarsus, a provincial capital in south central Asia Minor, present day Turkey. Tarsus was a city noted for its culture and learning, a thoroughly Greco-Roman city, yet one with a significant Jewish minority population. We know that Paul was born into a devout Jewish family—a heritage he would always cherish and respect. Yet he was also born of a father who was a citizen of Rome. We don't know how Paul, a Jew, acquired his Roman citizenship, perhaps because his father had been part of the military or was a freed slave. From this dual heritage—devotedly Jewish and proudly Roman—Paul would embody within himself the cultural and religious mix that would be key for his future mission. From his Jewish heritage came a tenacious and unyielding faith in the God of Israel, the compassionate, liberating God who had created the world and held it in his loving providence. And from Judaism as well Paul was endowed with a strong moral sense of translating one's belief in God into a life obedient to

God's will.

From his Roman heritage and his classical education in Tarsus, Paul would draw

on a broad vision of the Mediterranean world in all its diversity and dynamism and be schooled in the art of rhetoric and persuasion that Rome had inherited from its Greek predecessors. Paul's family tree, his DNA if you like, would be translated by God's dynamic Spirit into a figure who would bridge the Mediterranean world.

Did the young Paul, immersed in love of his Jewish piety and schooled in the classic literature of Greece, ever imagine some dreamy afternoon in Tarsus that he would travel nearly 10,000 miles—most of it on foot and a lot of it on the sea which he feared—for the sake of a crucified Galilean whom Paul would come to believe was the embodiment of the divine presence on earth and the revelation of God's love for the world, including the gentile world? Could he ever have imagined that his life story would take him to the imperial city of Rome, as Acts tells us—not as a curious citizen but bound in a prison ship and held in house arrest in the great city where, nevertheless, he would preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ with assurance and without hindrance? Did Paul, who described himself as a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” and “zealous for the tradition of his ancestors,” ever think he would be known for 2,000 years of history as the “apostle to the gentiles”?



**Father Donald Senior, CP**

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## Paul experiences conversion

The fact of the matter is that Paul of Tarsus, a devout and passionate Jew, would be remembered as one whose life experienced a profound transformation. He would be remembered as one who would become an extraordinary follower of Jesus and recognized as a key promoter of the

Only with the help of other Christians was Paul able to make sense of the experiences that had crowded so forcefully into his life that he could no longer see his way.

gentile mission of the early church.

The New Testament gives us two pictures of a crucial turning point in Paul's life where his vocation from God would burst into flame. One is found in the dramatic conversion stories of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul, whose cocksure zeal drove him

to persecute the followers of Jesus, who had watched with approval the stoning of Stephen, who had kept guard over the cloaks of the very men who threw the deadly stones, Paul, who was described vividly as “breathing threats” and who had gone into homes and dragged women and children to punish them with imprisonment for their heresy (Acts 7:58-8:3; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:23)—that zealous Paul would be knocked to the ground by the power of Christ's redeeming presence. Blinded by the light of God's forgiving love, Paul, paradoxically, would begin to see the truth for the first time (Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). In Luke's account of the unfolding history of the early community, Paul the tormentor and persecutor of the Christians would now become the “chosen vessel”—the one who would bring the Gospel of Jesus from Judea to Antioch and westward to Greece and ultimately to Rome.

Even in the fulfillment of that destiny, irony would rule. Paul would get to Rome and to the fulfillment of his mission not by a seamless journey but as a prisoner brought by a prison ship and confined to house arrest in the imperial city. Yet Luke closes this great story of the triumph of the early church's mission by noting that Paul, although imprisoned, proclaimed the Gospel “with assurance and unhindered” (Acts 28:31).

Thus in the portrayal of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's conversion is, in a certain sense, forced from the outside. Incredible experiences beyond his control turn his

religious world upside down and transform his life forever. Only with the help of other Christians—early members of the NRVC perhaps?—was Paul able to make sense of the experiences that had crowded so forcefully into his life that he could no longer see his way. The man who had been cocksure in his convictions now is blind and unsure. His travelling companions on the way to Damascus, as the text so beautifully says, take him by the hand and lead him to a wise person and a disciple of Jesus, Ananias. Ananias, who is very nervous about Paul because of his reputation (a background check was undoubtedly needed!), yet comes at the bidding of the Spirit and lays hands on Paul and heals him and helps him understand that indeed God had chosen him to be the instrument that would bring the Gospel of life to the gentiles. At the same time Ananias was not to hold back on the truth but also to alert Paul that the vocation of discipleship and ministry would entail suffering in the name of Jesus.

Because of Ananias' ministry, Paul the new Apostle would understand his vocation from God and be strengthened to follow it. Without Paul's companions on the journey to Damascus and without the ministry of Ananias, would we have known of Paul the Apostle?

## Paul is called

This striking story in Acts about Paul's conversion and call takes a very different form in Paul's own words in the Letter to the Galatians. Reflecting many years later on this life-changing conversion, Paul in his own words presents a different, if complementary portrayal. There is little mention of dramatic events on the road to Damascus (although see 2 Corinthians 11:32; Galatians 1:17). Looking back, Paul now sees that God had been calling him to this extraordinary transformation from all time—even before he was knit together in his mother's womb. In his letter to the Galatians in which he reflects on his apostolic vocation, Paul cites the great prophetic words of Isaiah 49 and Jeremiah Chapter 1—“Now the Word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations’” (Jeremiah 1:4-5). The catalyst for radical change was not simply the turbulence of outside events but the fulfillment of a God-given destiny, an act of providence to which God had called him from all time.

Thus Paul steps into a beautiful and profound biblical tradition—that of the call. That tradition includes Moses at the burning bush, hesitant and tongue-tied; Amos, the

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herder of sheep and dresser of sycamores, never thinking of himself as called to anything religious; Isaiah struck mute by a sense of his own sinfulness, having his lips purified by a burning coal in a temple vision. There is Hosea, crushed by the failure of his marriage, drawing from his own suffering an insight into God's enduring love for him and his people; Jeremiah hesitant and fearful, too young for this sort of thing, called by a God who would never abandon him; Mary of Nazareth, still a young woman challenged to a calling beyond imagination. We recall Peter sinking to his knees in awe in the boat alongside an abundant catch of fish; Matthew standing up from his toll booth and turning to a new life; the Samaritan woman whose life would never be the same after a routine visit to the village well. These and so many more stories form the biblical tradition of call—stories that are powerful, beautiful, compelling. The Spirit of God beckons mysteriously, tenaciously—inviting people to set out on new and often unexpected ways of life for the sake of God. Paul is one of these. It is too light a thing for you, God whispers to Isaiah, only to serve a familiar house; I will make you a light to nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).

All of us, I think, can reflect on these different but authentic modalities of our life, and no doubt many of you can think of men and women who have confided in you vocation stories not unlike these. On one level, we are driven by factors outside of us: world events, the economy, the changing face of the church, the movements of culture and history, the encouragement of friends and mentors. And we surely need wise and caring people to help us sort through such experiences and to make sense of them. Like Paul, we need people to help us shed our blindness and see our life and the people around us from the perspective of our Christian faith.

But on another equally important level, we also believe that we are held in God's hands, our lives both individually and collectively a response to God's profound call to us, a call imbedded in God's loving providence for all time; God leading us home despite our very selves and beyond our imagination. And here we know the importance of reflection on the deepest wellsprings of our faith, reflection on the Scriptures and the great characters and saints of our heritage who also responded to God's call and drank deeply of the wellsprings of Christian spirituality to understand what God was doing in their lives, just as Paul drew on the stirring words of Isaiah and Jeremiah and the example of their prophetic ministries to make sense of the unanticipated turns in his life.

## Driven to proclaim the Gospel

We can learn something else from our brother Paul as we reflect on our own lives and the life of our community as a whole. Paul channeled all of his life force into the fulfillment of his God given mission. This is one of the intriguing mysteries of Paul's life. From the very first moment of his encounter with the Risen Christ and the beauty of the Gospel message, Paul felt called by God to proclaim this Good News not just to his fellow Jews but to the gentile world. There was no gap, no long pondering that led after time to Paul's decision. He was convinced of the Gospel's life-giving force for all of humanity from the very first instant of his encounter with Christ.

There was no gap, no long pondering that led after time to Paul's decision. He was convinced of the Gospel's life-giving force for all of humanity from the very first instant of his encounter with Christ.

Paul's urgent missionary logic is clear in this famous passage from his letter to the Romans: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!'" (Romans 10:13-15).

Even though Paul testifies that he was called to be a missionary to the gentiles from the first moment he encountered the Risen Christ (see Galatians 1:15-16), still no doubt it took time and the assistance of others for Paul to further develop his initial vocation. By his own testimony, he spent considerable time in prayer and solitude in Syria, near Damascus, and then went for a brief time to Jerusalem to confer with Peter and James (Galatians 1:17-20). Afterward he went to Cilicia (his home region in southern Asia Minor) and eventually to Antioch, which would be his first true missionary base. Paul was drafted by Barnabas and brought to Antioch to join him in the new adventure of proclaiming the Gospel to the Mediterranean world that lay beyond the perimeters of Israel. In Paul's day, Antioch (located in present day Turkey near the Lebanon and Syrian borders) was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, and in this

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thriving commercial and cultural center, was a significant Jewish community as well as a dominant gentile population. Here, Acts tells us, the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians,” and here Paul, under the guidance of Barnabas

Those of us who have been entrusted with the sacred responsibility of helping young Christians discern their call in life and their path to God would do well to pray for a small measure of the passion of Paul.

and others, would hone his message for gentile Christians. From here in Antioch he would launch his missionary journeys west through Asia Minor and eventually to Greece, where he first set foot on what would be European soil and where he would establish a Christian community at Philippi (Acts 16:11-12).

We might also recall that Paul was someone who made no small plans, even though we might say vocations were sparse and finances precarious. As he indicates in Romans 15, Paul’s intention was to plant churches all around the northern rim of the Mediterranean world, eventually going even to Spain—thus winning over the gentiles for Christ, a glorious accomplishment of God’s grace that he hoped would in turn convince all of Israel itself to accept Christ. Then Paul’s mission would be accomplished! Paul, of course, never saw this dream realized, but his ardent love of Christ and his consuming concern for the gentiles and his own beloved Jewish people kept the driving passion of his life fully alive.

## Paul’s intense commitment

Paul, as you know, was not an original or charter member of Jesus’ disciples; he was not even a Matthias, chosen late but still one of those who had walked with Jesus from the beginning, as Luke puts it in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul never forgot his second generation status or, even worse, his wrong-headed persecution of the Christian movement. He would forever remain in his own estimation as one “born out of due time.” But that did not take away from Paul’s passionate commitment to Christ and the Gospel.

Paul’s passion was undoubtedly a product, in part, of a naturally fiery temperament. No even-tempered phlegmatic would express in a public letter like Galatians the hope that those Christians who proposed circumcision for his gentile

converts would have the knife slip in their own case—or begin a letter to a prominent church with the address: “O stupid Galatians!” Paul, I fear, may not have been easy to live with; perhaps it is no accident that his ministry was primarily an itinerant one! The community he knew the best and where he lived for some time was Corinth—and we all know that Paul had his troubles with the Corinthians and they with him.

But it is equally clear that the sustaining fire of Paul’s passion came from the intensity of his commitment to Christ and the Good News of God. At one point in his life Paul makes to his community the startling confession: “Christ lives in me.” It was this belief that drove him in his ministry and from this came his preaching and his theology. It was the passion of Paul that led him to write letters whose imagery and force changed Christian consciousness forever. His letters were written in rapid, often tortured prose, letters so bursting with ideas that more than one scribe at a time had to take Paul’s dictation and even another inspired biblical author had to say, with some understatement, “There are things in the writings of our Brother Paul that are hard to understand” (see 2 Peter 3:16).

My point is that Paul’s ideas—his preaching, his writing, his theology, his teaching—were welded to his own passionate discipleship. Paul’s theology was not borrowed or trendy or merely speculative. Paul of Tarsus, pastoral theologian, derived his vision from the living soul of the church and his own passionate commitment to it. He was the recipient and responsible guardian of tradition: “I hand on to you what I first received.” But he also was able, in dialogue with his churches, to draw out a theological vision from the genuine Christian experience of his people: the church as the body of Christ in response to the factionalism of Corinth, a theology of weakness in the face of his and his Christians’ own experience of physical and spiritual limitation, a theology of a law-free Gospel because of his confidence in the religious experience of gentiles, a theology of a cosmic Christ triumphant over the cosmos because of the paralyzing fear of fates so prevalent in the Greco-Roman world.

The model is clear. Those of us who have been entrusted with the sacred responsibility of helping young Christians discern their call in life and their path to God would do well to pray for a small measure of the passion of Paul and to make sure that what we proclaim is linked to a burning commitment to discipleship and rooted in the experience of real people and a believing community.

But we need to note in particular that the very heart of Paul’s theology and his spirituality was linked to another

experience of passion, namely the passion of Jesus. For Paul the dying and rising of Jesus Christ was the reality that explained all reality, that revealed the true face of God. In the light of the passion, of the paschal mystery, Paul rethought and rediscovered the heart of his Jewish tradition. The God of Abraham was also the God of the Nations. The God of Jesus Crucified was revealed, not in the trappings of power and splendor, but in the marvel of what some humans counted as weakness: a life poured out for others.

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ Crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-25).

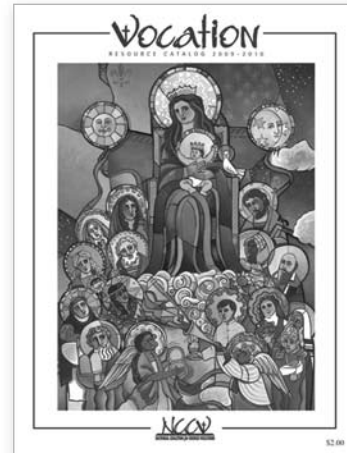
From this center Paul would contemplate everything. He would name love the heart of Christian life, as it was unconditional love that animated the Crucified Christ. The experience of limitation and weakness, as Paul himself experienced in his own mortal body, would find meaning in the crucified body of Jesus who gave himself for us. The Body of Christ that was the church would give greatest honor to its weakest and least honorable member because God had revealed himself to the world through a Crucified Messiah. And thus the Body of Christ was a crucified body in which the wounds were still visible. The apostolic sufferings and wrenching heartache Paul experienced in the course of his ministry, or that his communities experienced in their struggles and sufferings, were not in vain because the cross of Jesus had forever affirmed that through God’s grace, from death comes abundant life.

## Leader, non-possessive collaborator

I think all of us who work in the church today can learn something about apostolic leadership from Paul, too, and about the image of the church we need to project to those we serve. It does not take a reader of Paul’s letters very long to see that this was a man with a fairly robust ego. Paul was very conscious of his role as an “apostle of Jesus Christ” and cites it frequently. It marks the beginning and the conclusion of virtually every letter he wrote. When his apostolic authority was under attack—as it was in Galatians and 2 Corinthians—his response is vigorous and uncompromising.

Yet it would be a dreadful misunderstanding of Paul and his ministry to think of him (as has sometimes been the case)

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as some solitary colossus standing astride the early church or as a “lone ranger,” moving fearlessly and alone across the map of the Mediterranean world, planting the seed of the Gospel without dependence on or connection with others.

This image is false, and our evidence is Paul’s own testimony. One of the most remarkable and important insights we have gained into Paul in recent times is that he operated within an extraordinary network of co-workers. Paul did not shrink from the demands of leadership or the responsibility of authority, but he exercised that calling in a manner compatible with his own theology of the passion and of the community that belonged to Christ.

The famous concluding passage in Romans 16 is one of the best sources of evidence for this and has become one of my favorite New Testament texts. As Paul concludes this letter to a church he has never visited, but one that obviously had great importance to him, he adds a series of greetings to Christians at Rome that gives a breathtaking insight into

the range of his contacts and his non-possessive spirit. His greetings are testimony to the mobility and networking of the early Christians. He begins with “Phoebe, the deacon” (as Paul calls her, not “deaconess”), at Cenchreae, the port of Corinth, who must have been visiting Rome, a woman the Romans are urged to receive as a saint because she has been a helper and good friend to Paul. Then there are Prisca and Aquila, whom Paul calls my “co-workers in Christ Jesus who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of

Paul’s sense of collaboration is not simply a personal style, or a tactic imposed by necessity, but flows from the deepest experience of his faith and his theological convictions.

the gentiles give thanks.” He then names the Jewish Christian couple from Rome who had already moved to Corinth and formed a house church before Paul arrived and who made it possible for him to have any success in that major city of the empire. The list goes on, including Junia and Andronicus, another couple whom Paul calls “apostles” (throwing translators into a dither for centuries, leading them to call Junia “Junias,” even though this masculine form doesn’t exist in Greek). Junia and Andronicus were apostles whom Paul says were “in Christ” before him.

He greets Epaphroditus, the first convert to Christ in Asia. And then Paul warms to his topic:

Greet Mary who has worked very hard among you.  
Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, my co-worker. Greet the family of Aristobulus. Greet those wonderful workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother—who is also mother to me. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas. Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints. Yes and Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the Churches of Christ greet you.

Paul runs out of breath and out of room as this incredible list of earnest and personal greetings to friends and fellow workers pours out of him at the close of the letter. There are 29 Greek and Jewish names (10 of them women), drawn from nobility, freemen and slaves.

The facts about the abundance of Paul’s apostolic

contacts could go on and on. Paul apparently never traveled alone; he hands out the title “co-worker” liberally throughout his letters, and even his letters themselves are collaborative pieces, all but two of them are explicitly co-authored. But more important still, Paul’s sense of collaboration is not simply a personal style or a tactic imposed by necessity but flows from the deepest experience of his faith and his theological convictions. His collaboration comes from his vision of the Gospel, rooted ultimately in his image of the God who gathered all people, who was the God of Jews and gentiles. Paul’s conviction spills over into his consistently collaborative images of the church as a body of many members, as a profusion of gifts welded into one Spirit, as an array of many instruments and materials fashioned into one living temple of God. The building up of the community of the church was his restless, apostolic goal, and he knew that every gift, no matter how brilliant, was subordinate to the gift of charity and the bonding of the community.

Paul’s own theology of weakness put a check on the temptation to possessiveness about status or authority. Paul’s own evident physical disability, his wrong-headed persecution of the church early in his life, when he had been so sure of his convictions and his moral prowess—all of these experiences had taught Paul his own moral fragility and led him to find his strength, paradoxically, in his own weakness, because where he was weak, God was strong. Above all, Paul’s contemplation of the passion protected him from conceiving of himself or his authority in arrogant terms. Jesus, God’s suffering servant who gave his life so others might live, was the ultimate sign of how authentic authority was exercised.

That memory of Paul is needed now. We need confidence in our apostolic vocations, but we need to hold them in a non-possessive way. Collaboration with others in our ministry and our vision of the church is not a passing fad; nor can it be theological dressing for expediency. It is an expression of the Gospel. Paul knew that and lived it. I do not need to remind any of you, my brothers and sisters, that we, too, work in a church where more than ever we will need to work alongside others in deep mutual respect and with a common sense of purpose. This must be our approach if the church is to be renewed and our mission to the world sustained.

## Suffering apostle and man of hope

Allow me to cite one final characteristic of Paul. I am convinced from reading Paul’s letters that he was a man who suffered greatly from his ministry at the same time that it was



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the consuming passion of his life. Paul began his ministry with bold plans, some of them bordering on the audacious. As mentioned earlier, Paul lets us know in Romans 15 and through hints in other parts of his correspondence that his intent was to move around the rim of the Mediterranean world, planting Christian churches and so igniting the Roman world that eventually all the gentiles would turn to Christ, which in turn would stir the jealousy of the rest of Israel, with all of the Jews then turning to Christ and Christ, with Paul's assistance, finally handing the world triumphantly over to God.

Not bad! Paul's exuberance reminds me of the motto of a great city planner in Chicago: "Make no small plans!" But those wild apostolic hopes ran headlong into unyielding reality. Paul, for example, never seems to have anticipated the continuing existence of a non-Christian Judaism. And the fact that a majority of his fellow Jews did not have the kind of experience Paul had and come to accept Jesus as the Christ broke his heart. The passage at the beginning of Chapter 9 of the epistle to the Romans is one of the most poignant, incredible autobiographical passages ever:

I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kin by race. They are Israelites and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh is the Christ. God, who is over all, be blessed for ever. Amen.

Willing "to be cut off from Christ for the sake of his kinspeople"—can we imagine Paul saying that? Can we imagine the anguish that wrung that offer from his heart?

Paul's heart was broken not just by the dreams that never took flesh but by the constant drumfire against the few things he had been able to build. I think that Paul never saw his vision of a law-free Gospel for the gentiles fully accepted. Truth squads of other Christian leaders seemed to have stalked his steps, questioning his orthodoxy, turning the heads of his converts to a different understanding of the church, planting doubts about his apostolic authority.

Paul's anguish and frustration come to a rolling boil in a famous passage from 2 Corinthians 11. As if on some blue Monday, Paul's patience breaks, and out comes a torrent of frustration and pain, directed not at the leaders of the synagogue or at the threats of Roman officials but at his own

fellow apostles and the leaders of his own communities: "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ?" All right, he says, I will talk like a madman. I am a better one, with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. He writes:

"Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked;

a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?"

Paul puts his ear to the heaving chest of the world and decides that the moans and groans he hears coming from the children of God, and even from creation itself, are not death pangs but birth pains.

Ever ask someone on the wrong day how they are feeling—and they actually tell you?!

Paul was no plaster of Paris saint; no abstract role model. He lived at a time when his vision of the church was very much in doubt; I don't think he ever lived to see it secured. And there must have been nights in Corinth or Thessalonica, or Ephesus—surely in Jerusalem or during house arrest in Caesarea and Rome—when he wondered if he was on the wrong track after all—maybe thoughts like these have passed through your minds and hearts as you exercise your ministry and take stock of its results.

But, at the same time, Paul managed what every great pastoral leader has done. Paul held tightly to his hope. I love the passage in Chapter 8 of the Letter to the Romans. Paul the cosmic doctor seems to ease onto the examination table the body of humanity, this groaning mass of creation. As he reviews the drama of salvation, Paul puts his ear to the

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heaving chest of the world and decides that the moans and groans he hears coming from the children of God, and even from creation itself, are not death pangs but birth pains—the moans and groans of the Spirit leading all of the created world to God.

Paul never let go of his foundational experience of faith: the love of the Crucified Christ for him was the pledge of God's unbreakable covenant, of God's unceasing redemptive love for the world: "Can anything separate us from the love of God?" Paul asks.

It is a question wrung from the heart of a minister of the Gospel, of one called to mission, of an adult who has lived in the church from the inside and who still refuses to be undone by its scandals and frustrations, one who had lofty ideals of community but also knew the sad realities of divisions and conflicts, one, in effect, who knew the reality of suffering and yet nourished great hopes.

"Nothing," he says in the most soaring passage of his letters, "nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:38-39).

## Paul's enduring legacy

In the Church of Rome we know that two apostles are to be remembered. Both Paul and Peter ministered to that church; both died there in testimony to their faith; and the memories of both have formed our church's spirit. Peter's ministry was one of reconciliation and unity. Working from the vantage point of the Jewish Christian community of Jerusalem, Peter exercised his mission in keeping the pieces of the burgeoning community together. He was often dazed at the rapid movement of the Spirit as the Christian community pushed out in unanticipated ways beyond the boundaries of the Jerusalem church: Cornelius the Roman centurion seeking baptism at Caesarea; the Ethiopian eunuch searching the Scriptures on the road to Gaza; Greeks seeking baptism in Antioch of Syria. His role was to make connections, to insure continuity and peace within the church of Christ.

Paul, on the other hand, injected into that church a restive spirit of mission and a passion for bold ideas, the apostle of dramatic change and God's new possibilities. He was a champion for the freedom of God's great, world-embracing Spirit. He had great, even cosmic hopes that all of the gentile world would be ignited with faith and in the glow

of that flame, God's beloved Israel would warm to faith in Jesus. It was a vision that drove Paul all his life, from his first mysterious encounter with the Risen Christ in a moment of intense conversion, through moments of joy and perplexity as he planted his Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world, and into the final terrible moments of imprisonment and martyrdom. It was a vision he would never live to see fulfilled but would never relinquish. Paul had the marks of greatness that would characterize generations of Christians who would follow in his footsteps: teachers, apostles, missionaries, pastors, yes, even vocation directors—he sustained his hope in the face of great suffering. At the end of his life Paul may have had to lean on his sword, but he still held it firmly.

As ones called to a ministry that has its moments of joy, no doubt, but also its share of discouragement, frustration and solitariness, we might do well to remember Paul: passionate disciple of the Crucified Jesus and theologian of experience, one whose God-given invitation was nourished by others, a man confident in his apostolic call and identity but non-possessive in holding that treasure with others, a man open to new possibilities, one whose restless, bold dreams for the church brought him suffering but whose hope, rooted in faith, never dimmed.

A short time ago I was in Minneapolis to give a lecture at an assembly for Catholic school teachers, and the woman who led the prayer service at the close of the day reflected that in traditional societies women have often been assigned two very different tasks: midwifing and preparing bodies for burial. She said, without bitterness or rancor, that at times, in relationship to the church, she does not know whether she is preparing a body for burial or being a midwife. Is she preparing the body of someone she loves and reverences but whose life has come to an end? Or is she assisting at a birth of some wondrous child whom she does not yet know? I think all of us who live close to the church know what she means.

It is truly an incredible time, an auspicious time for anyone who seeks to live a profound Christian life in our culture—but how much more so for those who aspire to be ministers of the Gospel in the pattern of the Crucified Christ, from whose selfless death came abundant life for the world. ■

The themes and patterns that run through the Gospels are very much like the themes and patterns of vocational discernment.

# The Gospels and the journey to religious life

BY FATHER DONALD SENIOR, CP

*This is the second of two addresses given by Father Donald Senior, CP at the convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference in Louisville, KY in October 2008. The first address appears on page 8.*

**I**'D LIKE TO TURN NOW from a consideration of the life and ministry of Paul as a story of a profound Christian vocation and mission, to the Gospel literature.

A number of experiences have led me to see a profound symmetry between the deep structure of the Gospels themselves and the process of call, discernment and mentoring that makes up the process of accompanying someone on the path to religious life. I've been involved with a number of vocation-related groups and programs at Catholic Theological Union, including programs sponsored by NRVC, but also the Intercommunity Novitiate Program and the Institute for Religious Formation. I also have new member experiences from within my own religious community of Passionists, especially that of living in a formation community for the past 35 years or so.

I emphasize in my presentation to you this afternoon this symmetry between the Gospels and the quest for the Christian life for two reasons. First of all I hope it might be an encouragement to you. The ministry of vocational discernment that each of you does in different ways has a

fundamental harmony with the Gospel and the mission of Christ. It is not peripheral. Secondly I hope that this pattern of the Gospels and its relationship to the quest for God's will in one's life might also be used to encourage the young men and women you work with who are trying to discern their vocation.

## The Gospels and Christian vocation

Let's begin by looking at the purpose of the Gospels. We know that as narratives they were meant to be formative for the early Christian community. That is to say they are not archival documents, meant only to record for posterity the sayings and actions of Jesus and his first disciples. They do inform us a lot about Jesus and his teaching and his ministry. They do, in fact, inform us about first century Palestinian Judaism—more than any other documents we have. But their primary purpose was proclamation. They are “gospels”—good news—meant to inspire and inform the faith of those who encounter them both then and now. As John's Gospel reminds us, not everything the early community knew about Jesus was written into the Gospels, but those things that would lead us to believe in him as Son of God were included.

At the same time that the Gospels paint for us a portrait of Jesus, the Son of God, the revelation of the Father, the Word made Flesh—they also reveal to us what it means to follow in the way of Jesus. They tell what it means to be a disciple, one whose life is profoundly shaped by the teaching of Jesus and a living relationship with him as the Risen Christ. The Gospels reveal what it means to live in a community of faith, what it means to take up the mission to the world entrusted to us by the Risen Christ. Thus the experiences of the disciples of Jesus—their destinies and agonies—are

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meant to inform Christian life. Indeed we know these portrayals were themselves influenced by the experience of the Christian communities who treasured these sayings and narratives, put them into literary form, and brought them to their liturgy, prayer and preaching. No wonder, then, that the

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overall dimensions of the Gospel narrative as a whole can be loosely related to the fundamental movements of Christian life.

Let us first consider this symmetry on a macro-scale, and then we will focus on certain specific dimensions. Lest we miss it, of course,

the most fundamental aspect of all is the fact that each of the four Gospels is a story of Jesus Christ. He is the compelling figure who stands at the heart of each narrative—the Son of Man who is the compassionate healer who casts out evil and heals the world, the master teacher who draws on the beauty of the Torah and brings it to its fulfillment, the prophet who is the champion of God’s justice and brings nourishment and dignity to the poor, the Word made Flesh who reveals the unconditional love of God for all the world and who gives his life in an act of consummate friendship and love. Jesus is the one who binds together humanity as it was meant to be—in justice and compassion, not in enmity and violence. He is the one who sends his disciples out to teach and to heal and to overcome evil.

When all is said and done, the experience of religious life and the longing to be part of it cannot be reduced to finding community and stability in the midst of loneliness, or performing heroic service in the cause of justice, or living in a way that respects the fragility and sacredness of our created world, or loving the beauty of Christian worship and ritual. These motivations—as worthy as they are—will only be sustained if they are grounded in a fundamental love for the Jesus of the Gospels.

As the Gospels present the story of Jesus, despite the distinctive format of each—particularly John’s Gospel—there is a certain common pattern that can be related to our own Christian life. What happens to Jesus and his disciples happens to us.

The Gospels begin with the remote origins of Jesus, his family tree as it were. For Mark this is terse: the prophetic

figure of John the Baptist, one crying in the wilderness, establishes a connection with the longings of Israel for salvation. For Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ origins are deeply woven into those of Israel itself. Matthew presents this through genealogy and Jesus’ recapitulation of the great saga of Israel. Luke explores Jesus’ origins through the beautiful Jewish characters that surround the temple and welcome the child Jesus into life. John reaches back beyond the origin of time into the heart of God from which the Word springs forth to bring a message of redemptive love to the world. We, too, as well as every aspirant for religious life, bring a family history: a distinctive culture, dominant events that shaped our life and that of our family, grandparents and parents who have formed our history and deeply influenced our own being, echoes of triumph and goodness, wounds of weakness and abject failure. All of these mark our DNA; all of these influence our very being.

## Baptism, test and active ministry

For Jesus, baptism, especially in the Synoptic accounts, marks the beginning of his public ministry. It is immediately followed by a test of the depth and intensity of his commitment as Jesus—like Israel itself—steps out into the desert. For most Catholic Christians the experience of baptism takes place in infancy, without our awareness, but it is real nevertheless. Others spoke for us—our parents, our godparents, our pastor. And our being changed—we no longer belong to an individual or a clan but now are part of a people, the body of Christ. This is the inaugural grace, one that as adults we need to reclaim and intensify, marking a conscious and adult embrace of our identity as Christians, of our dignity as a member of the church, of our God-given destiny as a child of God, our responsibility to share in the mission of Jesus and his church for the life of the world.

That faith will be tested as we grow. In some instances it may grow cold or even be abandoned, and some of the candidates we encounter are only rediscovering the meaning of their baptism. Like Jesus, we need to go to the desert, to remember who we are, to put aside false lures and wrong paths, and to decide the direction of our life.

The body of the Gospels is taken up with describing the joys and perils of active ministry. Jesus is joined by a community; he sets out on a mission of healing and teaching. He pours out his life in giving to others: the demoniac in the synagogue of Capernaum; the woman with the hemorrhage who touched his cloak; Zaccheus perched in his tree; the

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Gadarene demoniac tormented and violent, living alone among the tombs; the daughter of Jairus brought back from the dead. The list seems endless. Jesus also feeds the hungry—drawing abundance out of few provisions and boundless generosity. He quickens the hearts of those who have lost hope. He portrays a God of boundless forgiveness. He preaches to the crowds; inspiring would be disciples. He reaches out to the strays, bringing them in. Now as then, the Gospel stories of Jesus' mission are filled with passion and life—capable of inspiring goodness in the human heart and drawing people to come and follow.

But the perils are enumerated, too. He encounters opposition to his prophetic ministry of justice, raised eyebrows at his association with the unsavory, miserly calculations that his mercy was too swift and too abundant, as with the woman in Simon's house. He encounters dullness of heart and lack of response. Jesus finds opposition that can not only dull the zest of one's heart but even be violent and kill. The Gospels do not succumb to romanticism or a sentimental portrayal of the Christian mission.

And at the heart of the Gospel story is the call to transformation and conversion. The tough wisdom is that following after Jesus means leaving some precious things behind, having to travel light in life without too much baggage or too many encumbering commitments to other things—even beautiful things like family ties and the joys of home and familiarity. The Gospels portray Jesus gently, steadily kneading like some lumpy dough the hearts of his disciples—making them open and malleable and perceptive of the truth. And then comes the shock of final opposition; of fierce resistance to good; of violence and rejection; the frightening specter of death that tears at the disciples' moral courage and scatters their fragile community into the night. And so the Passion comes bringing scandal, failure, betrayal—all the things we fear.

But the end of the Gospel story—our story as a Christian community—is not death but resurrection. New and abundant life heals our failures as Jesus' words to Peter on the shore of the sea: Do you love me? Restoration to discipleship and mission. And beyond that at life's end and world's end lies ascension to the heart of God, communion with God and with each other: all will be one. What happens to Jesus, the Gospels promise, happens to us.

This movement from remote origins, to birth in baptism, to maturation in ministry, and the final consummation in death and resurrection is the life cycle of the Gospels and is the life cycle of Christian life. But certain features of this

narrative and of what we might call this life cycle or life journey bear closer attention as particularly pertinent to the experience of the call and initial formation into religious life. These features also might illumine certain features of the Christian experience fundamental to religious life that also can have great importance in the ministry of inviting a new generation of Christians to consider this way of life as an expression of their discipleship.

In the Gospels the beginning of Christian life is presented as a "call"; an invasive gift which disconnects one from ordinary circumstances and leads one to a new and sometimes unexpected way of life.

## Christian life as a call

First of all we note in the Gospels that the beginning of Christian life is presented as a "call," an invasive gift which disconnects one from ordinary circumstances and leads one to a new and sometimes unexpected way of life.

Let us begin with those familiar yet haunting call stories found in all four of the Gospels and with similar echoes elsewhere in the New Testament. Right away it is clear that there is abundant material here. The notion of "call" is not peripheral to the Scriptures but fundamental to the Bible's understanding of human existence before God.

Who can forget in the opening chapters of Mark and Matthew's Gospels, those encounters by the Sea of Galilee? Fishermen Simon and Andrew casting their nets in the sea, James, Son of Zebedee and John his brother, sitting in their boat mending their nets—they have no inkling of what is about to happen to them, something that will change their lives forever. Jesus, walking by the sea, calls to them, "Come, follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mark 1:16-20). They drop their nets and leave their father and his workers behind in the boat where they had been sitting.

Then there is Capernaum, the border town on the frontier between the realm of Herod Antipas and Philip, where Jesus meets Levi, Son of Alphaeus sitting at his tollbooth. "Follow me," is the unadorned command. And Levi gets up, leaves his counter, and follows Jesus. That night, with his tax collector friends and other unsavory characters, Jesus dines in

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celebration, earning a sharp rebuke from the religious leaders. But Jesus does not flinch: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick do. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” (Mark 2:15-17).

In Luke’s Gospel we have the exquisite story of the call of Peter. Jesus’ magnetic power draws large crowds to the shore of the sea, thirsting to hear his words. Their eagerness presses

The life of discipleship begins not with a choice but with a call. It is Jesus who, either by majestic command or compelling allure, initiates the life of discipleship. His authority and his alone is the source of that call.

Jesus to the water’s edge where some fishermen are washing their nets, their boats now empty after a nighttime of futile fishing. Jesus steps into Simon’s boat and asks him to push a bit off from the shore—and in such a glorious pulpit Jesus of Nazareth preaches to the crowds fanned out along the shoreline of the cove in front of him. But

he is not through with Simon. His sermon finished, he asks Simon to cast out into the deep and to let down the nets for a catch. “Master,” Simon replies, “we have worked all night long and caught nothing. Yet at your word I will let down the net.” Such a catch it is—the nets on the point of breaking, the boat beginning to take water! Simon Peter, overwhelmed, falls down at Jesus’ knees, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When the boats straining with their cargo come to shore, Simon and his partners James and John leave everything and follow Jesus. (Luke 5:1-11).

John’s Gospel is different here, as with everything else. There is no command by the shore of the sea or at a tollbooth in Galilee but in the Judean desert. While John the Baptist preaches to his disciples, Jesus—the Son of God and the lamb destined for sacrifice—passes by like some haunting specter. “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the World,” acclaims the Baptist. As if caught in the beauty of his net, two of John’s disciples begin to follow after Jesus. Jesus turns and says to them, “What are you looking for?”—a question that echoes down the centuries like a distant clap of thunder. “Master, where do you live?” “Come and see.” And so begins a chain of allurements as Andrew returns to draw Simon Peter his brother to come and see what he has seen. And then Philip and then Nathaniel are also caught by the

mysterious power of Jesus (John 1:35-51).

There are many other stories, some with poignant variations. In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul, so sure of his own convictions, is knocked from his horse on the way to Damascus, blinded by the brilliance of the Risen Christ, called to be Christ’s chosen vessel even as he kicks against the goad. At the end of John’s Gospel, Peter’s call is renewed in what is perhaps the most exquisite story of all the New Testament: deflated disciples fishing listlessly on the shore of the sea of Galilee, a figure on the shore with a charcoal fire—someone unknown but hauntingly familiar—directions again on where to fish and once more an abundant catch, then the heart pounding recognition, Peter plunging into the sea and swimming ashore, a breakfast of bread and fish by the sea with the strain of joy and shame about to burst. And then comes the moment of reconciliation: “Simon Peter, do you love me more than these?” The threefold question heals the breach of a threefold betrayal. “Feed my lambs, feed my sheep.” Discipleship restored; the call renewed.

And could we forget the woman of Nazareth, Mary? A voice from God on the lips of an angel calls her to a new and startling life, a life of unexpected abundance and wrenching suffering, a call to bring God’s own life into the world in a manner of unimaginable beauty and daring. To this call, she says yes: “Be it done unto me according to your word.”

Not all the calls were heeded. A rich young man whom Jesus loves turns away because the cost is too high. For a scribe seeking the truth about the commands of the law, the call is still a distance away—“You are not far from the kingdom of God,” Jesus says to him (Mark 12:34). For Nicodemus who dares to come to Jesus only by night, only the shattering loss of death will move him to overcome his fears and claim the body of the Crucified Christ (John 19:39).

What an ensemble of strange and wonderful encounters. We might note the fundamental qualities of these stories:

The stories make abundantly clear that the life of discipleship begins not with a choice but with a call. It is Jesus who, either by majestic command or compelling allure, initiates the life of discipleship. His authority and his alone is the source of that call. It comes unexpectedly and without warning.

And most of the stories also make clear that the call is first and foremost a call to follow after Jesus. The focal point is the person of Christ—that remains the heart and soul of all Christian experience. And we should note the precision of the words and the indelible character of the image. The disciples follow after Jesus, surely not ahead of him and not even

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alongside him. It is an enduring image repeated over and over in the Gospels: Jesus is out in front of his community; the disciples follow behind, often in confusion and fear.

But there is something more in the content of the call. “I will make you fish for people.” The disciples who are called to follow Jesus also will share in his mission of redemption. They will be plunged into the work of transforming Israel, of renewing the covenant community, of establishing the kingdom, of healing and exorcism and teaching just as Jesus did. And their destiny would be to encounter the withering power of alienation and death in Jerusalem just as he would.

### **Calls usher in change and surprise**

And, the stories make clear, the lives of those called would never be the same. They leave their boats and their families and their tollbooth. Once the call was heard, their lives fundamentally change and new allegiances are required.

There is also a note of the preposterous in virtually all of the biblical call stories in both the Old and New Testaments. Moses encounters God in the burning bush at Horeb, the mountain of God, hesitant and fearful as God anoints him to lead the people out of slavery. “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the Lord says to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak” (Exodus 4:10-12).

The calls of the prophets have similar absurdities. Amos of Tekoa is dragooned by God into a powerful mission of justice. “I am no prophet,” he says, “nor a prophet’s son. I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. And the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, “Go, and prophesy to my people Israel.” And so he went. Jeremiah is tongue-tied, hesitant—“I am only a boy,” he tells God. “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy,’” God thunders, “for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 1:6-8). Isaiah himself, standing in the portals of the temple, is overwhelmed by a sense of God’s presence and his own unworthiness. He cries out, “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips....” A seraph purifies his troubled heart with a burning coal from the temple brassier, and then the voice of God penetrates the prophet’s dread: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

His anguish put aside, the prophet speaks: “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6).

And so it would be with all of the great characters who form the biblical saga, men and women—unlikely vessels of God—hesitant and awkward, yet called by God to take up their mission on behalf of the people. The call of God is often disruptive, breaking into ordinary lives and asking ordinary people to bear a mission of human transformation and to experience profound and sometimes wrenching change in order to be faithful to that divine summons. And nowhere in the Christian Bible is this more apparent than in the Gospel portrayal of the disciples of Jesus. None of the Gospels portray these first ones

None of the Gospels portray these first ones to respond to the call of Jesus as ideal types. Despite their initial response to drop everything and follow him, they prove to be awkward, slow to learn, often confused.

to respond to the call of Jesus as ideal types. Despite their initial response to drop everything and follow him, they prove to be awkward, slow to learn, often confused. And surely one of the most astounding features of the Gospel literature is that it does not hesitate to portray the disciples at their worst: impeding Jesus’ mission, objecting to his destiny in Jerusalem, and when the terrible threat of the passion fell over Jesus’ ministry, they deserted him, denied him, and even betrayed him. Only after the death of Jesus, only after the power of God brings the balm of Gilead to cure death itself, are the disciples reinstated in their mission and their betrayal of Jesus reconciled. Transformation indeed.

### **Acceptance of failings among the called**

There is profound Gospel wisdom here. For ourselves, first of all, we need to recognize and accept in peace our failings and weakness. We can be repentant, certainly, but also live in serenity with the realization of God’s embrace of our humanness. And the same holds true for those to whom we minister. Of course there must be proper qualifications and fundamental spiritual and psychological health in those who are called to public ministry in the church. But we must also be patient with their weaknesses and sometimes slow response to the call of the Spirit.

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Another aspect of the Gospels that is important to consider is that the master/disciple or the mentoring relationship is a privileged mode of Christian instruction. The first disciples of Jesus are invited to “follow him.” The invitation is not first and foremost to learn a trade or to master a body of knowledge but to learn from Jesus the

The Gospel stories alert us that one not only has to be attentive to God’s call but also ready to leave something or someone behind in order to be free to follow Jesus.

meaning of one’s life and destiny, to be formed in the profound values of his life. Those values include a deep and passionate relationship with God, whom one can call “abba,” Father; a way of praying that is in the pattern of Jesus’ own prayer; a sense of compassion for those in need; a fearless sense of prophetic justice,

the kind that enabled Jesus to speak the truth in the face of oppression and falsehood; the courage of Jesus that led him to set his face toward Jerusalem.

## Themes of journey, conversion, perception

Discipleship in the Christian tradition has a strong personal quality, one reflected in the mentor relationship that we know is so important for young Christians today who seek to find God’s call in their lives. You know this well in your own ministry of working with potential candidates for religious life or other forms of service. The time and energy spent in listening, in offering wisdom, in accompanying someone who wants to respond to a call—this has strong roots in the Gospel, indeed in the very relationship of Jesus with those he first called.

There is a sense of journey to the process of vocational discernment, and it is not by accident that the most pervasive biblical symbol for describing the life of faith is that of the journey. All of Israel’s lengthy history is cast as a long and often tortuous journey of faith: from the first stirrings of Abraham’s trek into the pastures of Canaan, through the exodus from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land, and from the wrenching experience of exile to a muted and hope-filled return to the land of Judah. And so, too, is the life and mission of Jesus cast as a long journey, beginning in the bursting energy of his ministry in Galilee, and then

the ominous and purposeful journey to Jerusalem where he would meet his destiny in death and resurrection. The Gospels are clear that this journey of Jesus and his disciples captures the spirit of the Christian experience of faith. Luke is most explicit—the first name given to the church is the people of the journey. Response to God’s call is not an instantaneous or static reality but one that unfolds over time and one that must endure the rigors of the march to Jerusalem, a journey that often involves loss, fatigue and failure. How true this is for you who have watched the long maturation process of someone considering a religious vocation. The Gospels never portray the life of discipleship in ideal terms or as a static reality achieved once and for all. No, it is a life-long journey with many twists and turns in the road to God and fullness of life.

The metaphor of journey as a description of the experience of Christian discipleship also reminds us of the need for freedom and the meaning of religious poverty. In the Gospels on more than one occasion, the would-be disciples of Jesus are challenged to subordinate family ties and abundance of possessions to the call of the Gospel and the ability to follow Jesus, the Son of Man who has nowhere to lay his head. Disciples must be free to move where God calls them, to be on the road, as it were, for the sake of the mission of Jesus. The endpoint of the Christian journey, as the Gospels make clear, is not simply Jerusalem, the holy city, but indeed the face-to-face encounter with the living God.

The biblical call stories and the metaphor of “journey” both remind us that responding to God’s call requires conversion and lifelong personal transformation. Do you remember the story of Abraham’s encounter with God at the northern shrine of Schechem in Genesis 17? We should not forget Abraham’s laugh in the crook of his elbow. In Genesis 18 is the encounter with the three mysterious visitors under the oak tree at Mamre—and Sarah’s laugh behind the tent flap. After all, how will a body that is as good as dead give life to others? The visitor replies: “Is anything too wonderful for God?”

It is a question that should press upon us now, surely. The Gospel stories alert us that one not only has to be attentive to God’s call, but also ready to leave something or someone behind in order to be free to follow Jesus. Damp nets. A confused father. A tax collector’s booth. Memories of failure. A tired body. Competing obligations. The tug of family and possessions. Fear of the unknown and untried. Sometimes the burden to be shed is massive. I think now of Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee during that breakfast



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with the Risen Christ. Peter had to come to grips with the fact that he had publicly denied, yes *betrayed*, the one he loved, the one who had given every ounce of meaning to his life. “But, Lord, you know that I love you . . .” The words are full of heartbreak, but they had to be said before the apostle could be reinstated. Paul, too, had to put behind him his cocksure understanding of God’s ways, a surety that had led him to persecute the church of God. He finally had to see himself not as a super apostle but as one “born out of due time,” a frail earthen vessel carrying God’s treasure. Only then could Paul be free to bring the Gospel to the world.

The Gospels frequently use the language of “perception” to describe this conversion of heart and mind. In fact, as you may know, the Greek term in the Gospel for “repentance” or change of heart is usually *metanoia*—whose root meaning refers not first and foremost to repentance in the form of sorrow for one’s sins, or for conversion of heart—but, rather, changing one’s mind—*nous*—changing one’s way of seeing the world. The Gospels abound with metaphors of perception: “seeing” “hearing” “understanding.” Jesus challenges his disciples: Do you have eyes and do not see? Do you have ears and do not hear? Let those with ears to hear, hear.

Attentiveness, seeing the world and our lives through the eyes of faith—this is the dynamic of life-long conversion suggested in the Gospel. It is what those who have the ministry of vocational discernment are asked to support and engender in those entrusted to them. The formative process—from the first moment one begins to accompany a young Christian attempting to discern God’s call in his or her life—to the moments of decision and formal entrance into a new way of life and beyond—all of this can, in Gospel terms, be thought of as “conversion of heart and mind,” as an illumination by the Spirit of God to seeing things as God intends us to see them.

## Blend of compassion and respect

One of things that has struck me about the teaching of Jesus is the extraordinary blend of compassion and respect that marks his relationship to his disciples. Perhaps the best example of this demeanor is found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel, which is recognized as a distillation of Jesus’ authentic teaching on discipleship. The sermon begins with a scene of gathering the poor, sick and disabled from all points of the compass. This is not a crowd of strong, snappy people. And the presentation of the sermon ends in the same way: Jesus comes down from the mountain and encounters

people desperate for healing. Certainly this is not a first century theological seminar.

In that setting of compassion Jesus addresses his disciples—who themselves are characterized as people of “little faith” who are confused and doubtful even to the very end of the Gospel story. Yet Jesus truly believes they have a capacity for heroic virtue. He believes that God has made them with a capacity for forgiveness, for integrity, for honest speech, for use of sexuality that is not demeaning or exploitative, for life-long bonds of love in marriage, for the capacity even to love their enemies and thereby heed a call to create community across the boundaries of culture, race and economic standing. These concepts are not presented as impossible ideals or as ways to reveal the flaws of his audience. Jesus seems to believe that these children of God can truly be complete as God is complete.

This belief has ongoing importance today. So many studies of young adult Christians indicate that they look for challenge from their faith and from our preaching, that they themselves, although weak too, want to be inspired by the demands of faith and service. It’s important that we keep both reins in our hands: that we have compassion for human weakness and failure, that we have patience as people develop and move through their journey of faith, but also that we reveal to young adults the strength of the Gospel call, the profound beauty of its values, its expectation of heroic action, its strong challenge to aspects of our culture.

Religious life in its origins and throughout the centuries has been a call to live the Christian life in a public and heroic fashion, to forge communities of faith and hope and service that can be credible witnesses to a world that often does not believe any of this is possible.

## Paschal mystery encompasses all

The wager of this presentation is that there is a deep

Attentiveness, seeing the world and our lives through the eyes of faith—this is the dynamic of life-long conversion suggested in the Gospel. It is what those who have the ministry of vocational discernment are asked to support and engender in those entrusted to them.

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symmetry between the very pattern of the Gospels in their portrayal of Jesus and his disciples and the ministry of vocational discernment. There are coinciding patterns in the attentiveness to family origins, the experiences of baptismal grace drawn upon anew, the call to discipleship, and the unfolding of the life of discipleship as a journey of faith. That journey involves a discernment of God's presence in one's life and a challenge to live one's life heroically—even as one is aware of one's own weakness and failure—committing to service and community and a life of credible witness to the world. All of these patterns and impulses of the Gospel are impulses of Christian life in its deepest sense and, therefore,

We find our ultimate purpose and meaning in the God who loves us and called us into life and gives us our vocation. Our role is to remind God's people who they truly are and to whom they ultimately belong.

they are the grace notes of your ministry of accompanying young Christians as they seek religious life for themselves.

Underneath the various components of Christ's life as portrayed in the Gospels, there is one fundamental mystery that gives meaning and coherence to it all—the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

The paschal mystery is ground zero, the zenith point, the convergence of all meaning from a Christian perspective. To move from limitation, struggle, weakness and mortality to abundance, strength, freedom and unending life—that powerful current that characterized the life of Jesus Christ is, in the astounding wager of Christian faith, the promised destiny of us all.

Jesus embodied the paschal mystery in his death and resurrection. Paul knew this was the heart of the Gospel, and he proclaimed it to the gentile world. This Easter message of hope needs to pulsate through all of our ministry to Christians who are seeking God's will for themselves. First and foremost, as Christians we are people of hope, people of the resurrection. We believe fiercely that God will not abandon us or our world, come what may. And, therefore, a life lived for God and for God's world will never be in vain.

Allow me to conclude with a biblical notion that has been running through my mind these past few weeks as I prepared for the honor of speaking with you at this convocation. Like

so many others, my mother died of Alzheimer's and when our family was struggling with her illness and its terrible progress, I came across a powerful book that was a great consolation for me. It was entitled *Forgetting Whose We Are*, and the subtitle revealed its force—"Alzheimer's and the love of God." It was written by a Methodist minister, David Keck, who was also a biblical scholar. His mother had contracted the disease when she was only 57, and the experience of his family compelled him to think about the Gospel and this strange disease. He noted how Alzheimer's disease strikes at values we hold most dear in our society: our autonomy, our sense of self, our sense of identity and belonging—all of this is lost as the disease takes away one's memory and even one's personal identity. What, he asks, is the meaning of the Gospel for someone who sits on the side of the bed and cannot remember his or her own name or recognize the faces of loved ones?

Strangely, he notes, there are some Gospel lessons to be learned. First of all, the experience of Alzheimer's reminds us that none of us are as autonomous as we think we are; we all depend on others more than we sometimes want to admit; and all of us enter into life and leave life fully dependent on others. And, above all, Alzheimer's reminds us how difficult it is to remember. We have all kinds of problems with our individual and collective memories: repressed memories, distorted memories, etc. A whole industry takes depositions and tries to get memories of past events to concur, and it is always difficult to do so.

David Keck points out that in a religious sense, too, our memories can be faulty and we can forget who we truly are. In some ways that is the whole purpose of the Scriptures for Israel and the church—to tell the vital stories and to hand on the vital teachings that remind us we belong to God and there we find our meaning and ultimate destiny. The liturgy, too, is in a way an attempt to remember: recalling the great acts of our salvation and its meaning for who we are before God. We remember not for the sake of the past but for the sake of the future.

In a certain way, the church and its traditions and liturgy perform the task of the caregiver to the person who has Alzheimer's. Faithful caregivers continue to groom and care for the persons they love even when those who suffer the disease are no longer able to remember who they are or to whom they belong.

All of us are capable—even when our health is intact—of forgetting who we truly are before God and whose we are, that we find our ultimate purpose and meaning in the God who loves us and called us into life and gives us our vocation. Like

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the caregiver, our role is to remind God's people who they truly are and to whom they ultimately belong. It means we have to treat all people with deep respect and reverence, even when they do not recognize their own God-given dignity and purpose. Even when they forget that food and possessions and resources are ultimately a gift of God to be shared by all, we will not forget. And likewise, if for a time the church itself seems confused or forgetful about the ideals and beauty of its mission or the character of its priesthood or the meaning of the call to consecrated life or the grace of the lay vocation in the church, our work, like the devoted caregiver, is to continue to bring forward the best of the church's ideals and to invite God's people to respond. The people we serve may only have a dim awareness of who they are as Christians, of what God is calling them to. We can be the instruments of

God, God's caregivers, helping dim realizations become fresh and life-giving.

Keck adds one important note—one with which I will conclude. When all is said and done, the Bible views God as the one who does not forget, even if everyone else does. Recall the exquisite words of Isaiah 49: "Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.' But, says the Lord, can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See I have written your names on the palms of my hands."

God will not forget us, even now. That is the source of our hope and our peace as we continue our work on behalf of the church. ■

Many religious communities stand at a threshold. This is a sacred time for listening carefully to God's call and—despite risk and uncertainty—daring to cross over in hope.

# Inviting thresholds: how communities might respond to shifting times

BY SISTER MARIA CIMPERMAN, OSU

IT IS A GIFT AND PRIVILEGE to be with you, to ponder, engage and learn from and with one another. Thank you for this invitation.<sup>1</sup> This conference theme, “Called by One, Invited by Many” is apt, for your ministry is to walk with people who are hearing an invitation from the One. As members, leaders, formation ministers and associates, but most particularly as vocation ministers, you represent some of the many people inviting women and men to discern the call to religious life, in your congregation, for the church, world and all of creation. As vocation ministers you journey with women and men discerning a call, walking with them to and across significant thresholds in their lives. You also walk to and across thresholds with your congregations. Yours is a noteworthy, creative and poignant worldview. You see some of what it is that men and women in discernment will be part of. You see it through their eyes, with their promise and energy, as well as with your lens as a member of your congregation. You are at the threshold of who we are and who we are becoming in religious life. This perspective is not limited to you, but it is particular to you. You have an opportunity to see and hear keenly. Thank you for this.

Today I would like to name our space in religious life more particularly as a *threshold space*, a very sacred space even in its seeming ordinariness. I invite us to ponder together the invitation of thresholds. Thresholds today invite all of us,

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members and inquirers, indeed all of religious life. Thresholds are also sacred spaces in our Christian tradition.

This presentation is offered in three movements. First we consider what a threshold is and what brings us to a threshold in religious life. In the second movement we spend some time at the threshold and ponder the questions that meet us there, as well as the gifts present there. In the third movement I suggest some of what we might find across that threshold.

In the midst of this presentation we will have conversations and a few stops along the way. A longing for meaningful conversation is a call we hear from a number of our younger and newer members, and so I look forward to our conversations and ponderings.

## Movement 1: Inviting thresholds

The genesis of “threshold” as a central metaphor for conversation about religious life today came from an experience I had in Ireland while working with a congregation on the call of religious life today. As it was my first visit to Ireland, the group wanted me to see some of the beauty of the land. So on a free day some of us embarked on a few adventures. Toward dusk, we came across an outdoor space that included an threshold, a sacred circle and a holy well.<sup>2</sup> I found myself “caught” at the threshold. Even before it was named as such, I felt I knew the space and that it held infinite and vast layers of meaning.

I find “threshold” to be an apt description of our times, and particularly of our time in religious life. This is a threshold time. Religious life is at a threshold moment. In the quiet I think we sense this; and the invitation to be attentive, reverent and responsive to these moments is real. Something is shifting in “the life,” and while I think we were at impasses some time ago, something is moving again.<sup>3</sup> My hope is

that during our time together engaging inviting thresholds, together we can attend to some of the movements and moments and see, hear and sense where the Spirit leads us.

In addition, although we come to thresholds always as individuals, this is a particular time for communally attending the thresholds and their invitations. (In the second and third movements I will focus most particularly on the communal threshold invitations and experiences.)

We begin by opening up the word and concept of threshold. There is so much to a threshold! A threshold can be a doorway, an entrance from which you can enter or leave a building or room. It is a doorsill. It can be a brink, a region marking a boundary. A threshold can also be a starting point for a new experience or state of life.<sup>4</sup> It is all of this; yet there is so much more to a threshold! Within our tradition it is a sacred space. Our Scriptures speak of thresholds in terms of pathways, entrances, doorways, crossings and more.<sup>5</sup>

A particularly beautiful and rich description comes from the late spiritual writer John O'Donohue.

It remains the dream of every life to realize itself, to reach out and lift itself up to greater heights. A life that continues to remain on the safe side of its own habits and repetitions, that never engages with risk of its own possibility, remains an unlived life. There is within each heart a hidden voice that calls out for freedom and creativity. We often linger for years in spaces that are too small and shabby for the grandeur of our spirit. Yet experience always remains faithful to us. If lived truthfully and generously, it will always guide us toward the real pastures.

Looking back along a life's journey, you come to see how each of the central phases of your life began at a decisive threshold where you left one way of being

and entered another. A threshold is not simply an accidental line that happens to separate one region from another. It is an intense frontier that divides a world of



Sister Maria Cimperman, OSU

feeling from another. Often a threshold becomes clearly visible only once you have crossed it. Crossing can often mean the total loss of all you enjoyed while on the other side; it becomes a dividing line between the past and the future. More often than not, the reason you cannot return to where you were is that you have changed; you are no longer the one who crossed over. It is interesting that when Jesus cured the blind man, he instructed him not to go back into the village. Having crossed the threshold into vision, his life was no longer to be lived in the constricted mode of blindness; new vision meant new pastures.<sup>6</sup>

We know this experience. Once we see differently, we cannot *not* see. The vision moves us to the next place. It is good to take a few moments to remember and name those moments when something within us shifted, when we found ourselves in a new place, when we left one way of being and entered another. We have all experienced this, and we share this with each person who inquires about religious life.

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We share this with each person who hears God's call, God's invitation to know oneself as beloved and loving. This is an exceedingly wide community!

I invite you now to take a few moments to remember one such moment. This moment may be in religious life. It may have been an encounter in nature or with particular people. Take a few minutes to remember and name those moments when something within you shifted, when you found yourself in a new place, when you left one way of being and entered another. Ponder and remember this....

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These are the tender moments when we hear God's voice, encounter God's love. Once we hear it and respond, something changes. We never can get enough of it. We thirst, for we've had a taste. We come to see all as connected. We have a sense that, "You, O God, are in this place. Your Presence fills it."<sup>7</sup> We do not forget these moments. They remind us where we most deeply belong and how we most deeply belong.

## Called to be hopeful

Each age also has its own way of naming this call. Each epoch teaches us more about God in yet more ways. In her recent book, *Quest For The Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, Sister Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ writes that Christian faith today does not believe in a new God, but in finding in new situations the presence of God that is there.<sup>8</sup> Each time teaches us more about God. This does not mean we ask God to be present in our new situations. It means we ask to be present, to be present to God, in these new situations, in these our times. In this way of being we find God in all.

We come to this space, this sense of God in all, with great hope. It is with hope that we see the world. People joining us usually see the world with great hope, too. We want to be part of God's new creation. We see the joy in God's creation and revel in our interconnections with all. There is great hope in this space of deep connection. We also see the pain present in the world, and as we seek to respond to the pain around us, we see in hope a virtue we need ever more deeply.<sup>9</sup> The call here is not to optimism but to hope.

Father Anthony Gittins, CSSp, offers helpful distinctions:

Often confused with optimism, hope needs to be clearly distinguished from it. Optimism (and its shadow, pessimism) is a disposition toward or judgment

of a view of reality that is partial. Strictly, the optimist chooses to acknowledge only the evidence that supports a positive view; more informally, optimists weigh the evidence and judge that the positive is preponderant. But optimism (and pessimism) is essentially a quality or predisposition that depends on human reason. It is a rational virtue or quality.

Hope is very different. Though not irrational, it is essentially a theological virtue, a sibling of faith and love. It is focused, not on external reality or hard facts but on God, God's justice, and God's faithfulness. Hope endures, not because life seems good or is the way we would have chosen it, but because we are committed to the God who...calls us to believe, even against prevailing evidence, and all appearances notwithstanding.... Gustavo [Gutierrez] once said that there are two kinds of people. First, those who go into a situation and then carefully assess the evidence, on the basis of which they then declare whether or not there is any hope (and perhaps whether or not they are optimistic). By contrast, said Gutierrez, there are Christians! Christians are different because they do not look for or conclude that there is any hope: they are themselves bearers of hope. Therefore, wherever there is a believer, there is hope. And wherever a Christian encounters a situation without hope, the very presence of the believer transforms it now into a situation of hope!<sup>10</sup>

Further on, Gittins writes, "Hope, for Christians, is simply non-negotiable: it is a basic requirement of the person of faith, of the person who claims to believe in God's promises."<sup>11</sup>

Rooted in God's love and seeing God's call among those with great needs, our founders and foundresses are certainly men and women of hope, not optimism. Deep hope. Hope moves us to the places where hope is desperately needed. As women and men religious we find our calling in the places where hope is seemingly absent. We know we cannot do this alone. Everything in creation reminds us of our interconnection, and so we seek others with whom to share this life of seeking, creating, being part of God's creation. This brings individuals, communities and congregations together.

The women and men who find us are looking for a way to be this life in the world, and community naturally makes sense to them. As one new member recently shared at a gathering, "I see community as a manifestation of the reign of God. This is what I came to be part of. Not community for

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its own sake but as part of God's reign." How hopeful this is! I wonder if we dare say the same about our communities? This new member's statement was not a conclusion but a commencement.

People joining religious life today are aware, to varying extents, of the challenges of religious life. At the same time they see in congregational religious life and in community life not impasse but an invitation in this moment, at this time, at the threshold of religious life—and they seek to give all, risk all, for God's mission. They offer and open themselves in love.

Is this different from the early days of probably all of our congregations? Probably not. Most congregations didn't begin with even as much as we have at this moment. Women and men joining today are responding to the same God who called each of us. They come to us and with us to this threshold time in religious life, cognizant of numbers, sponsorships and finances, but these are not their issues. This is where hope comes in. We only lean into what we believe is possible. Our newer members see so much as possible.

We also offer many stories and realities of where in mission, what was once impossible, we have "possibilitized"—a term the liberation theologians have coined so powerfully. People entering religious life come with us to be community and to witness to God's mission now. They see in religious life a particular way to be community, which Father Richard Gula, S.S. describes beautifully as: "a way of discipleship involving a personal relationship with Jesus under the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the community of believers to bring about a world marked by justice and peace."<sup>12</sup>

We, too, seek to participate in God's mission. Our congregations were and are continually formed by this desire. So, too, now new members cross a threshold and join us on the journey. The journey for them is now a communal one, a congregational one.

In fact the communal aspect is important for both new members and vowed members. Those of us already in religious life may go about our personal and communal lives quite well for some time, and then slowly or suddenly find that new thresholds beckon. Though thresholds can invite both personally and communally, the emphasis here is on us. It is essential to note that the inviting thresholds in religious life today are not only individual but also communal.

We find ourselves at moments that begin to ask more of us, that beckon. As we are attentive we find ourselves at thresholds (not impasses). Something is calling us to see and be in yet another way and to seek to be present to God here too, even if it's unfamiliar territory.

## Movement 2, At the threshold

We are invited to the thresholds today—by the One who called us and by the many we are within God's creation. If we are in religious life for any time at all, we begin to ask questions; and each time has particular questions.

O'Donohue reminds us that, "A threshold is a significant frontier where experience banks up; there is intense concrescence. It is a place of great transformation."<sup>13</sup>

We will find both our restlessness and our energy here. We also hear that the word threshold "was related to the word thresh, which was the separation of the grain from the husk or straw when oats were flailed.... To cross a threshold is to leave behind the husks and arrive at the grain."<sup>14</sup>

We find ourselves at threshold moments when the questions arise and we know it is time to answer them with our lives. Sometimes thresholds are thrust upon us out of crises. In my own congregation the 1980 murder in El Salvador of Sister Dorothy Kazel, OSU<sup>15</sup> (as well as Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke and lay missionary Jean Donovan) and then Sister Joanne Marie Mascha's 1995 murder were such thresholds. Likewise Sister Dorothy Stang's death in 2005 offers a threshold moment for her congregation, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.<sup>16</sup> I am certain you can name many other thresholds.

Other times thresholds come out of living a reflective life. In an interview before the General Congregation Chapter in which he was named Father General of the Jesuits, Adolfo Nicolás mentioned among his hopes for the Chapter:

I have a feeling, still imprecise and difficult to define, that there is something important in our religious life that needs attention and is not getting it. We have certainly been diligent in addressing our problems whenever we have seen them.... But the uneasiness in the Society and in the Church has not disappeared. The question for us is: Is it enough that we are happy with our life and are improving our service and ministry? Isn't there also an important factor in the perception

People joining religious life today are aware, to varying extents, of the challenges of religious life. At the same time they see ... not impasse but an invitation.

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of people (*vox populi*) that should drive us to some deeper reflection on religious life today? How come we elicit so much admiration and so little following? Thus, one of my hopes is that in GC35 we begin a process of dynamic and open reflection on our religious life that might begin a process of re-creation of the Society for our times, not only in the quality of our services, but also and mostly in the quality of our personal and community witness to the Church and the World.<sup>17</sup>

The questions continue. Sister Mary Whited, Precious Blood Sister and current president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), asked at the recent LCWR conference:

How do we attend to this moment in the life of our congregations and our leadership conference? How do we “midwife” religious life into a future that is unfolding even as we assemble? How do we encourage our members to hold on to what is needed and to let go of what is not essential so that we are freer to climb? Can we risk conversing about the hopes and fears that stir in our hearts? Are there other mountains we need to be climbing? Are the mountains we are scaling even worth the climb?<sup>18</sup>

At the thresholds, when we finally arrive, we find ourselves asking lots of questions. It is in the silence, in the quiet, that the most powerful questions emerge. We hear from David Whyte in one of his poems.

SOMETIMES

Sometimes  
if you move carefully  
through the forest,

breathing  
like the ones  
In the old stories,

who could cross  
a shimmering bed of leaves  
without a sound,

you come  
to a place  
whose only task

is to trouble you  
with tiny  
but frightening requests,

conceived out of nowhere  
but in this place  
beginning to lead everywhere.

Requests to stop what  
you are doing right now,  
and

to stop what you  
are becoming  
while you do it,

questions  
that can make  
or unmake  
a life,

questions  
that have patiently  
waited for you,

questions  
that have no right  
to go away.<sup>19</sup>

### Questions for Reflection

1. What questions have patiently waited for you?
2. What are the questions, those tiny but frightening requests, that have no right to go away?
3. In religious life, what are these questions?
4. In your congregation, what are these requests?

(A suggestion: I encourage you to take some minutes to ponder and write down your thoughts. After quiet time, in small groups, share your questions by simply reading them aloud. Do not comment or in any way try to answer the questions. Allow a moment of silence after each person has spoken. If there is a desire to hear each person's questions again, please do so. Listen deeply. Then begin the discussion.)

### Threshold invitations: calls and cries

At the thresholds we find many questions to sift and sort,



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like chaff from husk. We bring who we are and who we are becoming to these questions at the threshold.

Our newer members join us at the thresholds. They come, with their humanity, to religious life with fresh eyes. Having recently crossed a threshold of their own with desire and freedom and hopes, they come to our congregations because they see a common vision and hope, and they desire to join their hopes with ours. Threshold questions are familiar and even welcome for them.

Together we find ourselves at these thresholds, these sacred moments, and they require both awareness and reverence.

If a threshold is a significant frontier where experience banks up, where there is intense concrescence, what do we find at the thresholds? (Note: each of us and our congregations are different, so I invite you to see where you and your congregation fit here. I particularly invite you to consider these questions as a congregation.)

At thresholds we find the following gifts: invitations from the many; communal discernment; *disponibilidad*; tests or temptations. First, let's look at the invitations—the calls and cries from the many. Here we must be attentive and listen deeply. In the Millennium Development Goals put forth by the United Nations, we can hear the people who embody these efforts—the hungry, those without education or health care, women and children. Our creation cries out in the midst of pollution and misuse. In this nation immigrant communities cry out, our cities and rural areas cry out. Our world cries out in disease, and at the dis-ease with which governments legislate and care for the common good and particularly for the increasingly common poor and marginalized. Our spiritual hungers cry out—hungers for meaning, for belonging, for tables of welcome and full participation. We hear cries for justice, for peace, for a way of living and believing that makes a difference for good in this world and universe. I acknowledge that some will find these calls overwhelming, but there are always some, and often newer members, who will find these calls an opportunity to love more deeply, who will see possibility and hope where others will not.

Among the invitations from the many we must also listen for the cries that may be within our own houses, communities, and even congregations. Within communities we may hear the cry for deeper meaning, for deeper and life-generating living. From our newer members, we may hear: How can I live more deeply than I did before joining religious life? How do I live more deeply when the world seeks separation and isolation and the call I hear from God

in community is communion and depth and breadth? How might we come to know each other at the depths of our hearts to more transparently bring the presence of God to the marketplace, barrio, hospital or school? To our homes and our communities? Our newer members may not respond to these cries any better than anyone else, but their longing is great. How do we attend to “the life” as we do the necessary reconfiguring for mission? There is a reason that this year's Giving Voice national conference in Milwaukee will explore the topic of community for mission.<sup>20</sup> It is a deep cry from some of the newer and younger members as they seek to live more deeply the life to which God calls all of us. Do you hear these questions too?

Invitations from the many call us, so let us come together and respond.<sup>21</sup> At the threshold we realize that what has been is not enough anymore. At the threshold we realize that we cannot respond alone; indeed we find ourselves now together at the threshold.

Remember, too, that the threshold is not the vision but the invitation to the wider vision. For example, reconfiguration or merging provinces is not the vision; it is, rather, an initial response to what calls us beyond the threshold. These efforts may help us clear out some debris, to let go of what we may have accumulated but which is no longer needed to respond to God and God's creation, for God's “new creation.”

Remember that the threshold is not the vision but the invitation to the wider vision. For example, reconfiguration or merging provinces is not the vision; it is rather, an initial response to what calls us beyond the threshold.

## Communally discerning our response

This brings us to the second gift at the threshold —communal discernment. The invitations to us today are communal. How we respond must come most deeply from who we are as women and men religious.

In **communal discernment** we consider our identity and role, the signs of the times, what we may offer and what it would take to respond well. We must make choices and even sacrifices. Communal discernment asks for our time, communal contemplation/prayer, awakened creativity,



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possibilitizing, prioritizing and decision-making.

At the threshold communal discernment is necessary. Yet how do we discern together? The answer lies beyond Chapters, though Chapters are essential. In discernment our deepest values, hopes, priorities, identities are named, and what is no longer the deepest value or priority or keenest identity is gently let go. Remember that a threshold is a powerful time, a transformative time, and only what is most essential is to stay. The rest, held lightly or even let go, frees us to deeply hear and respond. We certainly do this individually. We must also do this communally. Sister Christine Vladimiroff, OSB reminds us of the importance of the communal: “When we can clearly articulate who we are in our world and how we are gift to our Church, then we can move with confidence into that future that is hope-filled. This will also suggest to us the areas of our lives, as individuals and as community, that must change, that must be transformed for us to become a declaration of God’s Reign.”<sup>22</sup> She further reminds us that “Life in community and our sense of mission as service for others come out of our discipleship, following the Christ. Together they are our essential witness to the Church and to the world.”<sup>23</sup>

Communal discernment at this moment also offers potential for powerful creativity. I will touch on this a bit more in our next movement, but for now I offer an insight from Peter Senge, author and founding chair of the Society for Organizational Learning: “Only the creating mode leads to a genuine sense of individual and collective power, because only in the creating mode do people orient themselves to their intrinsic desires.”<sup>24</sup> There is much potential here, and again, it comes from a sense of deep listening to what is in the world, in the church and within our congregational lives.

Allow me to make this a bit more concrete and offer an example of a communal threshold moment entered into by the Carmelite Nuns in Baltimore through communal discernment.<sup>25</sup> Some years ago the Carmelite community looked at itself and saw that what they were doing and being was good. They looked at who they were and were satisfied. They also saw that no one had entered for some years, or at least if women were entering, they were not staying.

Sister Connie FitzGerald, OCD, their prioress at that time, reflected that the community knew they would remain alive for some years and decades; and while not an immediate issue, they knew that given their picture then, their time would eventually end. She knew that they had only a window of five to 10 years, and if they didn’t profit by them, they would die. Looking back at this time, FitzGerald reflected:

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We looked at ourselves and saw we have been around in Baltimore for 214 years and that our Carmelite heritage dates back to John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux and Teresa of Avila.... We also looked at our world today and [saw] that what we offer is still very important, a contemplative way of looking and being in the world. In fact, it is ever more important. We found ourselves realizing a need to offer a contemporary experience of the contemplative life.<sup>26</sup>

This Carmelite community recognized that there was a value to continuing their life—not for their own sake but because the life had so much to offer the world and church. They sensed the Spirit speaking to them in all of this, through a number of discussions over the course of many months.

One of the practices cherished by the Carmelite community is its “habit of dreaming”—communally dreaming. The women asked, “I wonder what it would be like if....”<sup>27</sup> And dream they did! They also realized dreams through hard work.<sup>28</sup> None of this was easy, but the dreaming together was necessary so that they could then see how dreams might be realized. Sister Colette Ackerman, OCD, current prioress, adds that, “You really have to think in very large terms, because things like feasibility and money and all will catch up with you soon enough, but you have to inject the magic into what you hope for. I think religious women have to do that to continue their traditions. The people who can do that will go on.”<sup>29</sup>

As they dreamed, the nuns again saw that their identity and way of life still had something crucial to offer the church and world. And then each sister was asked what she felt she could offer a newer member. To a person, regardless of age or health, each had something to offer, from the sisters in their 80s to the newest members. Ownership was happening.

FitzGerald reflects: “In that process, each person sharing what she can offer a woman coming in, the community went through a profound conversion. It set us up to do and to give what had to be done and what had to be given to help women come to the monastery and also to remain.”

Examining the signs of their times, this community saw that women discerning a call to religious life were looking for a deep community and prayer life. FitzGerald offers:

Women coming to religious life today want above all communities of prayer who are truly communities. They are, by and large, talented, educated women who have had a career before they come to us. They can live a ministerial life without entering a community.

They can even serve the poor; they can be in social work; they can be a lawyer who is looking out for the immigrant and the oppressed. They can do all of these as lay women....

There has to be a reason to enter religious life. And one of those reasons, I have discovered, is community. And I think all our communities of religious women, religious men as well, actually, are going to have to provide a very deep community life.<sup>30</sup> And the crux of this is that this is going to call for sacrifices. And sacrificing things that we may legitimately have.... We are going to have to be on call, to mentor these women, to provide a model for them of how the life needs to be lived. And unless communities can offer this, they are not going to have and keep new women.<sup>31</sup>

The realization came that if they were to welcome women today to the Carmelite life, they would themselves have to adapt and shift some of their lives. They crossed more than one threshold here.

At some point a realization came that if they were to welcome women today to the Carmelite life, they would themselves have to adapt and shift some of their lives. They crossed more than one threshold here, but important to note is that the key factor was their life in God and what God’s call was to them. The rest of the pieces could shift.

At one point FitzGerald notes interesting and perhaps provocative lacunae about the cost of new membership:

I think that many communities have not yet calculated the cost of new membership. It’s my belief that the time of renewal after Vatican II is over. It is completed, and we are in a new era and a new time of renewal and this time of renewal calls for different gifts and different sacrifices even than the previous epoch following Vatican II called for. After Vatican II, we moved into a very vigorous time and it was a time of the development of our sisters. There was a concentration on self-development, on education, even in a certain way on self-realization which was prevalent in the whole society. And religious life needed this. There needed to be a shift to a person centered kind of

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life, away from something that was strictly structure centered.

And that whole time for renewal called for new things in that time, and life has developed out of what we did at that time... They were good things that were necessary. I think that this time we are in now is calling for different gifts. It is my belief that we have to come to new terms with this new time and with what it asks of

What emerges at the threshold in communal discernment includes the whole of religious life, which can be inter-congregational.

us, because if we are to have new people in our community, it will demand of us real self sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

These Carmelite sisters took ownership for this movement and responded, aware of some of the sacrifices, yet likely unaware

of others. FitzGerald reflects that in this process the nuns became the very best each could be. At a profession she told the entire community: "You have become at this stage of your life, the very best you can be."

## New awarenesses emerge

The nuns were clearly aware of the challenges for new members in a community that has had great stability, and they sought ways to address the challenges. FitzGerald explains:

I think it's very difficult in a community like ours, which remains together for a lifetime, to integrate new women into the community. There's not a lack of willingness. It's a lack of awareness, of how hard it is to break into a group that has lived together for 25 years, 30 years, 40 years, and some of us even 50 years. There is so much give that has to happen if newer people are to find their place.

I think that the community became willing to give whatever it took in order to provide new spaces for younger women. Now it's one thing to think you are going to do this and to want to do this, and it's quite another thing to do this.

This has been costly to do this for the community because...when you bring six new women into the community, things change very much. The community is much more boisterous, the community is, for a time

at least, much less solitary. These newer women have emotional needs and even immaturities that the older sisters really don't have in the same way.

There are kinds of self-concern that occupy people who are coming initially to the community. There is an enormous amount of personal investment that has to be provided in order for these people to succeed, to feel that they belong, to feel that they they're in their own place. And what is remarkable is that everybody has done this.<sup>33</sup>

This brief example of one community's commitment and process is not intended to imply that the process was clear and quick. The discernment into action took place over the course of years, and now the Baltimore Carmelites are again an intergenerational community with a lively multicultural/intercultural mix. Six women have been incorporated into their life since the communal discernment process began.

The priority that emerged is perhaps best reflected by FitzGerald: "I feel very proud of what our sisters have really been able to do, and I think it speaks really of the depth of their own inner life, that in the end they have known what is really important, and they want people to live this life in the church and in the world. And the contemplative life they know and we know, all of us, is very, very important for the church and for the world."

We see in the Carmelite nuns an example of communal discernment on "the life" in our age. Theirs is not necessarily a formula to follow<sup>34</sup> but an example of what happens at the thresholds when we come to them in hope and with all that we are. What emerges at the threshold in communal discernment includes the whole of religious life, and it can even be inter-congregational. For example, after a long civil war in Sudan the bishops of the Southern Sudan region invited the Union of Superiors General and International Union of Superiors General to work in solidarity on human capacity building. In response, a number of religious congregations discerned to collaborate in the "Support for Southern Sudan" project, with resources and/or with personnel. As a result, several religious are now collaborating and working in this much needed arena.<sup>35</sup> We have here a communal call flowing out of mission. Possibilities abound.

Priorities and identities are shaped at this threshold of communal discernment. As we communally discern—in the midst of ministry, community, prayer—listening to the cries around us with a contemplative spirit, we are met with our third gift at the threshold.

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## Disponibilidad: radical availability

At the thresholds the virtue of *disponibilidad* invites.<sup>36</sup> While I have found no adequate English translation for this Spanish word, the best understanding of it is that it connotes radical availability. This is more than *disponible*, or available, as in “I am available to come to the meeting.” The meaning here is much greater and deeper. Disponibilidad refers to radical or root availability, complete availability to God’s mission, God’s call. Our newer members have much to teach us here, for somewhere in their “yes” to God’s call to religious life they experienced that gift and response. Didn’t you? Didn’t we? The invitation continues today.

One of my Ursuline sisters, at a table discussion about a congregational direction we once considered and which was now clearly not the direction we were called to, reflected, “That’s fine. This frees us to deeply listen anew. Over 25 years ago I let all go and responded to God’s call. I can continue to do so, in freedom.” The hope was palpable as we realized one direction was not the Spirit’s call and that we were being called anew. The listening continues for us—in active engagement. The threshold beckons to us again.

Disponibilidad is our *Suscipe*. “Accept me O God, according to your word, and let me not be confounded in my expectations.” It is this stance that helps us cross the threshold and respond to the “more” we sense calling us.

### Put to the test

We now move to our fourth threshold gift, **tests**. At the threshold we must be aware of something else that will greet us and ask for attention: tests, biblically also known as temptations. Early in Luke’s Gospel we read that Jesus prays, the Spirit comes, and he is made ready for mission.<sup>37</sup> This theme is repeated in Acts 1-2: the community is at prayer, the Spirit comes, and the early believers are made ready (bold) for mission as Peter rises to preach. So it is with us.

Yet there is more, for Luke’s account does not end with Jesus’ prayer and the response of, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). Instead, Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit,” (4:1), returns from the Jordan and then is led by the Spirit into the desert where he is tempted. Scholars remind us that the “temptation” signals the beginning of the eschatological struggle with evil (anything or anyone who attempts to obstruct Jesus’ movement forward in mission in response to God’s plan).<sup>38</sup> At the end of this time of testing, Luke clearly says in 4:13 that the struggle is not

yet over: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

This is our experience too. Thresholds evoke voices that remind us of the cost of community, of discipleship, of obedient listening to the Spirit among us.

What comes forth at the thresholds are the tests of our inclinations and discernments. Yes, something new calls us forth, a new energy emerges. So does fear. So does a desire for more security. Doubts emerge. Questions come forth, and as a community we must discern the spirits here. In the midst of hope also comes fear.

What! We can’t do that. What about what we are already doing—that must be our stable commitment. This would ask so much of me. I don’t think I can do it. I don’t know where this is going, and I can’t go until I see it all. I need a blueprint and the ink needs to be dry! What will this cost us—financially, people-wise, in environmental responsibility, in terms of the energy we have at this time? We’ve never done it this way. This is asking too much of me. It’s just too hard to change.

We’ve all found ourselves here at one time or another. The list continues. My entire schedule would have to shift. How we live local community would require change. I don’t have time for this. This is for the next generation to figure out—I don’t want to go here. I can’t be still—there is too much to be done. The associates will carry us on. (A word of caution: Do not put the associates in this position. Theirs is not a call to religious life but to live the charism in their various life commitments and ministries.)

The list goes on. Aren’t we already doing good works? I don’t want to be uprooted. We don’t have time. We don’t have money. We don’t have energy. I don’t have.... Gosh, have you ever found yourself or your congregation going down many roads, feeling like a spinning top or a computer frozen because you tried to keep too many things open and running at the same time?

Disponibilidad does not go down easily, though it offers us great freedom for response-ability. What are we to do in this moment? Where do we go? We have been praying! We go to our stories, our deep stories, ones that speak of who we

Disponibilidad refers to radical or root availability, complete availability to God’s mission, God’s call.... It is this stance that helps us cross the threshold.

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are. We go to what Johann Baptist Metz calls our “dangerous memories of Jesus.” We remember the dangerous memories of Scripture. To this we bring our narratives, our communal stories. In our founders and foundresses and the history of our congregations we have dangerous narratives to share with one another, not as a way of going back, but as a way of sensing the communion of saints with whom we travel.

This reminds us of where we put our trust. We see our salvation history, and in it all a God who is faithful to us. This assists us in pulling chaff from wheat and crossing thresholds (with some direction), though we will probably not see very clearly across the horizon until we reach the other side.

Not everyone may see at the same time; not everyone may be able to cross a threshold at the same time. A crossing may last several days, weeks or months.

But just before we cross the threshold, allow me to say that not everyone may see at the same time; not everyone may be able to cross at the same time. A crossing may last several days, weeks or months. There is, however, a dynamic of movement. Must all cross it? We hope that at some point all will, but

initially you simply need a critical mass to cross over. I don’t know what that is for any of our congregations. You will get a sense of that. Of course the more, the better and the further the movement. Someone just completing a leadership role recently shared that for the 10 years she was in leadership the team was cultivating not only new membership but also leadership within the membership. This year she saw some of the fruits of this in the voices of the newer and younger women, and she saw the energy also connecting with the rest of the generations when they assembled.

What can we do here at the crossing? We must remember that hope, too, is communal.<sup>39</sup> Once we have crossed we cannot go back. However, we can invite others at the threshold to cross. We can encourage and help one another, because the vision needs and beckons the ones on the threshold too—in freedom. All are in this community.

As we prepare to cross, we must do so with blessing. O’Donohue reminds us that, “This is where we need to retrieve and reawaken our capacity for blessing. If we approach our decisive thresholds with reverence and attention, the crossing will bring us more than we could ever have hoped for. This is where blessing invokes and

awakens every gift the crossing has to offer.”<sup>40</sup>

We bring all we have to this moment—and then move, walk, journey beyond what we can exactly see but which we know is deep and true. Thresholds ask much of us, more than we even imagine; and they offer much more than we even imagine. The threshold invites, and with both trepidation and eagerness we respond.

### Questions for Reflection

1. What threshold beckons your congregation now?
2. What is your participation at this congregational threshold?
3. What gifts are present at this threshold moment?
4. What threshold beckons you now?

### Movement 3, Across the threshold: promises and possibilities

What do we find when we cross the threshold? Across the threshold we find four gifts:<sup>41</sup> a greater sense of belonging and identity; creativity and imagination; community and communion; and globalizing solidarity. I briefly offer a few points on each.

First, across the threshold we find a greater sense of **belonging and identity**. We sense that we belong across this threshold, even as we may still not know exactly where it will lead. We have a sense of our deeper belonging to all of creation. There is a deeper sense of identity, knowing what we offer the church and world because of who we are and where we are. The Carmelites had this experience, and they worked hard to cross their threshold. Identity is forged, both in what we hold and what we let go of, in order to cross the threshold to the horizons that invite. In the midst of this our presence is more intentional.

As our identity is deepened, so is our public witness. Again, Vladimiroff reminds us that, “Life in community and our sense of mission as service for others comes out of our discipleship, following the Christ. Together they are our essential witness to the Church and to the world.”<sup>42</sup> This public witness invites us to a transparency that our society struggles against,<sup>43</sup> yet our profession of vows, a public ecclesial moment in the church, commit us to a public witness—in all.

A particularly poignant and powerful example of this comes from one of my Ursuline sisters and friend, Sister Anita Whitely, OSU, who for years worked in formation ministry and with the Religious Formation Conference, on its

board and as a conference facilitator. After a battery of tests in July, in August she was told she had cancer throughout her system. In her 60s and just completing her term on our congregational leadership team, she made a decision for palliative chemotherapy. Anita also made a decision to share the news with people publicly (it was on our chain call to the entire congregation), and she is very open and welcoming to others, allowing others to minister to her instead of pulling away from people. I commented on this when I saw her in September, and she simply said, “We are called to be public witnesses in all. This is part of that all. To the last breath.” Anita is teaching all who know her how to live and how to walk across yet another threshold. It is to her that I dedicate this presentation, because of her life and the thresholds she crossed all her life and now continues to cross, communally as much as individually.

Second, across the threshold we find both **imagination and creativity** further galvanized. Creativity flows out of our deepest desires. We were earlier reminded by Senge that, “Only the creating mode leads to a genuine sense of individual and collective power, because only in the creating mode do people orient themselves to their intrinsic desires.”<sup>44</sup> We know from our own experiences that creativity is a deeply contemplative act, and it moves us to integrate our lives (prayer, community and ministry—in essence, mission), again bringing forth our active contemplative dimensions.

The religious imagination is a less utilized resource of our tradition than one might think, yet our own founders and foundresses were exceedingly creative and persistent! They found their own resonance with Jesus’ proclamation of Isaiah in Luke 4:18-19. We don’t necessarily know how we will do this, but that we must do this is key. We don’t do this alone, either. Our imagination and creativity come forth as we respond to the longings of our world. Our creative resources are galvanized as we attend to the calls we hear.

We find our imagination engages persons, structures and systems. That is one of the gifts of our times. We do see the systems at work even as we respond to the individuals in our world. God’s mission invites a vision beyond our own. All is drenched with possibility. If we can find medicines that can bring people living with HIV and AIDS back from near death so directly that we call it the “Lazarus effect,” we can surely bring our 1 million-plus religious worldwide—and our collaboration with so many—to the front of mission efforts. And much happens beyond our expectations.

All of this is intimately connected to integration, which this age craves and our newer members desire.

Third, across the threshold we find deeper **experiences and understandings of community**. Here phrases such as “spirituality of communion” or “community as a living spirituality of communion” take on more visible flesh. We are hearing this call all over, in both the church and the world, so something clearly is stirring. The 2004 “Passion for Christ and Passion for Humanity Conference” synthesis document noted the longing for such community and communion.<sup>45</sup>

We also found a desire for communion spirituality in “Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium,”<sup>46</sup> a document produced by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The document reminds us that communion and contemplation are necessary for one another, beginning with the communion of friendship with God.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, communion is indispensable in religious life, and a spirituality of communion is “necessary to establish the dialogue of charity needed in today’s world.”<sup>48</sup> Commentator Charles M. Mangan, writes that “Attempts to spread communion by consecrated men and women are to encompass all people, but especially those who reside in locations oppressed by ethnic hatred or violence.”<sup>49</sup> The community mandate is certainly expansive.

What do we find when we cross the threshold? Across the threshold we find four gifts: a greater sense of belonging and identity; creativity and imagination; community and communion; and globalizing solidarity.

Fourth, we find across the threshold a greater realization of **globalizing solidarity**. Once we risk crossing over, how we see the local and the global has implications. While we have no one definition of globalization, Father Robert Schreier’s description is helpful: It is the “increasingly interconnected character of the political, economic, and social life of the peoples of this planet.”<sup>50</sup> Much good has emerged for many as a result of globalization. Yet, our current economic crisis is one example of where globalization can also harm. We see what happens when the common good, when God’s mission, is not on the radar screen of decision-makers. Globalization, however, is here to stay; it is the air we breathe. At the same time we have some choices in it. Globalization is not an engine that runs without human intervention.

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Across the thresholds we also find the wonderful gifts of our brothers and sisters in religious life around the world. They daily remind us of the interconnectedness of our efforts to live the mission of God. Whether more locally based or internationally based, the real question is how we connect globally in vision, mission and intent.

Crossing thresholds will necessarily, and I do mean necessarily, call us to engage our increasingly globalized

Religious life is indeed at significant threshold moments. The more familiar and even comfortable we can become with them, the better we will be able to fruitfully respond to the Spirit's calls.

world and create solidarity in the midst of it. We are called to speak out against all that dehumanizes persons and desecrates creation. Solidarity moves us to what John Paul II described as "globalization without marginalization" or "a globalization of solidarity."<sup>51</sup> Solidarity, walking alongside another, taking the

other's cause as one's own, is our call. Knowing God's mission to be to a globalized world, we respond accordingly, and what happens is often beyond our imagination.

## Bridging nations and congregations

Across the threshold, globalizing solidarity has both international and inter-congregational dimensions. A few years ago at Oblate School of Theology we had a conference on the environment, and Brian Swimme offered three lectures. Beginning one of his talks to an audience of about 400, he thanked women religious for their pioneer efforts in taking care of the environment.

A facilitator about a year ago shared with me that she was working with a group of Dominicans for whom the earth has been a focus for over 20 years. She said she could understand if the Franciscans were doing this for a long time, but the Dominicans? So she asked a few of them about it. The response was quick. "*Veritas*, truth, is a great value to us and we seek truth in all. Of course that would bring us to the environment," they told her. The writing of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI resonates with the global solidarity necessary in the midst of our environmental crisis.<sup>52</sup>

Globalizing solidarity occurs when we gather together

internationally. Every congregation, from the local to the international, is called to be global today, and each is to name as fully as possible what that means. To simply have members from around the globe is not enough. How is that membership globalizing solidarity within us and around us and through us? I experienced a powerful example of the potential for this in early September in Ireland with the Presentation Sisters (PBVM). As an inaugural program, they invited 15 sisters from the entire PBVM family (not one branch but the entire tree) to come together for a "Horizon program." The group included sisters from India, Ireland, Pakistan, Australia, Zimbabwe, the Philippines and the U.S. During my time with them we spent a week on the vowed life, leaning into it, together seeking to hear and see what the Spirit in the midst of all was inviting and opening. Their entire time together was a threshold time, and I could see some of the fruits emerging just at the end of their third week together. They had three more weeks in Ireland, followed by a month in a country and culture other than their own. From there they would all meet in India for theological reflection on their experiences through an Asian context. After this, they would travel to another part of India for a retreat that would conclude the program but continue so much that was happening to them.<sup>53</sup>

Such movement is happening in many congregations. During a recent Chapter, the Christian Brothers in Ireland invited some of their members to gather and together read the signs of the times and discern the Spirit's call to the way of life for a Christian Brother. The Oblates in the U.S. also recently invited three of their members to see the needs of the secular world around them and discern what way of life and presence is needed today. The limits are only to our creativity, and that is quite boundless.<sup>54</sup>

Globalizing solidarity is also inter-congregational. It is interesting that "Starting Afresh From Christ" calls us to not only start or continue dialogues, particularly among peoples in conflict, but also to attend to the "intra" dimension of religious life, and even to create and sustain communion among the various institutes. The document calls for a "joint search for common ways of serving the church."<sup>55</sup> The acknowledgement of this need and efforts to do more are publicly witnessed today.<sup>56</sup>

A recent example comes from Father Frank Monks, former superior general of the Camillians. He states: "For us religious lots of challenges remain in areas like justice, ministry, ethics and education; this is why we are asked to overcome the fragmentary approach among us, so we can speak with one voice and establish a new culture of



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communion and cooperation.”<sup>57</sup> He saw this as critical, not only for the work of religious but because these efforts have implications for others as well. He says further, “There are poor nations where Christians offer up to 40 percent of health services, but have no voice and are left to fight their battles alone, with poor results.”<sup>58</sup> This reality has local and international implications, for this article explains that superiors-general of religious communities are calling for better teamwork among their congregations to make their voices heard in international forums that allot funds to AIDS projects .

The communion we all seek in God and in all is present now, here and at the thresholds and beyond. Religious life is indeed at significant threshold moments. The more familiar and even comfortable we can become with them, the better we will be able to fruitfully respond to the Spirit’s calls for the church and world.

The sacredness of thresholds is clear. We begin as we conclude, with our friend John O’Donohue, who reminds us that, “If we approach our decisive thresholds with reverence and attention, the crossing will bring us more than we could ever have hoped for. This is where blessing invokes and awakens every gift the crossing has to offer.”<sup>59</sup> Come, my brothers and sisters, let us attend to these inviting thresholds. Amen!<sup>60</sup> ■

### Questions for Reflection

1. What threshold has your congregation crossed?
2. What did or do you find across the threshold?
3. To what does your congregation witness? How is this visible?
4. To what do you witness? How is this visible?

### *Younger sisters respond to this article*

To read reflections by several younger women religious on this presentation, see the 2008 second issue of the newsletter *Giving Voice: The Voices of Younger Women Religious*, available online at [www.giving-voice.org](http://www.giving-voice.org).

1. I also gratefully acknowledge Sister Kristin Matthes, SNDdeN and Sister Lisa Buscher, RSCJ, two dear friends and colleagues in the Giving Voice organization of women religious under age 50. Both offered helpful feedback on drafts of the writing as the time of the NRVC presentation drew near. Community and collaboration are indeed gifts and calls of religious life today, and I am grateful for both.
2. The actual location was St. Gobneit’s grave.
3. I do not mean that there are no impasses remaining or to come. I do think that in different ways religious have attended to some of the impasses in recent times and that the generations who have come most recently to religious life do not necessarily have the same experiences of impasse as those who precede them. Each time finds its own invitations and challenges, and this also becomes the dynamic of congregational and religious life.
4. See, for example, the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, found at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threshold> (accessed November 7, 2008).
5. See, for example, John 14:1-6a; John 16:12-13; Matthew 6:25-34; Mark 4: 26-29; Mark 14: 32-36.
6. John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 192-193. I am deeply grateful to my Irish friend, Sister Regina Daly, PBVM, for conversations on threshold and for connecting me to this source in O’Donohue’s writing.
7. These words are from the song “You, Lord, Are In This Place,” on the CD *Sacred Weave*. CD information may be found online at [http://www.kevinmayhew.com/Shop/Categories/5557/Kevin\\_Mayhew\\_Publishers/Other\\_Resources/CDS/Celtic.aspx](http://www.kevinmayhew.com/Shop/Categories/5557/Kevin_Mayhew_Publishers/Other_Resources/CDS/Celtic.aspx) (accessed October 22, 2008). At this point in the presentation the song was played, followed by a few moments of silence.
8. More exactly, she writes, “Christian faith today does not believe in a novel God but, finding itself in strange situations, seeks the active presence of divine Spirit precisely there, in their midst.” Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, (New York: Continuum, 2007), 1.
9. Virtue here is defined as both a disposition and practice toward becoming a particular (moral) kind of person. More on virtues can be found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and also in more recent writings by virtue ethicists.
10. Father Anthony Gittins, CSSp, “The Future of Religious Life,” *InFormation*, 14, no.2, (2006): 9.
11. Ibid.

12. Father Richard M. Gula, SS, *The Call to Holiness: Embracing a Fully Christian Life* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003), 21. While Gula here is describing Christian spirituality, he is also offering the integral dimensions of community.
13. O'Donohue, 193.
14. Ibid.
15. See Sister Cynthia Glavac, OSU, *In the Fullness of Life: A Biography of Dorothy Kazel, OSU*. (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1996).
16. Sister Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, was murdered in the Brazilian rainforest on February 12, 2005. Her life story can be found in Roseanne Murphy's *Martyr of the Amazon: The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007).
17. Interview by Father Michael Kelly SJ, Australian Province Communications Delegate. "What should GC35 do?" *Province Express: A Newsletter of the Australian Jesuits*, December 12, 2007.
18. Sister Mary Whited, CPPS. Her address may be found online at: <http://lcwr.org/lcwrannualassembly/Presidential%20Address%20-%20Mary%20Whited%20CPPS.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2008).
19. David Whyte, "Sometimes," *River Flow: New and Selected Poems 1984-2007* (Langley, Washington: Many Rivers Press, 2007), 52-53. © David Whyte. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Many Rivers Press, Langley, WA. [www.davidwhyte.com](http://www.davidwhyte.com)
20. Information about Giving Voice and its conference may be found online at: <http://www.giving-voice.org/> (accessed November 8, 2008).
21. We have been responding individually to these questions, and at some point something asks the deeper question about who we are as we read the signs of the times ... and who we will become as we seek to respond to these signs and times. This is indeed the life of virtue, and virtues are personal and communal.
22. Sister Christine Vladimiroff, OSB, "Beyond Exile: A Journey of Hope," Part 2 of a day-long presentation on "Ecclesial Women: Claiming Visibility and Life" held in Cincinnati, OH at Mt. St. Joseph, May 10, 2008, page 8, (unpublished text of presentation). Thank you to Sister Christine for this.
23. Ibid.
24. Peter Senge, "Personal Transformation." This is a pre-publication online draft of an article that appeared in the *Sloan Management Review*. Found online at: [http://www.solonline.org/repository/download/transform.html?item\\_id=505852](http://www.solonline.org/repository/download/transform.html?item_id=505852) (accessed November 8, 2008).
25. The following anecdote comes from the DVD *A Future Full of Hope*, from the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO), coordinated by Sister Janice Bader, CPPS. Information about the DVD may be found online at: <http://www.usccb.org/nrro/NRRO%20Planning%20Materials%20Order%20Form.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2008).
26. FitzGerald, interviewed in the DVD, *A Future Full of Hope*, further explained that they knew that the people who would be most qualified to do formation of the women entering would, after that window, be beyond the age when that would be most possible.
27. Sister Constance FitzGerald, OCD.
28. However, not all dreams were realized. Prioritizing is an important part of working with dreams and possibilities.
29. Interview, Sister Colette Ackerman, OCD, *A Future Full of Hope*.
30. Note that this does not need to become a tension between ministry and community. All is integrated. We apostolic communities must learn from this.
31. Sister Constance FitzGerald, OCD.
32. Sister Constance FitzGerald, OCD.
33. Sister Constance FitzGerald, OCD.
34. However, Sister Janice Bader's office at the NRRO, the initiator of the DVD, does have some suggestions. They can be found in the booklet that accompanies the DVD.
35. See "Solidarity with Southern Sudan" project report, found online at: [http://vidimusdominum.info/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=303&Itemid=82](http://vidimusdominum.info/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=303&Itemid=82) (accessed November 8, 2008).
36. I am grateful to theologian and friend Sister Meg Guider, OSF for this insight. She shared this during the 2007 national Giving Voice Conference in Boston.
37. I am deeply grateful to Sister Sarah Sharkey, OP, New Testament scholar, friend and colleague at Oblate School of Theology, for assistance with insights and resources on Luke and Acts.
38. I thank Sarah Sharkey for this insight.
39. For further elements of hope, see the Chapter on virtues and hope in Sister Maria Cimperman, OSU, *When God's People Have HIV/AIDS: An Approach to Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).
40. O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 194.
41. Note that some of these gifts may be found on both sides of the threshold. Much depends on the congregation and the threshold preparation. There are also more than four gifts to be found at the threshold and across the threshold. I simply

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offer four to begin the reflection on gifts.

42. Vladimiroff, 7.

43. Note our current economic crisis and our church's sexual abuse crisis.

44. Peter Senge, "Personal Transformation."

45. "Final Document: What the Spirit Says Today to Consecrated Life—Convictions and Perspectives," International Congress on Consecrated Life, *Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity* (New York: Pauline Books and Media, 2005), 243-255.

46. "Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium," document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), May 19, 2002.

47. *Ibid.*, #25.

48. *Ibid.*, #26.

49. Charles M. Mangan, "The Spirituality of CICLSAL's 'Starting Afresh,'" *Review for Religious*, 62, no.1 (2003): 23-24.

50. See Father Robert J. Schreiter, CPPS, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 4-5.

51. John Paul II, "Ecclesia in America" (January 22, 1999): #55, found online at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_22011999\\_ecclesia-in-america\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america_en.html) (accessed November 8, 2008).

52. See, for example, John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," (World Day of Peace, 1990): found online at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace_en.html) (accessed November 8, 2008). A very fine analysis of Pope Benedict XVI's writings related to creation and the environment is found in Lucia Silecchia, "Discerning the Environmental Perspectives of Pope Benedict XVI," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 4, no.2 (2007): 227-269.

53. Now when people hear about this they are duly impressed with the program and then ask—how did they pay for this!? And how did the women get the time away from ministry to do this? Practical questions, yes, but I hope this is because the idea of it so clearly makes sense that that part was already accepted. They did find funding to assist them with this, and some of the sisters spoke of their reticence to be gone from ministry for so long. In fact, one of the women from India shared that she thought of saying no after her application was accepted, and she went to one of the busy wise women in her

province and shared her concern that she could not be gone for that amount of time. The older sister listened to her and said, "When will there ever really be a 'good' time to go? This time in this program will change everything for you. Then you will return and we will see what emerges for you." Wise woman.

54. The current work of the UISG and USG on human trafficking is another example of the world working together on behalf of the dignity of all.

55. "Starting Afresh From Christ," #30.

56. Interestingly, on local levels we have been doing increasingly more inter-congregational formation in the past 20 years. This bodes well for further inter-congregational collaboration among our members and congregations.

57. "Religious Seek More Funding in AIDS Fight: Superiors-General Call for Teamwork to Get Voices Heard," from *Zenit*, May 9, 2008.

58. *Ibid.*

59. O'Donohue, 194.

60. I thank Sister Joanne Gross, OSU, a friend who, among many gifts, has a keen editing eye and great heart and who perused this paper as it was prepared for print. Many thanks also to *HORIZON* Editor Carol Schuck Scheiber, who is always a gift to work with on these topics related to "the life."

Humor, joy and laughter have been undervalued by the church for centuries. But it's time to reclaim them, and vocation ministers may just want to lead the way.

# Laughing with the saints: joy, humor and laughter in the spiritual life

BY FATHER JAMES MARTIN, SJ

**H**ERE'S A LITTLE STORY about three different vocations. So there's this barber in a small town. One day he's sitting in his barbershop, and a man walks in wearing a pair of sandals and a long brown robe with a hood. The man sits down in the barber's chair. "Excuse me," says the barber. "I was wondering: why are you dressed like that?"

"Well," says the man. "I'm a Franciscan friar. I'm here to help my brother Franciscans start a soup kitchen in town."

And the barber says, "The Franciscans? Oh, I love the Franciscans! I love the story of St. Francis of Assisi, and I so love all the work you do for the poor, and for peace, and for the environment. And it's just great that the Franciscans live so simply! You guys are wonderful! This haircut is free!"

And the Franciscan says, "Oh no, no, no. We live simply and take a vow of poverty, but I have some money for a haircut. Please let me pay you."

"Oh no," says the barber. "I insist. This haircut is free!" So the Franciscan thanks him, gives him a blessing and leaves.

The next day the barber comes to his shop and on the doorstep to the barbershop, there is a surprise waiting for him. On the doorstep is a big basket filled with wildflowers, along with a thank-you note from the Franciscan.

That same day another man walks into the barber's shop wearing a long white robe with a black scapular over it. He

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sits down in the barber's chair and the barber says, "Excuse me, but why are you dressed like that?"

And the man says, "Well, I'm a Trappist monk. I'm in town to visit a doctor, and I thought I would come in for a haircut."

And the barber says, "Oh I love the Trappists! You know, I've read all of Thomas Merton's books, and I so admire the way that your lives are so contemplative and prayerful, and it makes me happy to know that you're praying for all of us. You guys are wonderful! This haircut is free!"

The Trappist says, "Oh, no, no, no. Even though we live simply, I have money for a haircut. Please let me pay you."

"Oh no," says the barber. "This haircut is free." So the Trappist thanks him, gives him a blessing and leaves.

The next day the barber comes to his shop, and on his doorstep is a surprise waiting for him: a big basket full of cheeses and jams made by the Trappist abbey, along with a thank-you note from the Trappist.

That same day another man walks into the barbershop wearing a black suit and a clerical collar. After he sits down the barber says, "Excuse me, but why are you dressed like that?"

And the man says, "I'm a Jesuit priest. I'm in town for a theology conference."

And the barber says, "Oh, I love the Jesuits! You know, my son went to Santa Clara and my daughter went to Loyola Marymount. I love Ignatian spirituality, and I've been to the retreat house you have in town. You guys are great! This haircut is free!"

And the Jesuit says, "Oh no, no, no. I take a vow of poverty, but I have enough money for a haircut."

The barber says, "Oh no. This haircut is free." So the

Jesuit thanks him, gives him a blessing and is on his way.

And the next day the barber comes to his shop and on his doorstep, a surprise waiting for him: 10 more Jesuits.

Now, imagine if I told you a second joke or a third joke or a fourth joke. You might start to feel uncomfortable. You might start to wonder when I was going to get to the point. You might wonder whether so many jokes were appropriate at the conference of a church organization. They're funny, but they're beside the point, aren't they?

But, in a way, those stories are the point of my talk, which is that joy, humor and laughter are under-appreciated values in the spiritual life and are desperately needed, not only in our own personal spiritual lives but in the life of the Catholic Church. Joy is not a waste of time. Far from it. For joy is what we'll be sharing when we are welcomed into heaven. We will be joyful. We may even laugh for joy.

Humor is an essential, but neglected, requirement of Christian spirituality and is, moreover, an essential element of vocation work. Billy Joel was wrong when he sang a few decades ago, "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints." Remember that song? Well, Billy Joel had it backward. The most joyful people are those closest to God. As the Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God."

Joy, humor and laughter are necessary and healthy, and they have a long tradition in the church, and one that we ignore at our peril. They are needed for those who work in vocations—to keep a sense of humor about the church, about the difficulties in vocation work, and also, most importantly, to show the Christian joy that is the best way to attract others to our way of life. Joy has a somewhat disreputable reputation in the church. And that's a tragedy, not only because joy is

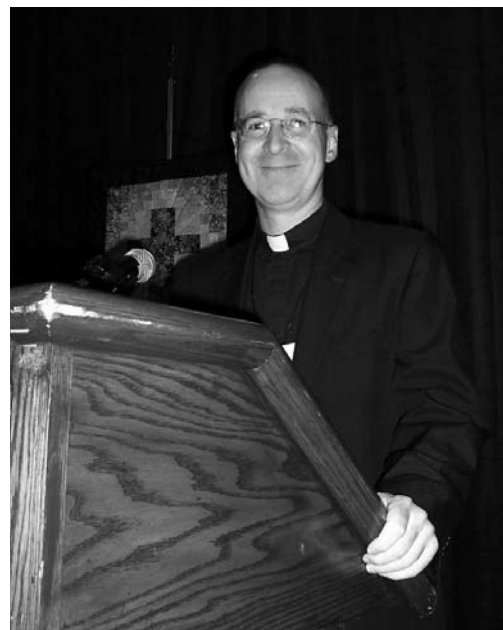
necessary, but also because it has a distinguished history among the saints and spiritual masters as an essential element for

spiritual health. When you meet people truly in touch with God, they are joyful, aren't they? Think of the holy people in your lives. Are they not full of the spirit of the Resurrection? Full of joy? Think of how often you would see pictures of Mother Teresa or Pope John Paul II smiling. Think how easy it is to imagine people like Francis of Assisi smiling.

Now before we go any further, I want to say that I'm not advocating a mindless, idiotic happiness. As the book of Ecclesiastes says, there is a time to weep and a time to mourn. You would be a robot if you weren't sad during times of misfortune or illness or death, or over the recent developments in the church, such as the sexual abuse crisis. Those are things to mourn and to grieve.

And I stand before you as someone who has seen a fair amount of sorrow in my life, at least as much as most people. My father died of cancer a few years ago, and I've lost other friends to disease and accidents; I've worked in refugee camps and in the slums of East Africa; I've worked at Ground Zero after 9/11; and I was a priest in the church during the sexual abuse crisis. These were times to mourn.

But Ecclesiastes also said that there is a time to laugh. And sometimes laughter—even in the midst of sadness—can



**Father James Martin, SJ**

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be healthy. A few years ago the superior of a Jesuit province was visiting the province infirmary, the place where the sick and elderly Jesuits live. The provincial was talking about how the province was getting older and older.

“Well,” said the provincial, “we have so many aging Jesuits that there really isn’t any place to put them. There isn’t even room for anyone else here in the infirmary.”

To which an elderly Jesuit shouted out, “Father Provincial, we’re dying as fast as we can!”

## Little value for laughter

It’s not clear to what extent joy and laughter have been deemed as inappropriate throughout Catholic history. But I’m sure we’ve all met Catholics who seem to think that being

“The Gospels have a lot of controversy stories and honor-shame situations. I suspect that the early readers found these stories hilarious, whereas we in a very different social setting miss the point entirely.”

religious means being deadly serious all the time.

And I’m sure you know priests who make you wonder how they can say that they “celebrate” the Mass when they never crack a smile. I’m sure you’ve been to Masses that are spoken where the priest says, “And we join with the choirs of angels in their

unending hymn of praise ... Holy, holy, holy Lord....” I always think, oh brother, if that’s the way the angels sing their praise, we’re in deep trouble.

When I was a boy, in the front pew of our parish church were always the same two women: two lay women who were sisters. They arrived early every Sunday, never, ever greeted anyone, sat in the front pew every week, and stared dead ahead at the altar, and when it came time for the kiss of peace, they quickly shook one another’s hands, and never, ever, turned around to shake anyone else’s hands. They seemed deadly serious about their faith. But you know, when you’re deadly serious, you’re seriously dead.

Now, I have a few theories about why humor may not be valued as it should be. And it may have started early. First of all, it’s worth thinking about how much the Gospel writers were interested in presenting Jesus as an overtly humorous person. While the Gospels clearly show Jesus as

clever, especially when it comes to the parables, there are few moments in the whole New Testament that strike one as actually laugh-out-loud funny. Why might this be?

Recently I asked some distinguished New Testament scholars what they thought about Jesus and humor. Wouldn’t it make sense that, if the evangelists wanted to present Jesus as an appealing figure, they would highlight his sense of humor and even show him laughing occasionally? After all, humor is something that most people find appealing, and they did back in antiquity and the time of Jesus.

In any event, some Scripture scholars suggested that this was a reflection of the Jewish culture at the time, which prized seriousness about God, a subject not to be taken lightly. Religion was serious.

Another scholar was Professor Amy-Jill Levine, a distinguished New Testament expert at Vanderbilt, and the author of a new book on the Jewishness of Jesus, called *The Misunderstood Jew*. When I asked about humor in the New Testament, she said that one difficulty with the topic is that what we think is funny may not have been seen as funny by the evangelists or people in Jesus’ time. For them, the setup was probably more amusing. “The parables were amusing,” she said, “in their exaggeration or hyperbole. The idea that a mustard seed would have sprouted into a big bush that birds would build their nests in would be humorous.”

Father Daniel Harrington, SJ, professor of New Testament at Weston Jesuit School of Theology agreed. “Humor is very culture bound,” he said. “The Gospels have a lot of controversy stories and honor-shame situations. I suspect that the early readers found these stories hilarious, whereas we in a very different social setting miss the point entirely.”

Professor Levine noted that there was, of course, no way of knowing for certain whether Jesus’ humor or even jokes might have been expunged from the Gospels by the early church. But she noted that in many of the noncanonical Gospels—that is, the Gospels not accepted by the church—there are many times where Jesus laughs. Moreover, she said that the early church fathers, set on combatting heresy, would probably not have seen the genre of humor as appropriate.

Overall when I asked her what she felt about humor in the church she said, “It’s undervalued and needs to be recovered. We need to be open to the joys of the proclamation. The good news should really put a smile on our face!”

Another reason that humor may have been downplayed was the prevailing Hellenistic culture into which the Gospel was first introduced. Greek culture was very interested in

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reason. And reason, of course, is serious. For Aristotle, for example, the highest ideal was thought. And what was the highest activity? Thinking. And so, for Aristotle what was the best image of God he could come up with? “Thought thinking thought.” That sounds like a lot of fun, doesn’t it?

Also, Roman culture during the first century put emphasis on two character traits: *gravitas* and *pietas*. *Gravitas* of course is the sense of seriousness that is to mark a leader. *Pietas* is a sort of duty to family, god and state, something that is normally translated today as piety. Both *gravitas* and *pietas* were serious virtues. Finally, another Scripture scholar suggested that joy and enthusiasm could lead to, uh oh, erotic love, which was seen as dangerous or at least suspect.

The German Jesuit theologian Father Hugo Rahner, who was Karl Rahner’s brother, once wrote a wonderful little book called “Man at Play,” in which he traces the notion of playfulness throughout Greek, Roman and early Christian thought. Hugo Rahner says that while Aristotle actually encouraged a person to be balanced in humor and seriousness, many early Christian writers favored a more serious approach to life, since they were concerned with facing the dangers of the world and the evils of Satan.

St. Paul, for example, writes in his Letter to the Ephesians that we must avoid “smartness in talk.” St. Clement of Alexandria warns against “humorous and unbecoming words.” St. Ambrose says, “Joking should be avoided even in small talk.” On the other hand, St. Augustine recommends some joking from time to time, and St. Thomas Aquinas recommends play in his writings, saying that there was a virtue in playfulness, since it leads to relaxation.

But Hugo Rahner recognized the real need for lightheartedness in the church. In his last chapter he writes, “Not everything in our civilization is in the hands of the devil, and thundering from the pulpit is not always in place.”

Writing around the same time as Rahner was a man with the wonderful name of Elton Trueblood, who wrote a terrific book called *The Humor of Christ*. He offered a different analysis of why we might fail to see humor in the New Testament, and why the church might have downplayed humor. First, we are overly familiar with the stories, and so we overlook their inherent humor. He recounts the tale of his 4-year-old son hearing the story of the speck of dust in your neighbor’s eye and the log in your own and just laughing uproariously.

Trueblood’s second explanation is that the great stress the Gospels place on the Passion means the sad parts almost overwhelm the joyful parts of the story. Finally, says

Trueblood, there is a failure of imagination about Jesus of Nazareth. Simply because Jesus could weep does not mean that he did not laugh. But he must have laughed. For that is what people do when they tell jokes or funny stories.

There is another tantalizing explanation of the dearth of humor and playfulness in the church, recently advanced by the author Barbara Ehrenreich. Last year she wrote a fascinating new book called

*Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*.

Her thesis is that something has really bothered some European men about enthusiasm and collective joy, which is often primitive or hedonistic. Now, she’s not only talking about the Catholic Church, but about all sorts of cultures. She says that what bothers the powers that be is that their social inferiors have assembled to enjoy

themselves, to assert their camaraderie and friendship, often make fun of their rulers, and so alter the state of things that they might prove to be a real threat, as in, say, the French Revolution. Joy could be subversive.

Ehrenreich says that the church fathers set aside the parts of Jesus’ message that embraced what she calls a “sweet and spontaneous form of socialism” for something far more serious. Because spontaneity, she suggests, always threatens the status quo. It reminds us that humor and laughter can sometimes be subversive and therefore scary.

Those are a few reasons why humor might have been given a short shrift in Christian circles: Jewish culture, Greek culture, Roman culture, a lack of understanding about what was considered funny, an over-familiarity with the story, an overemphasis on the Passion, a failure of the imagination, and the sociology of hierarchical institutions.

You might disagree with that little analysis, and that’s OK. The point is not to prove conclusively that the church has undervalued humor in the past, but that we need to value it today.

I would suggest that humor is not prized in the church today, at least on an official level. You might know a funny

We are overly familiar with the Gospel stories, and so we overlook their inherent humor. Elton Trueblood recounts the tale of his 4-year-old son hearing the story of the speck of dust in your neighbor’s eye and the log in your own and just laughing uproariously.

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priest or a humorous nun or a jokey pastoral associate, but, how many newly appointed bishops are officially described as funny? When was the last time you heard a bishop described by a Vatican official like this: “The bishop is completely hilarious and has an amazing sense of humor and laughs all the time?” Humor, as Barbara Ehrenreich suggests, is seen almost as a strike against a church leader when it should be seen as a requirement.

## Rich tradition of humor and joy

The undervaluing of humor is surprising when we look at the Gospels and find a Jesus who has a real sense of joy and even

Joy, humor and laughter are constant threads through the lives of many saints, disproving the stereotype of the dour, depressed, grumpy saint. You laugh with the saints.

playfulness, which you can see in many of the parables. And there are other indications that he must have been a person who was joyful. You’ll remember that at one point Jesus is even castigated for not being serious enough in the Gospels, for not being as serious as John. “The Son of man has come

eating and drinking,” says Jesus. “And you say, look, a glutton and a drunkard.”

Jesus himself embraces people with a sense of humor or even sarcasm. You’ll remember the story of Nathaniel, sitting under a fig tree when he is told by his friends that the Messiah is from Nazareth. Nathaniel says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” which is a joke about how backwards the city was. That doesn’t bother Jesus one bit. In fact, it seems to delight him. “There is an Israelite without guile!” he says.

And there are many signs of humor from the evangelists themselves—that is, from the way that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote and edited the Gospels. But again, we may be so familiar with them that we miss them. The story of Zaccheus, the short man who climbs up into a tree to get a better look at Jesus, is a touching but also very playful story, as written by Luke. Amy-Jill Levine pointed to the story of Eutychus, in Acts 20, sitting on the window ledge of a room in which St. Paul is talking and talking and talking around midnight. Eutychus finally falls asleep during the long speech by Paul, falls out the window, drops to the ground and is presumed dead—until Paul goes down, finds out that

he’s not dead, and then talks until dawn.

But while some church fathers and some quarters in the church may have downplayed the role of humor in Christian life, many of the saints never did. Most of the saints were joyful. While I was researching my book *My Life with the Saints*, I realized one thing: the saints were deeply attractive individuals whom people wanted to be around. And, in general, the people we find attractive usually have a sense of humor.

Joy, humor and laughter are constant threads through the lives of many saints, disproving the stereotype of the dour, depressed, grumpy saint. You laugh with the saints.

St. Teresa of Avila herself even spoke out against that kind of deadly serious Catholicism. “A sad nun is a bad nun,” she said. “I am more afraid of one unhappy sister than a crowd of evil spirits.... What would happen if we hid what little sense of humor we had? Let each of us humbly use this to cheer others.” So a doctor of the church is recommending a sense of humor.

Stories about the humor of the saints reach as far back as the early Roman martyrs—that is, from the very earliest days of the church. In the third century, St. Lawrence, who was burned to death on a gridiron over hot coals, called out to his executioners, “Turn me over. I’m done on this side!” Or remember, St. Augustine of Hippo, who famously prayed, “Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.”

And some saints were known specifically for their sense of humor. St. Philip Neri, for example, was called “The Humorous Saint,” and at his door was a little sign that said, “The House of Christian Mirth.” “Christian joy is a gift from God flowing from a good conscience,” he said. Once, a young priest asked him what prayer would be the most appropriate to say for a couple after a wedding Mass, and Philip Neri thought and said, “A prayer for peace.”

Saintly humor continues right up until modern times. The most well known contemporary example is Blessed Pope John XXIII, whose most famous joke came when a journalist innocently asked him, “Your Holiness, how many people work in the Vatican?” John said, “About half of them.” Another time he was walking in the streets and a woman passed him and said, “My God, he’s so fat!” And he turned around and said, “Madame, I trust you understand that the papal conclave is not exactly a beauty contest.”

In the 1940s, when John was still a cardinal and the papal nuncio in Paris, he was at an elegant dinner party, seated across from a woman wearing a very low-cut dress that exposed a good deal of cleavage. Someone turned to him and



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said, “Your Eminence, aren’t you embarrassed that everyone is looking at that woman?” And he said, “Oh no, everyone is looking at me, to see if *I’m* looking at her.”

## Win friends and influence people

The saints knew that there were some good reasons for humor. Humor can serve some serious purposes. So let’s look at 10 reasons for joy, humor and laughter in the church.

**1) Humor evangelizes.** Joy, humor and laughter show one’s joy in the Risen Christ and one’s faith in God. This essentially positive outlook shows people that you believe in the Resurrection, in the power of life over death and in the power of love over hatred. Don’t you think that after the Resurrection, the disciples were joyful? “All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well,” as Blessed Julian of Norwich said. Joy reveals faith.

On an even more practical level, St. Francis Xavier Seelos, the 19th-century Redemptorist priest, spoke of “holy hilarity” as a tool for spreading the Gospel. Joy draws others to Christ. Joy is an imitation of Christ. As St. Teresa said, “Why hide it?”

Once, when I was a Jesuit novice, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, came to visit our novitiate. Most religious orders these days are concerned about declining numbers, so I asked him the best way to increase vocations. He said, “Live your own vocation joyfully.” That’s good advice for everyone: joy attracts more people to Christ. Why would anyone want to join a group of miserable people?

And I continually point to that as the most effective way to increase vocations. You know, many of my friends have been vocation directors. In fact, it sometimes seems like all of my Jesuit friends are either presidents of high schools or vocation directors. Vocation ministry is gratifying work since they are able to meet young people on fire with their faith and can help them find the best path to meet God. It’s also a hard job. One of my friends always used to say that your whole year is reduced to one number: how many people choose to enter—something that you have no control over! One day, during a year when vocations were low, he was lamenting that fact. “All anyone cares about is one number!” I nodded sympathetically and said, “That’s true.” And I paused and said, “So how many are entering this year?” Fortunately, he has a good sense of humor!

Overall, from what my friends in vocation work tell me, it can be hard to figure out the best “tools” for attracting

vocations. That’s why I like to continually return to this advice from Father Kolvenbach: “Live your own vocation joyfully!” So simple, so profound and also so difficult!

As an aside, the Superior General of the Jesuits is usually called “Father General,” or more simply, “The General.” Anyway in the early 1960s, another Father General, Pedro Arrupe, who had a marvelous sense of humor, was visiting a Jesuit school in New York called Xavier High School. At the time, all the boys in the school wore military uniforms and had military drills and things like that. So when it was announced that Father General was coming to visit Xavier High School, the school decided that all the students would line the street, wearing their uniforms, as a way of giving Father General a special welcome.

Anyway, a friend of mine was accompanying Father General, and he said that the General’s car drove down the street in between hundreds of students in uniform. He opened the door, got out, and suddenly everyone snapped to attention and saluted. And Father Arrupe said, “Ha! Now I feel like a *real* general!”

**2) Humor is a tool for humility.** We can tell jokes about ourselves to deflate our egos, which is a good thing—especially for anyone working in an official capacity in the church, where it’s easy to get puffed up. That goes for cardinals who wear silk robes and have people kissing their rings. That goes for priests, brothers and sisters whom others think are holy just because they’re in a religious order. That goes for lay people in parishes and schools and hospitals and chanceries who exercise a great deal of power over people’s spiritual lives. All these people can get puffed up, and humor is a good way for people to remind themselves of their essential humanity, their essential poverty of spirit. For example, that Jesuit joke I told at the beginning is fun to tell. I love the Society of Jesus, but jokes remind me that Jesuits need to be careful about being too proud of their accomplishments, or too focused on too many practical matters.

You know the story of the three priests, Franciscan, Dominican and Jesuit, who are on retreat together? Anyway, they receive this special grace of finding themselves at the Nativity scene. So they’re kneeling before the Nativity scene,

Joy attracts more people to Christ. Why would anyone want to join a group of miserable people?

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and the Dominican says to Mary, “Oh the joy of seeing the Word made Flesh, of seeing the Incarnation of God, of seeing the hypostatic union of the human and the divine!” And the Franciscan says to Jesus, “Oh the joy of seeing how the Son of God identifies with the poor, and chooses to be born in poverty, and among the dear animals that he loves!” And the

Jesus deployed humor, exposing and defusing the arrogance of religious authorities with clever parables. Humor is a weapon in the battle against the arrogance and pride that sometimes infects our church.

Jesuit says to Joseph, “Have you considered sending him to a Jesuit high school?”

Humor deflates puffed-up egos. And it reminds us not to take ourselves with such deadly seriousness. That goes for people at the very top, too. Once, when Pope John XXIII was in Rome he got a letter from a little boy named Bruno. “Dear

Pope,” wrote Bruno, “I am undecided. I don’t know if I want to be a policeman or a pope. What do you think?” “Dear Bruno,” wrote the pope, “If you want my opinion, learn to be a policeman, for that cannot be improvised. If you are ever in Rome, please stop by and I will be glad to talk this over with you.”

That is an important way that the saints used humor: as a tool in their quest for humility. In the 1960s when the Red Brigade was causing violence in Rome, people would carry pictures of Padre Pio around for protection. One day Padre Pio was going into Rome, and one of his friends said, “Aren’t you worried about the Red Brigade?” And he said, “No, I have a picture of Padre Pio with me.”

### 3) Humor can shock listeners into recognizing reality.

In other words, humor can go right to the point. It puts things into perspective. St. Francis of Assisi once said, “Preach the Gospel. Use words when necessary.” That’s pretty clever and even funny. But it’s also a profound truth.

St. Anthony Avellino was a 17th-century canon lawyer who entered the Theatine order. One day a pious priest asked him, “Father Avellino, how long should one stay at the bedside of a sick person?” Rather than offer a long explanation, Avellino said, “Always be brief. There are two advantages: if they like you, they’ll want you back. If you’re boring, their displeasure will be short.”

Here’s a contemporary example of using humor to

get to the point. Last year, a Jesuit priest who is a spiritual director and psychologist was speaking to a group of Jesuit superiors in Australia about priestly formation. When he started to speak about the need for priests to have a mature understanding of their sexuality, one superior leapt up and said, “I think that anyone who is gay, even if they are celibate, and even if they’re ordained, should be kicked out of the priesthood.” And the speaker said, “Really? Who would do all the work?”

Rather than offer a lengthy disquisition about the validity of orders of the celibate gay priest, he used humor to both answer and deflect the question, silencing the man in a way that I imagine Jesus silenced people with some of his clever answers. Humor can be an effective tool for truth-telling in a way that mere argumentation and lengthy disquisitions simply cannot be.

**4) Humor speaks truth to power.** A witty remark is a time-honored way to challenge the pompous, puffed-up or the powerful. Jesus deployed humor in this way, exposing and defusing the arrogance of religious authorities with clever parables. Humor is a weapon in the battle against the arrogance and pride that sometimes infects our church.

A friend told me that her mother was once in the hospital at the same time that the local bishop was. After his operation the bishop went around room to room visiting all the patients. When he visited my friend’s mother, who was recovering from a difficult surgery, he said, very unctuously, “Well dear, I know exactly how you feel.” And she said, “Really? Did you have a hysterectomy, too?”

**5) Humor can show Christian courage.** As I mentioned, St. Lawrence showed his courage to his torturers during his martyrdom, saying, “I’m done on this side.” It’s both a pointed challenge to his executioners and a bold profession of faith. In that same vein, St. Thomas More in the 16th-century stepped up to the chopping block and, as he climbed the steps to his beheading, said to his executioner, “I pray you, help me on the way up, and I will take care of myself on the way down.” That brand of humor says, “I do not fear death.”

## Let God be playful

**6) Humor deepens our relationship with God.** One of the best ways to think about prayer is as a personal relationship. Like any relationship, our relationship with God often starts with infatuation; it goes through exciting and sometimes dry periods; it requires time; it requires listening; it requires some

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moments of silence, and it requires honesty. All the things that you say about friendship you can say about prayer.

Our relationship with God can also use some humor. That is, it's okay to be playful with God in your prayer and accept that God might want to be playful with you.

Once, when she was traveling to one of her convents, Teresa of Avila was knocked off her donkey and fell into the mud, injuring her leg. "Lord, you couldn't have picked a worse time for this to happen. Why would you let this happen?" she cried. The response in prayer that she heard was, "That is how I treat my friends." And Teresa said, "And that is why you have so few of them!" That's a playful way of addressing God and assumes God's own playfulness.

Here's a question: Can you allow God to be playful with you? The Book of Isaiah says, "The Lord takes delight in you." Can you allow God to delight in you, to be playful with you? On a practical level that means this: Can you imagine God not simply loving you, but as the British theologian James Alison says, liking you?

Can you allow God to give you things that delight you, and give you joy? Can you allow yourself to think that the wonderful or funny or unexpected things that surprise you are signs of God being playful with you? If you think of the metaphor of God as parent, you might say, "Doesn't a parent sometimes enjoy being playful with a child?" For myself, I think that those surprising moments in life are examples of God's delight in you.

The Jesuit priest Anthony DeMello said it best in one of his shortest recommendations for a meditation. "Look at God looking at you," he said, "and smiling."

**7) Humor welcomes.** Hospitality is an important virtue in both the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament, the act of welcoming Jesus into one's home was a sign of one's acceptance of Jesus. If a town didn't welcome the disciples, Jesus told them to wipe the dust of that town off their feet. Jesus himself welcomed those who were outsiders into the community, by healing them and by casting out demons. He was showing God's hospitality.

In the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah were rewarded for their hospitality of strangers with the gift of a son. A few Scripture scholars have even gone so far to say that the real sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, the reason that God condemned them is not so much for their licentious behavior, but lack of hospitality. And in the Middle Ages, the Benedictines gave us the wonderful motto, *Hospes venit, Christus venit*. The guest comes, Christ comes.

Humor is one way of showing hospitality. Perhaps the

easiest way to get people to feel at home is to make them laugh. You know that a dinner, party or gathering is successful and that people feel at home when they start to laugh.

A few years ago I worked in Nairobi, Kenya, with refugees. At the end of my first year I signed up for an eight-day retreat at the Jesuit retreat house in Nairobi. The retreat house grounds are just gorgeous, right at the foot of the Ngong Hills, right near the house of Isak Dinesen, or Karen Blixen, whom you might know about from the movie *Out of Africa*.

On the last day of the retreat, there was a big celebratory dinner, and everyone was supposed to speak about their retreat. When I looked around, I realized that the other few men, the priests and brothers, on retreat had left. So when I stood up, I looked around and it was just me and about 50 African sisters. I felt a little strange and was worried that I would say the wrong thing. So I blurted out, "I guess I'm the only man here." And from across the room an African sister called out, "And blessed are you among women!" Everyone laughed, and I felt right at home and could talk about my retreat with them. Laughter had welcomed me.

**8) Humor is healing.** Physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists believe that humor helps the healing process in the physical body. Laughter releases endorphins. And if we take seriously the Pauline image of the Body of Christ, we might consider that the same holds true for the Christian community. In the midst of some of the worst times in the church, with the sexual abuse crisis, and declining vocations, and parishes closing, the People of God could use, from time to time, some laughter. That's not to say that one laughs about the pain or sin in the church. Rather, humor gives us a much-needed break and can help us to heal. Humor is healthy during difficult times in the church.

**9) Humor fosters good relations and helps with our work.** This is perhaps most important for bishops, priests, sisters, directors of religious education and pastoral workers. In his parables Jesus used a little humor to help people understand difficult topics. Or consider a more secular example of the use of humor in management. In Doris Kearns Goodwin's wonderful book, *Team of Rivals*, she tells the story about how Abraham Lincoln gathered a very different group

Jesuit priest Anthony DeMello said it best in one of his shortest recommendations for a meditation. "Look at God looking at you," he said, "and smiling."

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of men around him in his cabinet. Most of the time they disagreed with each other, quarreled with one another, and even worked against one another. And one way that Abraham Lincoln lightened the atmosphere or made a point, without offending anyone, was to tell a good joke or a little country story to illustrate his point. Humor can make for good social relations.

Once, before the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII picked up a preparatory document, took one look at all the people that the document condemned and found it too harsh. Rather than arguing with the men who wrote it, or discussing the theological objections he had to these condemnations, and so on, he simply picked up a ruler, measured the document and said, "Look there are 30 centimeters of condemnations here!"

## Broaden your horizons

**10) Humor opens our minds.** Neuroscience tells us that when we laugh we release endorphins, and we can relax. Psychologists say that when we relax and feel less threatened, we are more able to listen and learn. So laughter helps to get your message across. Likewise laughter can signal a sudden spiritual insight. Often in spiritual direction when people finally, finally realize how foolish or sinful or selfish they have been acting, they laugh. They laugh at themselves and how foolish they have been to turn from God. Why do they laugh? Well, it's funny to think of how human we are, and it's joyful to know that we have been freed by God. Laughter both deepens and reveals understanding.

**11) Humor is fun.** Here's an 11th reason to embrace humor. And let me repeat that: it's fun. There may be no better reason for humor than that. God forbid that Catholics should actually enjoy ourselves and have fun, right? Fun—a word you don't hear in church much—is a foretaste of heaven. The saints understood this, and I would bet that Jesus understood the need to have some fun in life.

Those are some of the reasons that joy, humor and laughter should be part of everyone's spiritual lives, whatever your role is in the church. They are gifts from God to help us enjoy creation and build up the kingdom. They are also neglected gifts that need to be recovered for the health of the body of Christ. In short, joy, humor and laughter are part of the vocation of being Christian. Finally they are essential elements in attracting anyone to any kind of Christian vocation.

To that end, I'll conclude with, what else, a joke about two different kinds of vocations in the church. Why? Well, you know now that the better question is, why not?

A Jesuit priest and a Franciscan friar are driving to a Catholic college. Well, they're talking about liberation theology, and they get into this big argument, swerve off the road, hit a telephone pole, and go straight to heaven. The Jesuit and Franciscan suddenly find themselves standing in front of the gates of heaven, which are hidden behind some big white clouds. They're all excited, thinking, well, we spent all our lives serving the church and all that, so we're pretty excited to see what heaven is like.

In a few minutes, the clouds part, and the gates of heaven open, and trumpets sound and hundreds of angels start flying around and singing. Then a long red carpet rolls out, all the way up to the Jesuit. And out come all these Jesuit saints—Aloysius Gonzaga, Francis Xavier and Ignatius Loyola himself. They all hug the Jesuit, who is just overjoyed. And then ... out comes Mary, and St. Ignatius introduces her and she hugs the Jesuit, too.

Then there is a trumpet blast and out comes ... Jesus, who embraces the Jesuit and says, "Welcome to heaven." They all hug each other, and everybody starts singing St. Louis Jesuit songs, which is what they sing in heaven, and then they all go inside to heaven, laughing and singing.

Then the carpet rolls back up, and the angels go away, the gates close, and the clouds come back. And the Franciscan is left standing there in front of the gates by himself. Well, he's pretty excited, wondering what his welcome is going to be like. He waits some more. And some more. After about a half-hour he starts to get ticked off.

Finally, after an hour, a little side door opens up and St. Bonaventure says, "Hey!" And the Franciscan says, "Who, me?" And St. Bonaventure says, "Yeah, you." So the Franciscan goes up to the door and St. Bonaventure says, "Oh, yeah, hi ... um ... so ... welcome to heaven."

And the Franciscan says, "That's it?" And St. Bonaventure says, "Is what it?" And the Franciscan says, "Oh, come on! That's the welcome I get? I mean, the Jesuit gets the trumpets and the angels and the red carpet and the saints and Mary and Jesus, and all I get is this lousy welcome?"

And St. Bonaventure says, "Oh yeah, right ... well you have to understand something. We get Franciscans up here every day. We haven't had a Jesuit in heaven for 300 years!" ■

# BOOK NOTES

## Good entertainment, weak spiritual guidance

BY SISTER LINDA BECHEN, RSM

**I**T WAS WITH MUCH ANTICIPATION that I finally sat down to read Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* (Viking). I have treasured other works dubbed as "spiritual memoirs," such as Patricia Hampl's *Virgin Time* and Mary Swander's *The Desert Pilgrim*, which explored the authors' quests to find God in varied experiences and various places. For me a spiritual memoir offers a personal and honest search for God through the ordinary challenges and sometimes raw realities of life. These can offer hope, learning and reassurance for one's own life pilgrimage

Displaced, disenchanted, and discouraged, Gilbert invokes God desperately one evening at the low point of an irretrievable marriage. Up to this moment, God has not been a part of her experience, and spirituality has been reserved for some remote hideaway apart and exclusive from the daily-ness of life. Gilbert's invocation serves as an epiphany moment, which is confirmed when she is compelled to seek a spiritual guru and is invited by a medicine man to come to Bali so that he can teach her all he knows in exchange for her teaching him English. All of this interfaces in her life, and she finds herself embarking on a year-long journey to "pursue pleasure in

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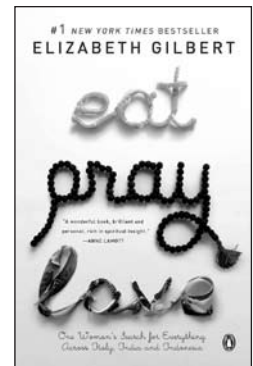


Italy, devotion in India, and balance in Indonesia."

In Italy she immerses herself in the country by learning Italian and indulging in the splendors of the food (she gains 25 pounds in three short months). She compensates by refocusing her life in an ashram in a remote rural Indian village. Here she gets up at 3 in the morning for meditation and service and ends her days at 9 p.m. Lastly she travels to Indonesia, where she enjoins her life to Ketut, a medicine man, who companions, consoles and counsels her on this segment of her journey.

What ensues is Gilbert's endeavor to claim who she is by exploring her life's purpose and direction. This effort is cloaked by her desire articulated early in the book: "I want to have a lasting experience of God... I want to be with God all the time. But I don't want to be a monk, or totally give up worldly pleasures. I guess what I want to learn is how to live in this world and enjoy its delights, but also devote myself to God" (page 26-27).

From this description, one may be led to believe that this is a handbook of discernment. It is not a book of discernment as much as a book of personal discovery laced with traces of spirituality. It is an enjoyable read, weaving witty stories, noteworthy characters and classic experiences; it offers personal revelation and delight as she finds bits and pieces to satisfy her thirsts and



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hungers. This is perhaps its attraction, making it a *New York Times* bestseller for more than a year. As a spiritual memoir, to nurture my own journey, or as a resource for others, it limps and is not one which I would promote in this manner.

From my perspective, it lacks some crucial elements needed by pilgrims who are seeking God and discerning a sense of meaning and purpose. First of all, a firm spiritual grounding is critical for this quest. This does not mean that one does not question or probe, but rather it calls one to be *rooted* in some spirituality or religion. Early in the book, Gilbert states that she is “culturally though not theologically Christian” (page 14). She dabbles in Buddhist meditation practices and in the rites and customs of the Balinese and has a Christian bent. This eclectic, cafeteria approach may have its benefits and satisfy short-term. Its sustainability over time, however, is questionable. There are many meaningful spiritual paths and practices; a solid grounding roots one in a faith tradition which not only serves as an anchor during one’s searching but also functions as a staff to guide during times of doubt, questioning and disillusionment.

Secondly, related to this need for spiritual grounding, it is apparent that some tools of discernment could have benefited Gilbert. These could have assisted her in reflecting on, responding to and integrating her experiences. Gilbert’s honesty is commendable and challenging. In the darkness of her honesty, the ability to rest in its desolation as she moved toward consolation would have been insightful and wisdom-filled. She acknowledges the darkness. However she lacks the tenacity to remain in this “dark night of the soul” and to trust in the grace which it has to offer. Rooting herself in the works of spiritual writings, especially of John of the Cross and Scripture, could have been helpful.

Thirdly, exploring one’s life purpose is hard work. Tenacity is needed to uncover the answers to two significant life questions aptly posed by Parker Palmer in his book, *Let your Life Speak*: “To whom do you want to entrust your life?” and “To what do you want to entrust your life?” I think that Gilbert has an ardent desire to entrust her life to God, but in some respects, at times, it feels like she does not entrust it beyond herself. Her focus seems narrow and self-serving. Significant relationships are few, and the extension of herself to the larger community is virtually limited to her time in India

when she was required to do service in order to remain living there. This is a time of renewal and revival for her, but it does not call her beyond herself to the larger community.

Lastly, this is a book that has a breadth of experience, yet it lacks the depth of reflection. Gilbert has innumerable encounters with persons and places; however, outside of the medicine man in Bali, she does not have one person with whom she shares this journey on an on-going basis such as a spiritual director or companion. There is no one who calls her to reflect on the patterns of her life, to incorporate the learnings, or to call her to probe the richness of her experience. It is a missed opportunity for her and us.

As I said previously, this is an enjoyable casual read and one which I would recommend as such. However, it lags as a spiritual resource and is missing some critical elements. One can only hope in this world of sequels, that *Eat, Pray, Love #2* will incorporate some of the above points filling in those voids and take it from “good” to “great.” It is an opportunity waiting to happen, only if Gilbert seizes the moment. ■

## New Anne Rice novel falls short

Anne Rice, the novelist who established herself with vampire stories and more recently produced two books based on the life of Christ (*Out of Egypt* and *The Road to Cana*), writes in *Called Out of Darkness* (Knopf) about her own faith journey. Her telling is demanding and sometimes painful. She describes her life from very early childhood in Catholic New Orleans, through her loss of faith in college and on into adulthood as a self-proclaimed atheist. Her reconciliation with God and her ultimate return to the church rounds out an what is for readers an exhausting journey. The pace is unbelievably slow; her loss of faith is sudden and very briefly explained. When she finally rounds the corner in returning to faith, we’re back to an almost ethereal world that feels a bit otherworldly and hard to connect with. This book takes on a worthwhile subject but falls short of delivering on its promise. —Sister Pat Kenny, RSM ■



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