

# HORIZON



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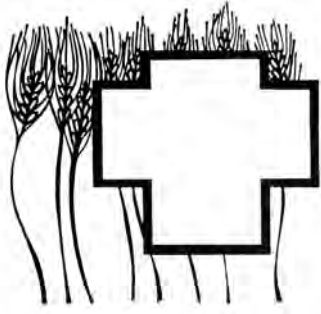
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# EDITOR'S NOTE

## Be prepared, the American way

**W**e North Americans believe in being prepared. Visit a bookstore and look at the titles. Entire cottage industries exist to help people prepare for life passages: becoming a parent, going to college, retiring from a job, and the list goes on. If you've ever spent time in a non-Western culture, you'll know that our penchant for preparedness is a distinct characteristic of the United States that is not shared by all cultures. (I can't imagine that it's always been so; it's hard to imagine early Americans tucking *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Settling the West* under an arm before setting out in their wagon trains.)

Whatever the origin, the fact remains that many of us like to know what's coming and get ready. Vocation ministers and prospective new members are no different. Entering a religious community is a major life transition, whereby one takes on a new identity, begins new work and lives in a new place with new people who have new expectations.

Perhaps there *ought* to be a *Complete Idiot's Guide to Religious Life*, but since there isn't, we at HORIZON hope that this edition will help new members and vocation

ministers alike make sense of this transition for those who are discerning a call. Serious discerners often want to know what happens during formation for religious life, and many want to begin preparing for it. Discerners may want to begin developing the skills and attitudes that will allow them to get the most out of the critical formation period.

If vocation and formation ministers and new members get this preparation time right, the whole church benefits because future church ministers will be healthy people with deep faith and well-grounded theological insight.

Life is never as tidy as guidebooks and articles indicate, but all of us who contribute to HORIZON hope that these articles will point vocation ministers and prospective members in helpful directions and get them asking the right questions. Pondering the issues we address in this edition is not a bad use of leisurely summer days.... So go ahead, get prepared.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor  
cscheiber@nrvc.net



Just because candidates are in their 20s or 30s and have met certain goals in life doesn't mean they are healthy, mature adults, capable of living well in a religious community. What are the signs, then, of true human development?

# Human formation never ends: candidates and adult maturity

BY FATHER JAMES GREENFIELD, OSFS AND FATHER KEVIN NADOLSKI, OSFS

**A**DMISSION to our religious community's formation program is a necessary, varied and involved process. And it frequently brings the applicant a fair bit of anxiety. From the psychological assessment and various medical examinations to the numerous interviews with members of the admissions committee and the probing background checks, the man could be overwhelmed at the extent of the work involved in applying to a religious order. Ironically the one task that appears to give most candidates the most anxiety is what we hoped would be quite simple: a one-page, single-spaced essay to answer the question: "Who am I?"

This autobiography is designed to engage the applicant in a right-brained, image-driven, narrative of his life. Numbers and data come from the assessment. Story, wherein the candidate is the protagonist, comes from the applicant. Deliberation, freedom and appropriate self-satisfaction with life's choices need to emerge through the telling of what the candidate decides is most important to include.

We obviously understand that it is a

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challenge to address such an important question in a fixed space. Yet we have learned that the exercise provides a wealth of information about the candidate's personality, history and identity. What's more, the text offers a window into the drama of his human development, an area of both initial and ongoing formation that is essential for a healthy religious life.

The conversation about human development is an urgent one for vocation and formation ministers today. Certainly religious communities have sought to welcome healthy women and men to their fold, and we have felt deeply the painful consequences when unhealthy or underdeveloped candidates are admitted. For the vocation minister attention to human development is essential. In this article human development is understood as the intersection of the biological, psychological, spiritual and social processes that create a person's self-understanding. It is a combination of personal information and autobiography that answers the question, "Who am I?"

In this article we will outline four identity statuses that can assist vocation ministers as they walk with candidates through the discernment and application process. Attention will be given to understanding where candidates are at the time of application by investigating two key variables—commitment and exploration—both of which facilitate identity formation. We will also provide a checklist for considering varying dimensions of a candidate's human development that may underscore a relationship and may indicate readiness for a formation program. We conclude with a brief discussion of "yellow flags" that may prompt caution for vocation ministers in their ongoing work with candidates.

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## Identity statuses indicate maturity

As the psychological assessment uses measured inventories and other instruments, vocation directors could struggle with how to decide to view someone's maturity or human development. Elaborating on the seminal work of Erik Erikson, James Marcia provides a useful tool in offering four distinct windows to frame candidates' development. Mining the rich interplay of factors that go into identity development, Erikson properly situates the time of adolescence as the stage in life when these processes are particularly salient. For our purposes, we apply Marcia's concepts to points beyond adolescence in order to illustrate the context of identity development for candidates to religious communities. Marcia names his four levels of identity achievement as follows: *identity achievement*, *identity moratorium*, *identity foreclosure*, and *identity diffusion*. Marcia sees that identity formation is accomplished and advanced through the behaviors of commitment and exploration.<sup>1</sup> Let us look at what each of Marcia's levels of identity might mean when applied to candidates.

### Identity achievement

Identity-achieved individuals have undergone the exploratory process and made occupational and ideological commitments. Resolved and resilient, they are now able to describe their choices and express the reasons for them. They are typically sensitive to external demands and make their decisions based on internalized values that they can make their own.

They tend to have more peaceful relationships with their families and even appreciate the differences that exist within the family system. They perform well under stress, reason at high levels of moral development, are relatively resilient to self-esteem manipulation and appear to have internalized self-regulatory processes.

Two common examples of this personality development may be helpful. Tyron is a high school senior who has engaged in the process of "college-shopping" by seriously exploring all his choices and reasons for and against certain schools. At the end of the process he chooses which school seems best and makes a whole-hearted attempt to meet all the requirements for acceptance. Megan is a college senior who wrestles with her desire to either find her first full-time job or to serve in a full-time volunteer program such as Mercy Corps. After thoughtful discernment and information-gathering, she makes a decision and moves forward with her plan of action.<sup>2</sup>

### Identity moratorium

Individuals in this moratorium status of development represent almost total exploration, but it is a transitional position, since most people move on to the aforementioned identity achievement. Here people are often intense, active, lively, struggling, engaging and occasionally exhausting! They seize the opportunity to engage family, teachers and friends as sounding boards for expressing or working out their current dilemmas. They characteristically make no commitments

Identity-achieved individuals have undergone the exploratory process and made occupational and ideological commitments.

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because the exploratory process defines their basic approach to life. They often deal with the fundamental questions to which there is really no one right answer and laboriously ponder significant issues at the expense of decision making, which is required for identity achievement.<sup>3</sup>

## Identity foreclosure

Foreclosed individuals make a commitment, but they do this without the exploration that facilitates human development. The commitment generally reflects the wishes of parents or other authority figures. People with this identity status tend to

It is the necessary and hard work of exploration and commitment that aids human development.

be neat, well-organized, goal-directed, clean and well-behaved. They prefer to be told what to do by an acceptable authority figure rather than to determine their own directions. They are inflexible in their thought processes,

tend to espouse more values at the level of Kohlberg's "Law and Order,"<sup>4</sup> are generally obedient and conforming, and deal with negative information about themselves by either a façade of acceptance or active resistance. "Foreclosures" have little doubt about what is right, and they tend to choose as friends and partners people who are very much like them. They might affiliate with a particular political party simply because their parents do.<sup>5</sup>

## Identity diffusion

The last status is the identity-diffused individual. Such persons may engage in cursory and intermittent exploration but remain uncommitted. Here two typical personality types emerge: the socially isolated and apathetic, and the interpersonally frivolous. "Whereas the description of the foreclosure family could provide material for a full-color government brochure on the happy, healthy family, the description of the diffusion family is more dismal."<sup>6</sup> Clarification is needed about Marcia's original word choice to describe identity formation variables. He used the word "crisis." However later researchers decided upon the word "exploration." Identity-diffused individuals are in a perpetual state of crisis and do not have the internal mechanisms of control to engage the processes of healthy development.

In brief these four identity statuses broadly describe the developmental places where candidates can be as they discern the choice for religious life. The research points to a dynamic in which there is a healthy movement, across time, to and from the identity-achieved and moratorium statuses. For example younger candidates may appear—and, in fact, live—in the achieved status, yet their achievement is not as deep as it needs to be to withstand some of the challenges that may eventually confront them. Here commitment is high and sincere, but exploration is limited. And candidates who seem just to test whether religious life is a viable life choice after trying out others, may move from moratorium to achieved, though only in a limited fashion, for they have not let go of the need or desire to keep testing options beyond religious life.

Conversely, with other candidates exploration might be high, but commitment is low. Candidates in the foreclosed identity status may be challenging to engage, as there could be a rigidity or fear that accompanies the foreclosed acceptance of the identity chosen, especially since it is someone else's, and this is a much needed source of approval.

As difficult as the foreclosed-identity candidates can be, the most difficult identity status to deal with is the diffused. Candidates in this modality should *not* be accepted, for they have completed little or no commitment or exploration and exhibit little desire for either.

As mentioned above, it is the necessary and hard work of exploration and commitment that aids human development. While the descriptions of the four identity statuses may help vocation ministers to frame each candidate's human development, what may help vocation ministers the most is to discuss with candidates their experiences of exploration and commitment. Asking open-ended questions, the minister might prompt conversations about experiences of risk, failure, ambiguity, challenging decision processes or troubled conscience.

To determine the quality of a candidate's commitments, the minister could ask the person to cite behaviors that illustrate the depth or extent of commitments made. For example one candidate could provide inspiring words on behalf of social justice and the poor, but how much time has he given to working in such ministries? Another could talk lovingly about prayer, yet how conversant is she about her prayer life and the ways it is integrated into her life? This process of probing candidates' history with exploration and commitment is essential for vocation ministers as they grapple with understanding the human development of the people before them.



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Jeffrey Jensen Arnett's research on emerging adulthood, now widely accepted as redefining the heretofore fixed developmental stages of adolescence and adulthood, aids the conversation about the human development of candidates for religious life.<sup>7</sup> Previously there were assumptions that went along with a candidate's age and state in life. For example if a man completed college and a master's degree and applied for religious life in his late 20s, he was considered a healthy and smart adult. Similarly a woman who delayed her college education to care for sick parents until their death and then applied to a community in her 30s was deemed a generous, if not heroic, adult woman. Neither is necessarily true. Arnett presents adulthood, not as a function of chronology or education, but of exploration and commitment. He pointed out that true adulthood may not be reached when adults delay or easily exit marriage or when they frequently make career changes. These behaviors sometimes indicate a lack of healthy exploration and commitment. Arnett's theory stresses the negative impact of delaying or avoiding exploration and commitment in one's 20s and 30s.

These statuses and phenomena that Erikson, Marcia and Arnett have advanced are indeed helpful for vocation ministers. Yet it must be acknowledged that their work has not been evaluated among cultures beyond North America. The increasing racial and ethnic diversity among applicants to religious life is a clear gift for the church. Yet it presents a challenge for vocation ministers who may be unfamiliar with other cultures. It is not safe to assume that the work of these men applies to candidates beyond a white, Anglo profile.

## A checklist

As this pluralism becomes the norm of social experience for candidates—with globalization touching all aspects of church and secular societies—it is helpful to be able to establish important factors that need to be addressed in understanding candidates for religious life. Sister Katarina Schuth, OSF, suggests that seminarians have a unique profile based on a number of factors that are unique to each. Her list of what shapes seminarians provides a parallel application for candidates to religious life.

- ✓ **Heritage** Family background, personality and character, place of origin, religious background, age and health.
- ✓ **Education** Natural intellectual abilities,

educational background, learning styles and financial success or failure.

- ✓ **Culture** Racial and ethnic background, cultural experience, language background and attitude toward culture.
- ✓ **Church** Experience of church, theological or ideological position, spiritual experiences, liturgical experiences, devotional life and ministerial images and goals.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, Schuth's four categories contribute immeasurably to candidates' identity and their development. Furthermore this listing is not exhaustive. Two factors that seem necessary to add are relationship and aesthetics.

- ✓ **Relationship** Includes the candidate's ability to initiate and sustain peer friendships and work/ministerial relationships, express the self clearly, appropriately and reflectively, forgive, respect boundaries, discuss comfortably one's sexuality and socialize effectively.
- ✓ **Aesthetics** Refers to the capacity to appreciate, experience, create and discuss beauty. Church ministers who seek to bring people to sacred moments need an aptitude for probing the beautiful.

## Affective development

A 2004 symposium at Chicago's Mundelein Seminary sponsored by the Cardinal Suenens Center on the important, yet elusive topic of affective conversion for ministerial candidates suggests that the elusive nature of themes and topics related to human formation and development does not make them any less important. In fact the contrary is true. As vocation ministers and formators wrestle with tough questions about the difficult matter of human development, the field of factors in candidates' personalities and histories grows. This, too, is a gift for the church, for it provides more opportunities for candidates to be engaged, stretched and known by themselves and the ministers with whom they work. Things like culture, aesthetics, relationality and ethics contribute greatly to a candidate's affective maturity. Moreover these translate operationally into the all-important "people skills" that the church yearns for in its ministers. Leadership theorist Sister Theresa Monroe, RSCJ, calls these "transactional skills."<sup>9</sup>

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These six profile dimensions provide vocation ministers with important data. However, these data do not necessarily translate into information about a candidate's human development. It becomes the important ministerial responsibility of the vocation leader to use this panoply of topics and themes to probe with questions of exploration and commitment. It is only here, after deep dialoguing around these dimensions of identity that the ministers can begin to see to what extent—or not—a candidate's development has progressed. Again the questions become important:

- What successes or failures in relating have helped you grow?
- How did you resolve a difficult disagreement with a loved one or authority figure?
- What aspects of your culture do you resist or find problematic?
- Have you ever befriended someone different from yourself?

## Some “yellow flags”

Vocation ministers are probably able to recognize those issues that preclude candidates from religious life. A candidate who has no friends, a passive personality, strong self-centered tendencies, steep narcissistic traits, or an irredeemably poor self-image should not be welcomed to the application process. These characteristics are, by definition, red flags that bring the process to an end. However there are other traits that could serve as “yellow flags” to caution the vocation minister on how or whether to proceed.

Candidates who are chronically agreeable, overly talkative and who possess a host of obsessive-compulsive traits and considerable anxiety need to be engaged with substantial deliberation, as these traits can point to problems in their human development, whether caused by trauma, personality disorder, or weaknesses in the work of development. Once the vocation minister sees evidence of these traits, it is wise to begin a process in which questions are asked about the candidate's exploration and commitment and his or her intersection with the yellow-flag traits. It is possible that these two necessary facilitators of healthy development were impeded. If this is the case, renewed attention to the identity statuses is in order.

As fewer women and men join the ranks of religious communities, the number of people who live in each local

community obviously becomes smaller. Consequently community life becomes more intense. Yellow-flag traits that make a vocation minister uneasy will surely make the few people with whom that candidate will eventually live uneasy, for the other members will experience firsthand the pain, discomfort and annoyance of those personal liabilities. Attention to human development in the general sense can avert the need for attention to aggravating idiosyncracies in the specific, living situations of community life.

## Healthy religious needed

At the beginning of Pope Benedict's recent pastoral visit to the United States, one of his first statements was on ministerial formation. His call and preference for “good priests rather than many priests” suggests that he understands the interplay of human development and the tasks involved for men to progress as healthy adults for their ordained ministry. His comments were in the context of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, wherein offenders were underdeveloped—if not pathological—and precluded from healthy human development. While Benedict would undoubtedly include descriptors like holiness, generous ministry, good preaching, and commitment to the poor in his definition of a good priest, his context certainly suggests that there is also a call for healthy development, frequently called “affective maturity” in Vatican documents that address formation. The pope's message referred to ordained ministry, and yet clearly the message applies equally to religious life. In a time when we want more members, we must not let our desire for more members discolor or dissuade us from our insistence and work toward admitting good, *healthy* members.

The tasks of human development are clear. Exploration and commitment help people grow into strong adults able to live religious life well. Vocation ministers enjoy a worthy and challenging responsibility as they help candidates to tell the story of their own development, a story in which candidates themselves have played the most important role in the narrative that answers an essential and central question as we admit new members: “Who am I?” ■

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1. James Marcia developed the research concerning identity statuses, and here we base our summary on the following works: “Development and Validity in Ego Identity Statuses,” 1. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 3 (1996) 551-

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558; "Identity in Adolescence," in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, ed. J. Adelson, (New York: Wiley, 1980); "The Empirical Study of Ego Identity," H. Bosma, T. Graafsma, H. Grotevant, and D. de Levit, editors, *Identity and Development: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications).

2. This example is drawn from the body of Marcia's work as noted above.

3. Ibid.

4. Lawrence Kohlberg, "Revision in Theory and Practice of Moral Development," *New Directions for Child Development* 23 (1978), 141-161.

5. Marcia, all works.

6. Marcia, 76.

7. Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

8. Sister Katarina Schuth, OSF, "Introduction," in *Catholic Priesthood: Formation and Human Development*, G. Colemean, T.G. Plante, and K. Schuth, (Liguori, MO, Liguori, 2006), 20.

9. Sister Theresa Monroe, RSCJ, "Hidden Challenge of Taking up the Role of Pastoral Leader," in *Experiences of Priests Ordained Five to Nine Years*, Dean Hoge (NCEA Publications: Washington, DC, 2006).

The U.S. Catholic ministry world has changed a great deal. Here is what the church needs from pastoral ministers today and how vocation ministers can help discerners begin to prepare.

# Helping serious discerners prepare for pastoral formation

BY FATHER DAVID B. COUTURIER, OFM CAP.

**M**INISTRY HAS BEEN CHANGING dramatically in the U.S. for religious and priests. As Catholics have become a more culturally diverse and more economically disparate segment of the American population,<sup>1</sup> religious men and women have adjusted to these new demographic and economic trends by significantly diversifying their ministries and expanding their categories of pastoral service to include apostolic works of personal, interpersonal, ecclesial and structural conversion.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, ministerial service today requires pastoral imagination, creativity, integrity, transparency, collaboration, accountability and skills in leadership never before experienced in pastoral ministry to this degree.

## Trends: non-ecclesial jobs, immigrant membership and priest-shortage

For religious communities congregational mission is no longer immediately synonymous with province-owned institutions. In fact in a recent study with Miriam Ukeritis, I noted the trend in religious communities to move from province-owned institutions to province-endorsed personal ministries and now to province-endorsed personal, non-ecclesial jobs.<sup>3</sup> More and more religious are trading in unstable

ministries in parishes and dioceses, along with province-owned institutions, for more secure work in other sectors. It appears that a confluence of factors that include economic instability in both religious and diocesan communities, as well as differences in the theological understanding of ministerial leadership, have led a greater number of religious to work outside traditional diocesan settings.

The situation of ministry is confounded by the now chronic new-member shortage affecting religious and priestly life. As scholar Dean Hoge recently noted, the total number of Catholics in America is growing by an estimated 9 to 11 percent per decade, but the number of those serving them is not keeping pace. Rather it is falling precipitously and disproportionately.<sup>4</sup> To meet emerging pastoral challenges, Catholic communities are looking overseas for relief for their new-member shortage. This rise in foreign-born members comes with blessings and challenges. Foreign-born new members often convey fresh perspectives on ministry and an enlivening enthusiasm for service, and they bring to our shores an expansive lived experience of the concerns and spiritual resources of the global church. At the same time, these new partners in ministry are culturally and linguistically different from what we have been used to in the recent past. More than 20 percent of all ordinations in the U.S. in 2004, for example, were of seminarians brought here to serve from other parts of the world; that number is projected to rise to 50 percent in the near future.<sup>5</sup> This is a challenge, since initial data suggests that these foreign-born priests and members of religious communities are experiencing high levels of isolation, both from the laity and communities they serve and, in the case of priests, the presbyterates into which they are incardinated.

Other changes to be noted are the following. Nearly 27 percent of all parishes in the U.S., 50 percent of all parishes

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worldwide, are without a resident priest. To cope with this, dioceses are experimenting with the institution of “parish life directors.” I say, “experimenting,” because, as one bishop recently told me, there are few theological models for this new position. In fact, in the face of what is now regarded as a chronic vocation shortage, dioceses are beginning to revisit the whole process of recruiting and forming the next generation of pastoral ministers—seminarians, deacons, religious and lay parish life directors.

Across the country, as the number of Catholics increases, religious communities and dioceses are undertaking an unprecedented reorganization and reconfiguration. To conserve human resources and continue the mission, many religious congregations have undertaken congregational or provincial mergers or unions, which are providing greater flexibility and adaptability across a range of ministries.

Dioceses are beginning their own processes of reorganization involving the yoking, twinning and clustering of parishes with fewer priests and dwindling numbers of master’s-level directors of church programs. It is not uncommon for young and relatively inexperienced priests to be called upon to pastor several parishes simultaneously and alone. Recently I met a priest 10 years ordained who was pastor of six churches *and* a high school religion teacher—all at the same time. This multiplication and intensification of roles can complicate priests’ collaboration with lay and religious ministers. Religious are finding it more difficult to work with increasingly busy, harried and stressed-out clergy.

Understandably a few dioceses have begun to monitor the health risks and attrition rates of their younger clergy because of the high danger of stress early on in ministry. Factor in the dramatic new influx of Hispanic and African immigrants onto the American Catholic scene, with the expectation that ministry must be done multi-culturally and across several languages,

and one can see just how challenging is the task of pastoral formation in religious communities and seminaries.

Given this current context, I want to lay out a thesis and explore some assumptions about promoting pastoral formation early on in the process of vocational discernment.

## New pastoral paradigm

First let me share the thesis. It is stark. The pastoral formation of religious and seminarians today requires a fundamental paradigm shift.

A generation ago the task of pastoral formation in America was relatively simple—to prepare the ministerial workforce for Catholicism’s apologetic expansion into a post-industrial economic world. Increasing numbers of vocations from a largely poor and immigrant population provided the church with a steady stream of direct pastoral service providers (teachers, nurses, social workers and associate pastors). These men and women were charged with a relatively direct and unified mission: to defend the faith in an alien land and move a generation of immigrant Catholics up and out of disadvantage as quickly as possible. To that end it was enough to provide candidates with the individual training required of those who would minister personally with individuals at the most basic and local levels of caring. In this light it was sufficient to offer degrees to equip teachers for the classroom, nurses for the hospital, and priests for the

The goal of pastoral formation is now changing, as the needs of the church and society shift dramatically. What is needed from religious formation programs and seminaries is a new generation of religious leaders.

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altar. Pastoral formation, as education and training in the caring activities of God, the church and society, was calibrated to the individual's caring behavior and his or her ability to reflect maturely and theologically upon that practice. Thus we saw a rising popularity in faith-sharing groups and clinical pastoral education programs in religious and presbyteral formation programs.

The goal of pastoral formation is now changing, as the needs of the church and society shift dramatically. What is needed from seminaries and religious formation programs is a new generation of religious leaders, with a style of prophetic leadership, attuned to humble and generous service and not the dominating and depriving models of

We require and we will train men and women who want to be religious leaders, not just followers.

governance that are the provenance of globalization today. Let me be clear. Pastoral formation must always educate men and women into the virtues and skills of personal pastoral care. This is fundamental and foundational. However formation programs must also send out the word that we require and we will train men and women who want to be religious leaders, not just followers, in the world of the twenty-first century. This demands the development in candidates of an emotional intelligence rooted in biblical inspiration and the church's ancient tradition of pastoral care. The goal of pastoral formation, therefore, is to prepare men and women to be deeply-spiritual and theologically-rooted religious leaders who can do five things:

- Articulate, in an inspiring way, the church's pastoral vision and the community's founding charism;
- Engage and coordinate collaborative pastoral action for mission effectiveness;
- Empower pastoral care through mutual effort, especially at the most painful points of congregational failure or communal apathy;
- Work through and help resolve group conflict so that communities can witness their spiritually-based "resurrection politics," as Missouri Senator John Danforth once described the work of the church;

- Gather groups by presence and witness, proclamation and catechesis, prayer and contemplation, liberation and social development, and dialogue to act out their Trinitarian identity as a "free communion of persons without domination or deprivation."

What changes, then, are needed in our approaches to pastoral formation, if we are to form men and women from day one of initial formation to become religious leaders in the church of the 21st century? We need to look at two realities: what the cohort of new discerners brings with them to religion today and the assumptions inherent in our pastoral programs.

## The new young adult discerners

How ready are our new adult discerners to take up the expectation that they be religious leaders in the world today? On the one hand, these men and women are impressively zealous and passionate about the faith. On the whole they are positive about the church and its mission. They resist cynicism and negativity, even as they manage the antagonisms resulting from the sexual, authority and media scandal of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are the inheritors of a tradition of social entrepreneurship at work that places a premium on personal ingenuity, confidence, creativity and adaptation. They appear less tied to doing the same old thing in the same old way, because we have always done it that way. They have grown up being asked their opinion and being rewarded for expressing their thoughts. They enter religion with the expectation of more of the same and with a decided bias for promoting the best ideas (their own included), from wherever and whenever they come. They are the first generation that can tell the lies of modernism and postmodernism from personal experience. They generally do not believe in the myth of "inevitable human progress" and mostly distrust a too rosy picture of human freedom, since they have inherited and, in some cases, regrettably experimented with the social disruptions that broke out in the latter half of the 20th century (i.e., divorce, cohabitation and sexual disinhibition). They are a generation that values change, but change allied with tradition, not against it. Overall their enthusiasm, positive spirit, creativity and transparency are a good baseline for building their emotional intelligence in pastoral formation and even during the discernment period.

At the same time, this generation is more a cohort of

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cultures than of individuals. They are among the most diverse groups ever to enter religion. The range of their Catholic experiences and personal needs makes it difficult for them to communicate from any single point of reference. As I have written elsewhere, they emerge from seven distinct but internally coherent “cultures of Catholic formation.”<sup>6</sup> These diverse cultures (essentialist, existentialist, socialization, behavioral, neo-essentialist, liberation and professional) work from separate but stable sets of beliefs, emotions, rituals and tools. Each culture expresses a value that is critical for pastoral service: fidelity, maturity, community, action, leadership, justice and accountability, respectively. Unfortunately we live in a polarizing time that sets these Catholic cultures and values over against one another. Vocation and formation ministers need to help new members and seminarians recognize, appreciate and learn from the pastoral insights, experiences and models of other Catholics similarly engaged in ministry.

It wasn't that long ago when those entering religious life and seminaries came from relatively similar Catholic backgrounds. Ethnic differences notwithstanding, seminaries and formation houses were generally monochrome in their look and uniform in their behavior. With this background, the post-Vatican II church invested more cultural diversity into its programs, including pastoral formation programs that required cross-cultural training and second-language acquisition.

What separates religious and seminarians now is not only cultural diversity but, more probatively, economic disparity.<sup>7</sup> This is especially true of programs that welcome candidates from other parts of the world, especially Africa and Latin America. Adult discerners are not only speaking different languages but engaging the world from vastly different economic horizons and ministerial assumptions, expectations that hide substantial disagreements over the place of family, the use of community resources, the management of time, and the idea of the common good in religious communities.

Notwithstanding the substantial diversity of life experiences, careers, age and cultures that characterize young adult discerners from the Northern Hemisphere, there are some things they do share in common.

For example they are the first generation of discerners to have lived their entire life in a boom economy, although that appears to be coming to an end. They are a generation that has seen primarily economic expansion and benefited from years of relatively low unemployment, increasing disposable income and ready access to higher education. They

are a generation that has yet to feel the strain of widespread economic pain. Few Americans entering religious life or diocesan seminaries have known hunger, material want or even very much delayed gratification. Even though they have lived through several wars already, these wars have been waged largely by proxy, with lots of borrowed money and little tangible sacrifice in the lifestyle of most Americans. This bright picture of economics skews their pastoral readiness to serve in a global world, especially one now experiencing a widening chasm between a small segment of the world population that is privileged, largely in the North, and the vast majority of the world, mostly in the South, that is dangerously deprived of the bare necessities of life.<sup>8</sup>

Managing the complexities of change will be the issue facing pastoral ministers as American Catholic communities continue further down the road of congregational and diocesan reconfiguration.

## Coping with economic hardship

If these men and women are to be reliable religious leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they will soon have to learn how to be pastoral ministers of congregations without means. I am here making a fundamental distinction between pastoral administrators who are called upon to manage the complexity and distribution of available resources in stable times and religious leaders who are called upon to act when available resources just aren't adequate, and transformation in the community is required.

Managing the complexities of change will be the issue facing pastoral ministers as American Catholic communities continue further down the road of congregational and diocesan reconfiguration. A chronic and unabated vocation shortage will test the survival strategies and diminishment thinking now controlling the downsizing and reorganization of our Catholic communities. We are nearing the tipping point where we bump up against age limits and physical boundaries in pastoral service. Pastoral leaders will be needed who can articulate a vision and mobilize effective congregational action as to the kind of Eucharistic community of compassion and justice we want to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Religious leaders will be needed at all levels of the church who can keep communities vibrantly committed to and working

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at the Gospel's resurrection vision of the creation of "a new heaven and a new earth."<sup>9</sup> Pastoral formation for this kind of religious leadership must start as soon as possible. This shift will not be easy. Many of the prevailing models of pastoral formation are still preparing seminarians, deacons, religious and pastoral ministers only to be direct pastoral service providers. We don't yet expect them to be religious leaders

Discerners from experiences [in well-off parishes] are often shocked by the challenges of communities without means.

of complex pastoral systems any time soon.

This is unfortunate.

Young adult discerners are ready for just this kind of new challenge.

Many of our young adult discerners grew up in strong Catholic parishes that embraced their ecclesial identity as "the people of God." As such their remote pastoral formation has

been influenced by the community-minded outreach typical of largely suburban Catholic parishes. This is the world of well-oiled and increasingly well-off congregations that divide up pastoral tasks into scores of largely lay-run ministries that are efficient and orderly. Discerners from these congregational experiences are often shocked by the challenges of communities without means. They would do well early in their formation to have supported experiences in urban (or rural) Catholic parishes, especially those where one learns how to be a member of a Christian community with deep needs and almost no material resources available. Learning the logic and skills of pastoral community organizing under these conditions could generate powerful theological reflections on new forms and opportunities for religious leadership today.

This leads us to the issue of the kind of theological imagination required for pastoral leadership in the 21st century. This generation of adult discerners is amazingly adept at the visual and the digital. They blog constantly and text message at breakneck speed, with limited attention to detail and little time for serious research or sustained reflection. They are constantly wired, online and on call 24-7. Through their use of Internet sites such as MySpace and YouTube, they are turning traditional notions of privacy on their heads. The virtual is now fast becoming their preferred interpersonal space. New adult discerners are one step away from virtual relationships.

And yet, we are a people of the text and of communion in real presence. We must teach young adult discerners a new type of cyber-asceticism, one that connects traditional spirituality with contemporary cultural expressions. In this way, we can demonstrate to an overly stimulated group of candidates how the patience of mutual story-telling, like that found in the Gospels, along with the interplay of dialogue and silence can be the fundamental rubric of a new contemplative spirit for pastoral service in today's world.

It has frankly surprised me just how limited many of the Catholic experiences of our young adult discerners truly are. Given their sometimes wide tally of romantic and social experiences, those coming to community life are parochially quite monogamous. They have not had very many different Catholic parochial experiences. Their home parish often becomes the norm over against which they judge all other Catholic forms of worship and celebration. This is strikingly true of those new to the faith or just returning to the faith after some time. They can easily lock onto a college campus experience or a television ritual with a rigid, religious tenacity, declaring theirs to be the only true form of Catholic worship required (for everyone else) in today's complex world. During discernment as well as formation, we must help these young discerners negotiate these turbulent waters, especially when these streams have become polluted by the polarizing language many have picked up from the media, both secular and religious.

## Promoting a new pastoral formation

What then can we do concretely to promote the pastoral formation of leaders with young adult discerners? The first thing, obviously, is to commit our programs, policies and procedures to an accurate theological understanding of religious leadership at all levels of formation, beginning with the later stages of the discernment period that takes place with vocation ministers. We should audit our programs for actions and attitudes that depress the development of emotional intelligence and theological reflection on ecclesial action. Young people need help thinking critically and theologically about the caring activities of the church and society. Deep theological reflection seems in short supply for a generation weaned on catechetical soundbites from the left and the right. Through no fault of their own, these young men and women are developing a kind of "organizational aversion," a reluctance to take up the issues, problems and concerns of organizations. They have been able to rely on



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strong institutions and the commitment of others to build and support them. The tempers of the time have kept these individuals largely focused on their own pursuits of happiness and the promotion of autonomous action.<sup>10</sup> However, the church thinks about the common good and acts accordingly. Since its reflections are about the resurrection of the body, young discerners should be introduced to sound foundational theology and taught how to apply it to community experiences and institutional life.

If they are to become religious leaders, they need help articulating the pastoral vision of the church in an inspiring way. This will take them immediately out of the rhetorical devices so current in much of ministerial language today (i.e. liberal versus conservative, traditional versus progressive). It will demand that all their pastoral actions be informed by a solid theological imagination, one cast in and operating out of the rich tradition of the church.

## Understanding one's own theology

Every adult discernor comes to religious life or priesthood with an operative theology already at play in his or her actions. Unfortunately, many of them are unaware of their own theological assumptions and unable to articulate how these inform their preferences and biases in the practice of the faith. As director of a new pastoral formation program at a major seminary, I have instituted a year-long series of reflective exercises for seminarians in their first year of theology that are meant to tease out their incoming working theology. Ministering for a year on a pastoral team with lay men and women and other seminarians, these students are brought through a series of 26 reflections on their parish experiences. These exercises are calibrated to sharpen their skills as theological observers of Catholic congregations. Despite their initial zeal to do hands-on ministry, they are required by the program to develop a pastoral asceticism in their first year. They step back from taking so-called "power" positions in the community (even minor ones, such as teaching religious education classes), so that they can learn the skills of "pastoral diagnostics"—observing how and why Catholic communities are organized theologically and pastorally as they are.

We have chosen parishes as the site of pastoral formation for several reasons, not least of which is the fact that they are by far the places in Catholic life that can offer the broadest range of experiences for the practice of religious leadership today. We have found no other agencies or sites

that can offer the range and depth of opportunities for young adult discerners to learn how to lead in a theologically reflective way. We have yet to find a comparable venue that allows discerners the chance to articulate a pastoral vision, coordinate pastoral action, empower pastoral care through mutual effort, work through pastoral conflict, and gather groups to take up their integral evangelizing form.

To accomplish all this, we had to negotiate a new relationship with our parishes. Instead of seeing them as sites where our students go to perform some ministerial service, we had to engage them as "learning parishes." Parish staffs had to see themselves as and act like training laboratories for our students, much like the way "teaching hospitals" take on added functions as training sites and educational venues for interns and residents in the medical field.

Religious congregations will need to look differently at their pastoral formation sites if they are to move from training for direct pastoral services to formation for religious leadership. In the past religious congregations trained their newer members to serve in schools and hospitals, for example, by a series of apprenticeships over many years as teachers, nurses, and then committee chairs, department heads, assistant principals and the like. Newer members watched skilled religious leaders at work in various settings over the course of many years. Our recent turn toward personal ministries may have deprived many of our new religious of the opportunity to develop leadership skills in religious settings by keeping them away from the institutional challenges in which leadership thrives. Therefore today we need to accelerate the process of leadership formation by moving our newer members into religious organizations where they can shadow leaders on a regular basis, perhaps as executive assistants, take charge of mission-based teams, and then have learning experiences where they can reflect in an interdisciplinary way on the art of religious leadership in the contemporary world.<sup>11</sup>

Our recent turn toward personal ministries may have deprived many of our new religious of the opportunity to develop leadership skills in religious settings by keeping them away from the institutional challenges in which leadership thrives.

## **QUESTIONS TO ASSESS OPERATIVE THEOLOGIES OF CARING**

### ***Personal conversion***

- A. What jobs have you held and what levels of responsibility have you had in previous school or work situations?
- B. How have you volunteered?
- C. What is your personal philosophy about caring, charity and justice? How have you tried to live out that personal philosophy? What successes have you experienced, and what obstacles have you encountered in living out your personal mission of caring?
- D. What Scriptural passages mean the most to you when thinking about service, ministry and leadership in the church?
- E. How would you rate yourself as a leader in your parish community and among your circle of friends?
- F. What personal skills and traits do you have that could be built upon to help you become a leader in the community? What challenges or traits might work against this development?
- G. How do you manage your time and stress?

### ***Interpersonal conversion***

- A. What were your family's rules about such things as volunteering and "giving back" to society?
- B. What kind of volunteer work did your mother, father, grandparents and siblings undertake? Who do you consider your models for service in society and in the church?
- C. How did you spend spring break in college? How did your friends volunteer and give back to society in high school, in college and after college?
- D. What groups or teams did you belong to during your high school and college years (and beyond)? What was your role in these different groups?

### ***Ecclesial conversion***

- A. How did the parish in which you grew up learn about and care for the needs of the community and the poor?
- B. How did your parish develop leadership in the congregation? How does the parish state and act out its mission in the neighborhood?

### ***Structural conversion***

- A. How did your family, friends and parish understand and discuss injustice in the world?
- B. What have you learned about your obligations and capacity to make a difference in the world?
- C. Have you participated in any organizations that seek to eradicate poverty, promote life or seek social change according to the social teachings of the church?
- D. How do you understand the church's mission in the world today?

Religious congregations need to develop a new working relationship with their pastoral formation sites. The paradigm that they are places where religious can perform a religiously-informed service needs to give way to one where the site trains religious in the art and skills of *religious leadership*. This will challenge those in formation and the pastoral placement sites alike. Those in formation may balk initially at the new talk about institutions and the need to lead groups. Our pastoral placement sites may also hesitate. They have become used to low-cost ministerial labor. The shift that places primary emphasis on the formative role they now play will require a more intentional reflection on the site's mission and the ways it accomplishes that mission and meets challenges and obstacles to it.

### Assessing capacity, setting the tone

Vocation ministers can begin the proximate preparation for pastoral formation of young adult discerners by helping them assess their operative theologies of caring. (See the box on page 16.) By analyzing the four areas outlined in the box, vocation ministers can audit their candidates' personal development in terms of caring for others and having the capacity to be a religious-leader.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, vocation ministers can do a great deal to set the tone and expectation that new members of their religious communities will become not just pastoral care *providers*, but pastoral *leaders*. Conversations during the discernment period can focus on understanding the discerner's current operating theology, as well as on presenting the expectation that new members will strive to become pastoral leaders who are well-grounded theologically, intellectually and spiritually. ■

1. David B. Couturier, "From Diversity to Disparity: The Structural Conversion of Religious Life," *HORIZON* 14:4 (Fall, 1989), 23-28.
2. David B. Couturier, *The Four Conversions: A Spirituality of Transformation* (South Bend, IN: The Victoria Press, 2008).
3. David B. Couturier, *The Fraternal Economy: A Pastoral Psychology of Franciscan Economics* (South Bend, IN: Cloverdale Books, 2007), 124-126.
4. Dean Hoge, "Challenges Facing Priesthood in America," *Origins*, 37:44 (April 17, 2008), 709-711.
5. I rely on the statistical work of Bryan Froehle. See David B. Couturier, "From the Parochial to the International and Pluricultural," NCEA Seminary Division Roundtable (March

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5, 2005) and NCWE "Formation Advising in Seminaries: The Impact of International Enrollments," <http://www.ncea.org/departments/seminary/FormationAdvising.asp> (2005).

6. Couturier, *The Four Conversions*.
7. Couturier, "From Diversity to Disparity."
8. Couturier, *The Fraternal Economy*, 167-172.
9. N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Re-Thinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 93-108.
10. I study the tension between a commercial and Christian anthropology in Chapter 1 of my book, *The Fraternal Economy*, 9-41.
11. This interdisciplinary learning should include studies in the theology, psychology and organizational development of leadership and authority in groups.
12. This quadrilateral methodology is developed in Couturier, *The Four Conversions*.

Vocation ministers have much to assess when considering applicants. For many communities, a person's capacity and openness to learning should be an important factor.

# Promote intellectual formation among young adult discerners

By FATHER RONALD D. WITHERUP, S.S.

**I**N 2007, WHEN AMAZON.COM introduced its high-tech gadget for e-books called Kindle, Steve Jobs of Apple Corporation scoffed at the idea that electronic books would ever really catch the general public's imagination. The reason? Because so few people read books anymore! He quoted a statistic that 40 percent of the American public reads only one book or less a year.<sup>1</sup> As a self-proclaimed bookworm, I am dismayed at that low figure. Ever since I was a child I have loved books. They opened new avenues of knowledge and understanding, and they gave me endless hours of entertainment and boundless imagination. But what will it mean for the future if Jobs is correct?

I begin with this anecdote because it is an important piece of contemporary culture that may have serious ramifications for the topic at hand. I am not convinced that Jobs' observation will prove correct in the long run. E-books still hold an enormous attraction for avid readers, especially if they also travel a lot. Yet it is undoubtedly true that the so-called Millennial generation does not have an attraction to books and book-learning the way the Boomer generation did. What might this mean for the promotion of intellectual formation among young adult discerners of religious life?

## Two caveats

To begin, two caveats are in order. First, I should note that

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there is no one-size-fits-all way to promote intellectual formation for religious life. Much depends on the type of religious life being discerned. One can rightly admit to different expectations for those discerning religious brotherhood or sisterhood from those desiring to be ordained priests. The type of ministry envisioned is also a factor. Anyone attracted to religious life because of a desire to teach, catechize, evangelize or preach should have certain innate intellectual abilities that would enable these ministries to be accomplished effectively. There are thus different skills needed for different ministries.

A second caveat concerns the role of book-learning itself. Although reading is an extremely important skill for education, not all intellectual development hinges upon reading alone. People gain valuable life lessons and even wisdom from acute human observation and sheer life experience. Also, if it is true that modern youth are more visually oriented than word-oriented, much knowledge can be gained from the visual arts, including cinema. Little wonder that some popular college courses in religion take up topics like "Jesus at the movies" or examine religious and moral questions from the perspective of cinematography. Even the Holy See has issued a list of the 100 best movies of all time!

Despite these caveats, one can offer some advice about promoting intellectual formation among discerners. I examine several aspects of the question and offer a few practical suggestions.

## Aspects of the question

The first aspect concerns the role of the intellectual life in religious life in general. Religious life is not a refuge for those who cannot make it in any other sphere of life. It is certainly not a last ditch effort to find meaning in life. It is a genuine

vocation, a call by the Holy Spirit discerned over time. By definition, religious life concerns living out the faith in some combination of community living, prayer and ministry. Faith is always more than just an emotional response to God's presence and action in the world and in our lives. It is also an intellectual grappling with the mystery of God. True contemplation, the goal of every Christian journey to spiritual wholeness, and specifically a calling in religious life, has an intellectual dimension that demands serious reflection. *Fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) should be a principle that, at least in rudimentary form, is found in all those who are seeking to discern membership in a specific religious community.

Sometimes in my experience as a seminary formator, I would encounter seminarians who would opine about the tediousness of their academic education and the desire to get to the heart of the matter, service to people. They would invoke the image of the Curé of Ars, who spent long hours in the confessional reconciling sinners and comforting those afflicted with every kind of spiritual emptiness. Overlooked in evoking this charismatic figure, however, is the fact that he also had one of the most extensive libraries of his day. He did not offer people vague platitudes to assuage their suffering. He was admired and sought after as a confessor precisely because he offered them substance, from one who had himself struggled with the mysteries of the faith in serious intellectual and spiritual reflection.

A second aspect concerns the multiple dimensions of intellectual formation set forth in the church's official teaching. Vatican II, for instance, in its decree on renewal in religious life, "Perfectae Caritatis," recommended education as a means of renewal. The Council fathers wrote:

Adaptation and renewal depend greatly on the education of religious. ...In order that the adaptation of religious life to the

needs of our time may not be merely external and that those employed by rule in the active apostolate may be equal to their task, religious must be given suitable instruction, depending on their intellectual capacity and personal talent, in the currents and attitudes of sentiment and thought prevalent in social life today. This education must blend its elements together harmoniously so that an integrated life on the part of the religious concerned results. (#18)

True contemplation, the goal of every Christian journey to spiritual wholeness, and specifically a calling in religious life, has an intellectual dimension that demands serious reflection.

In hindsight, this advice was indeed taken to heart by many religious institutes after the close of the Council, and the result was a widespread renewal of religious life, albeit in the direction of adapting to modern values, sometimes with the undesired effect that religious life lost its prophetic edge. Yet one cannot fault the value of education in this process. Vatican II foresaw that this would be an ongoing need.

More recently, "Vita Consecrata," the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of John Paul II on consecrated life, has given explicit advice concerning intellectual formation in religious life. In the context of the cultural and professional dimensions of continuing formation for religious, the text states, "Consecrated persons must therefore keep themselves as intellectually open and adaptable as possible, so that the apostolate will be envisaged and carried out according to the needs of their own time, making use of the means provided by cultural progress."(#71)

The point of this recommendation is to emphasize the need for adaptability in an apostolate that will inevitably be impacted by cultural trends. Although the text occurs

in the context of continuing formation—something that in my experience is not always a value promoted formally by religious institutes—its application to potential candidates for religious life should be clear. Adaptability and intellectual openness go hand in hand. Religious life and ministry in the 21st century cannot be accomplished in a vacuum. Cultural demands placed upon religious require people who exhibit this openness and flexibility; if it is missing in their lives as young adults, it may not be the easiest value to foster as they go through formation and acquire a religious identity.

In another context that also involves evangelizing culture, “Vita Consecrata” advises that there is more to ministry as religious than service to people. The text reads:

But in addition to this service of others, within the consecrated life itself there is a need for a renewed and loving commitment to the intellectual life, for dedication to study as a means of integral formation and as a path of asceticism which is extraordinarily timely, in the face of present-day cultural diversity. A lessened commitment to study can have grave consequences for the apostolate, by giving rise to a sense of marginalization and inferiority, or encouraging superficiality and rash initiatives. (#98)

One might be tempted to see this warning as a bit melodramatic, but I do not think so. The point, rather, emphasizes that religious can be effective in our witness to the world and in our efforts at evangelization, by whatever means to help people come to Christ, and bear fruit only when we have this desire to increase our understanding of the faith. In order to interact with culture, we need to be intimately aware

### ***Recommended resources***

*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*  
*The Holy Longing* by Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI  
*A Brief History of Vatican II* by Giuseppe Alberigo  
*How do Catholics Read the Bible?* by Daniel J.  
Harrington  
*The Bible Companion* by Father Ronald D.  
Witherup,  
[www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)  
[www.americancatholic.org](http://www.americancatholic.org)  
[www.bustedhalo.com](http://www.bustedhalo.com)

of it, and this requires careful observation and study. Lest this advice be put aside as restricted to the ordained religious or to those institutes specifically geared to education, the document goes on to add even more striking advice:

With all respect for the diversity of charisms and the actual resources of individual institutes, the commitment to study cannot be limited to initial formation or to the gaining of academic degrees and professional qualifications. Rather, study is an expression of the unquenchable desire for an ever deeper knowledge of God, the source of light and all human truth. Consequently, a commitment to study does not isolate consecrated persons in an abstract intellectualism, or confine them within a suffocating narcissism; rather, it is an incentive to dialogue and cooperation, a training in the capacity for judgment, a stimulus to contemplation and prayer in the constant quest for the presence and activity of God in the complex reality of today’s world. (#98)

These words are quite striking and place before us a high ideal to contemplate.

### **Five steps to foster intellectual preparation**

What does all this say to the religious vocation director who strives to attract good women or men to a particular charism and religious community? Vocational discernment has never been an easy task in any era, but I believe it may be even more challenging in our day. We live in very complex times. In our multicultural and highly diverse world, there is no such thing as the dominant Christian culture that once shaped the lives of young women and men who became attracted to religious life in a bygone era. Many are the discordant voices that young people hear today and that pull them in many different directions. Moreover a prevalent individualism and distrust of hierarchically oriented institutions, such as the church, can prove to be obstacles for young people to surmount as they try to respond to a divine call to follow Jesus Christ by means of religious life.

As challenging as the task is, we also have to resist the temptation to cut corners or to accept really weak candidates. Regarding how best to foster intellectual formation among discerners, I see at least five areas of importance.

1) Regardless of the specific charism of the religious institute, the **basic intellectual capacity of potential candidates should be assessed carefully**. One can get a good sense of this simply by initial conversations or interviews. At the time of application, appropriate testing of intellectual capacity, in addition to psychological suitability, should be done.

2) When interviewing potential candidates, **assessing their interests is an important measure of intellectual curiosity.** Listen carefully to what they say are their interests. Are they seekers? Are they intrigued by any life questions? If they read at all, what types of material engage them? Do they read anything deeper than *People* magazine or the equivalent? Have they thought of questions that indicate they know how to struggle with life issues and are open to delving into areas that might be a bit more challenging than they are used to? Do they have an interest in the prophetic aspects of religious life, but in ways that are not naïve or overly anti-institutional?


3) **Assess the discerners' involvement with communities and activities beyond themselves.** Is there a pattern of volunteering or community assistance? Are they active in a parish? Do they participate in wider parochial activities? These are important issues not simply on a pastoral level, but they also can indicate an intellectual acknowledgement of human responsibility and an ability to adapt to others' needs.

4) **Engage the discerners in conversations about culture.** Are they observant or in any way interested in cultural questions? Are they stimulated by news items (e.g., politics, economics, scientific discoveries) or have they been intrigued by thoughtful movies or TV shows (or maybe even books!) that are beyond the level of mundane, mind-numbing entertainment? As was pointed out above in quotations from church documents, interaction with modern culture is vital to healthy religious life in our day, and engaging cultural issues can be an important sign of the adaptability and a service-oriented attitude that religious life would like to attract.

5) The final point may seem obvious, but it bears reiteration. **For any ministry that involves preaching, teaching, catechizing and evangelizing, the intellectual bar for admission of candidates should be held high.** This is especially true for those aspiring to holy orders, but it also pertains to other ministries, such as teaching brothers and religious women's communities. The ability to comprehend and articulate the faith is critical in religious life, especially for anyone called to some form of ministry of the Word.

## Carrying the charism into the future

Promoting religious vocations is surely a major challenge in the 21st century. Religious vocation directors face as much of a task, if not more, than diocesan vocation directors in attracting vocations. Religious life has undergone enormous change since Vatican II, and religious life remains as



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countercultural as it ever was. But Jesus' own words come back to focus at precisely these kinds of times: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38).

Discerning vocations, even in Jesus' day, was never easy. But we must continue to do so, and we pray that the Lord will indeed send new harvesters to religious communities to take up the task of bearing our charisms into the future for the sake of the kingdom of God. ■

1. Jobs didn't say where his figure came from, but a 2007 Associated Press-Ipsos survey bore him out (albeit at a lower figure, showing that 27 percent of Americans reported that they had not read a single book over the course of a year.

Any major life transition creates inner turmoil. Here is a glimpse of what happens within new members during the period between acceptance and entrance.

# The inner journey of the transition into religious life

BY SISTER JANE BECKER, OSB

**V**OCATION DIRECTORS may give a sigh of relief when the congregation's decision to accept a candidate has at last been finalized. The tedious application procedures have resulted in an affirmative vote. Yet much can happen between the applicant's official phone call or formal letter of acceptance and the actual date of entrance, probably still several months away. Even more than before, the applicant may need support with discerning the meaning of new doubts and obstacles. I would like to address some of the dynamics at work during the interval between an applicant's acceptance by a congregation and the date of entrance. What can the vocation director expect of the candidate's resolve during this transition time?

A director's ideal dream would be that a candidate is thrilled by the community's acceptance, sets about preparations with great excitement, and feels a deep peace as he or she grows closer to entrance into the lifestyle that has been so carefully discerned. But vocation personnel know that the road to entrance is rarely that smooth.

Stumbling blocks often arise for the candidate, as do doubts about the decision. Complications surface—difficulties with selling the car, increased family responsibilities, or even new-found affection and love. The individual feels torn and depressed. Perhaps religious life needs to wait another year, or it was not a good idea at all. "What was I thinking?"

The vocation director is faced with discerning: Should this ambivalence be normalized and interpreted as a

predictable challenge on the spiritual journey? Or should it be read as a sign that something was amiss with the original request for admission? Is it normal to second-guess one's decisions, or is this ambivalence a red flag signaling caution about the candidate's suitability for religious life?

In this article I would like to walk down both paths, first the understanding of transition turmoil as a normal development, and then the path of caution. Either can cast light on what is happening, depending on the candidate.

## Transition: off the cliff and into the water

Years ago psychological research demonstrated that we often have a refractory period of doubt after making a purchase. "I should never have bought this coat. What was I thinking?" As soon as we have chosen one option, then the other side of our ambivalence, our desire for the other option, rears its head for a last gasp of protest.

Contemporary reflections on transition tell us much about the periods of major change in our lives. A life-changing event, such as acceptance for religious life, sets off a three-stage transition process. Progression through these stages is so consistent across all types of change, that author William Bridges has spent his life teaching others about what happens to them when they are undergoing change. I have used his theory to help novices understand their reactions during initial formation. The theory fits equally well for the months prior to entrance.

Bridges' description of transition is rooted in Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage and liminal experiences in a text first published in French in 1908. The word "liminal" refers to the lintel or sill of the door. Liminal experiences are those of moving from one reality through a doorway to another reality. The moment of standing in the threshold, the limen, is typically a dangerous time. One is no longer in the

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old familiar world, and one has not yet been integrated safely into the new world. Not until the individual has stepped completely through the doorway, can one be securely settled once again.

Bridges labels the three stages of this liminal passage as Endings, Neutral Zone, and Beginnings. I like the image of falling or jumping off a cliff, treading water, and finding the other shore. Transition begins with a series of losses (Endings), progresses through a period of seemingly “going nowhere” (Neutral Zone), and ends when one realizes again a sense of terra firma (Beginnings).

Soon after applicants receive word that the congregation has accepted them, they begin to experience Endings. Slowly or in jolts, they realize what they will lose by walking through this doorway.

On the concrete, practical level they begin to settle affairs, packing and sorting. Which possessions will they store, take with them, sell or give away? Favorite pieces of furniture and articles of clothing (and pets)—not all will fit through the threshold of religious life. What about the house or apartment? Whether it was their own or was rented, they will be leaving it. And the vehicle, “my car,” may have to be left behind. Novices often report that giving up their own car was emotionally one of their heaviest losses.

There will be losses in relationships. Friends and family will not be as accessible in the future, especially if the move involves some geographic distance. Even without a distant relocation, the entrant’s availability will change. Regarding gifts and financial support that they have been providing to others, calculations have to be made as to how much longer they can give at the level to which they are accustomed; and this will change how one feels about oneself in those relationships.

On the internal, psychological level there are also losses. Identity as single, independent adult begins to erode. The

security in being “like everybody else,” of following the road more traveled (toward career and marriage and family), will end. Any esteem that one receives from a job or career will be lost, at least for a time.

All of these losses constitute Endings. Grieving is an appropriate response. Applicants need help in naming the experience, the sense of loss. They can be invited to reflection: What does it mean to sell a car? It can mean loss of independence, loss of status, and loss of part of one’s identity. Candidates can be encouraged to notice how they are responding internally to their external preparations. As they experience loss of clarity about themselves, or anticipate loss of the availability of friends, they need to recognize their feelings of sadness, doubt, fear or resentment as the emotional price for any significant change. We do not make room for the new without letting go of the old.

Unless the vocation director can normalize this sense of loss as “part of the process,” candidates can begin to think that something is wrong with them—or wrong with their choice of religious life. We are always more confident of going forward if we can be assured that we are not crazy and that our feelings are part of the journey.

The Scriptures provide many images to appreciate these Endings in a faith context. “Go forth from the land of your kinfolk and from your father’s house.” “Go, sell what you have and give it to the poor; then come follow me.” “When I was a child, I thought as a child. Now I put aside childish things.” We leave our nets. We leave our boats for another shore. Praying one’s losses with figures in Scripture can bring spiritual consolation.

Transition begins with a series of losses (Endings), progresses through a period of seemingly “going nowhere” (Neutral Zone), and ends when one realizes again a sense of terra firma (Beginnings).

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## Treading water and finding land

The second stage of transition is called the Neutral Zone. Applicants to religious life need a period of time to settle affairs, and most congregations set a specific entrance date some months beyond the admission decision. No, we do not move immediately from the Endings to the new Beginnings. In between there is always a sea to navigate or a desert to

Candidates need the in-between time, not only to settle external affairs, but also to ripen internally.

cross before we get to the Promised Land. The Neutral Zone can involve deep waters, dark nights, wrestling with angels, and wrestling with the devil. It is also a time of growth and ripening.

Images of fallow ground and pregnancy apply well to the Neutral Zone.

Candidates need this in-between time, not only to settle external affairs, but also to ripen internally. They should be helped to explore this time of deepening. Not that the pain should be denied, but joy can be found in the growth experienced. Again, there is meaning in the struggle, which can be embraced in the context of a faith journey.

And what does the Promised Land look like? How do candidates know when they have touched solid ground, found the other shore and arrived at the new home? Ritually we would identify the day of entrance as the coming home, the completion of the passage over the lintel and through the door of transition. Psychologically the candidate may experience that “arrival” much sooner—in a growing peace about the decision, a sense of the Spirit’s confirmation, a sense of having been “brought back to one’s own land.” If the vocation director senses that these are true confirmations, he or she can help the candidate recognize them as such and rejoice.

On another level, candidates may not find clear closure even on the day of entrance. While we mark this day, we know that the complete journey from lay state to perpetual religious commitment actually continues for a much longer period. Pre-novitiate, novitiate, and temporary profession are also parts of the trip. The discernment continues.

## Confirmation or disconfirmation?

The transition process of Endings, Neutral Zone, and Beginnings explains the turmoil that some candidates

experience as they separate from the old and wait for the new. For other candidates, disruptions may signal trouble. Let us walk down this path a ways. When is disruption not simply a part of transition dynamics?

In the last months before entrance, candidates are already beginning to experience some aspects of religious life. They are being identified with church (as least by their friends) and called upon to defend church practices or explain their vocation. They are self-disclosing regularly with a director, a practice that they will continue throughout formation if not throughout religious life. They are accommodating and connecting to personalities (community members, fellow applicants) whom they would not have otherwise chosen as close friends. They are beginning to yield authority to another, submitting to norms of the congregation and decisions of vocation/formation personnel. (“No, new members may not bring pets.” “Yes, it will be all right for you to fly home for your brother’s wedding scheduled during your novitiate.”)

This more tangent experience of religious life is giving the applicants new data on how the life fits their personality and spirituality. Turmoil following these experiences may actually signal “desolation,” a lack of the Spirit’s affirmation of the decision. Religious life may have been the wrong choice. Faced more vividly with real demands of religious life, they may have new and valid questions about whether this is the direction they should take.

My experience has been primarily with postulants (pre-novitiate), novices and diocesan seminarians. Many in these groups, whether they eventually left or stayed, have told me that they decided to give themselves at least a year in formation before reconsidering their vocation. Those who then leave formation say that they gave it a fair try and now, after self-exploration and discernment, they know God’s call is elsewhere, that their deepest desire is to marry or to pursue a goal incompatible with the charism of the congregation. This approach speaks to seriousness in discernment.

An ambivalent applicant may need to make the same resolution. The time between acceptance and entrance is short. We would usually encourage an applicant who has already invested so much, to “give it a chance,” explaining that pre-novitiate’s purpose is to try on the lifestyle for good fit, to find out through experience how the choice feels.

## On the other hand...

Vocation directors are aware, however, of the increased risk that an older candidate faces on entering religious life. The

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older candidate may have an established career position, complicated finances (including retirement funding), and children. Careers and retirement funds can often be put on hold for a year, but not for the five or more years of initial formation. If after several years in community, religious life is revealed to be the wrong choice, departure at that time can be very problematic financially. This risk reinforces the need for extended careful discernment before ever asking to enter.

Occasionally an applicant's ambivalence comes from a relationship with a boyfriend/girlfriend or a new-found attraction. At a latter point in religious life we might acknowledge "falling in love" as a normal part of the celibate's challenges. We would invite the religious to gratitude for friendship while asking such discernment questions as: Given this attraction, what do you still want most in life? Where is your deepest self calling you? What do your commitments to God, others and self say about you?

While expecting our vows to be a challenge at times, I would be suspicious of an applicant who is finding separation from an old fling especially upsetting. What part of the old relationship has not been resolved? Or what unconscious yearnings have not been acknowledged? Nor would I take lightly the candidate who has suddenly met Mister/Miss Right. Why now?

Is this new love the perfect cover for a reluctance that could not be faced on the conscious level, e.g. because of guilt, parental expectations, an unconscious sense of obligation to give one's life to God, or a need to prove oneself? Has this knight in shining armor arrived to rescue the maiden (or this princess arrived to rescue the prince) when one could not discern correctly on one's own?

New love sends up a red flag for me. I might try to help applicants feel less guilty about a semi-conscious wish to reverse course, and encourage them to put off religious life for now. Not that they should assume that this particular knight/princess is the one for life; but perhaps the land of love relationships needs to be explored more extensively.

## The need to prove oneself

Why do religious sometimes request a dispensation within months of perpetual vows? Or why do some priests leave the ministry within a year or two of ordination? One possibility (among many) is that they could not discern clearly until they had proven that they could "succeed," could be found worthy for vows or ordination. This would be unconscious motivation, of course. Unconscious fear of "failure" or an

unrecognized need to "make the grade" may have been carrying these individuals farther down the religious road than was right for them. Unable to give themselves permission earlier to change direction, they have pushed on until they have enough distance from formation to look more deeply.

Similarly a new applicant may not have been able to face the signs of a wrong choice earlier. Now the success of being accepted frees one to see more clearly whether this is the right road. Another source of turmoil may be an individual's general difficulties with long-term commitments.

I would proceed with caution with an applicant whose history includes a chain of job changes, long-term dating without carry through to long-term commitment, or

broken engagements. If the pattern has been to move toward life choices and then move away, keeping options open, this pattern itself needs to be explored. One might encourage the applicant to confront the avoidance of commitment head on and to give religious life a chance. But this route may waste the congregation's resources if the candidate opts out later.

Is a new love the perfect cover for a reluctance that could not be faced on the conscious level?

## In the end

Every individual travels a fascinatingly unique vocation journey, and discernment continues long past the applicant's acceptance letter and entrance date. The normal dynamics of transition can explain much of the turmoil a man or woman undergoes in the last months before entering the congregation. I have raised other concerns in this latter section because of our tendency to try too hard to believe in someone's religious vocation. Like other formation directors, I have felt safer (and avoided guilt) when I have given a novice a more-than-fair chance, bent over backwards to see a good fit between her and the community, and gambled on the slightest hint that all would work out for her. But there are times when such an approach does disservice to the candidate, fellow applicants and the religious congregation.

In the end perhaps the vocation director can only be aware of transition dynamics, help candidates recognize the stages of transition at play in their own reactions, encourage guilt-free discussion of specific concerns that are surfacing, articulate the director's own perceptions, and pray for the presence of the Spirit in the candidate's final decision. ■

When she took a university teaching job, women students asked Sister Judith Schaefer, OP to help them understand religious life. Here's what she did with that request and what she's learned along the way.

# A campus program that builds on the new openness to religious life

BY SISTER JUDITH SCHAEFER, OP

**I**T ALL STARTED WITH an unlikely question. Eight years ago, during a job interview, a student on the search committee asked me, "If we hire you, would you be willing to start a Contact Program for women?" To gain a bit of extra thinking time, I asked the enthusiastic young questioner, "What do you mean by a Contact Program?" She went on to explain—and that has made all the difference.

The student explained that, for several years, women on the St. Mary University of Minnesota campus had wanted a vocation discernment group similar to the Christian Brothers' Contact Program, a discernment group open only to men. In response to the female student's explanation of what they wanted, I answered quickly that, of course, I would be happy to start such a group if I were hired.

Six months later I found myself back on campus hired as a full-time faculty member with my fervent interview response long forgotten in the midst of finding new classrooms, meeting students and grading papers. But the students didn't forget. They persisted. A year later I finally sat down with two young women who wanted to be leaders of the new group. We set a meeting date and time, they spread the word, and my co-facilitator, a Mercy sister, and I baked a pan of brownies. We thought we were all set for a quiet little meeting with four or five women.

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Soon after we arrived and had begun to cut the brownies into large pieces, the young women started arriving in groups of twos and threes. We cut the brownies in half. More women arrived and we cut the brownies into fours. By the time the meeting began we had 20 college women sitting in a circle talking about what they wanted the group to be. That was seven years ago, and even though the brownie pieces were quite small, they fed the spirit and the desire of the young women who came that first night—and who have kept coming for six years. Since that first gathering, approximately a hundred women have participated in our Women of Faith group. And I still find myself asking: what are they really looking for?

Over the past eight years I have seen the desires and vocational interests of the young women with whom I work change and intensify. In this article I would like to explore three topics related to my experience: 1) what we do in the Women of Faith program, 2) some general suggestions for similar programs on other campuses, and 3) trends in vocation discernment that I see emerging out of my experience. My ideas and insights are primarily from my experience with a unique population of college age women; the ideas suggested here may not be practical or applicable in other situations, but I believe that they do convey a new interest in religious life that is bubbling up in a new generation.

## Women of Faith program

As previously mentioned, the initial motivation and impetus for the Women of Faith program came from the women themselves. However, if one were to examine all of the motives, an important one, initially, was simply to "have what

the boys have.” Their enduring interest beyond that initial group tells me the women are seeking something deeper.

On our campus, prior to the formation of our group, any direction or discernment of religious life for women was referred to the Office of Campus Ministry or to the resident priests on campus. This left the individual who was discerning any type of faith commitment alone and isolated. From the beginning, two key components of our group were the self-selection of each woman to participate and a community of women coming together to seriously consider their faith life and vocation choices. A consistent sentiment expressed by the women has been that they are seeking a “place where it is safe to talk about God and my faith with other women.”

A strength of the program has been the commitment and enthusiasm of the college leaders. The first two leaders, Lynn Streefland and Emily Lambaere, undergraduate students at St. Mary’s University of Minnesota, launched the program and watched it grow into a strong community of support. The initial group met on a regular basis during the first semester, usually at our house/convent, and the program content focused on the lives of sisters—their spirituality, day-to-day experiences, methods of prayer and worship, devotion and forms of service. One significant event was a retreat to the Sinsinawa Dominican Motherhouse, where the young women spent time serving the sisters, praying with them, and talking to one another. In the midst of these conversations, we have watched movies (yes, even *The Nun’s Story*), eaten pizza and grilled cheese sandwiches, shared our faith stories, and had our gatherings crashed by several college guys wondering why the girls always kept coming to our house.

The initial college leaders, along with Sister Mary Jo Baldus, a sister of Mercy and co-coordinator of the group, and I were surprised at the consistent attendance. In many ways,

it seemed that the group was almost running itself. Sister Mary Jo, a campus minister at the college at that time, described this new group experience like

this: “Essentially it is peer-to-peer ministry.” With only e-mail and word-of-mouth promotion, an average of 20 women has attended each meeting through all of the years we have met. Initially, we were concerned that there would not be enough discussion or that only a few women would come, but the attendance and the continuing interest in the program has shown otherwise and has been the motivation to continue.

Within the past six years, five young women have entered one of a variety of religious orders, and several have pursued entrance but ultimately decided to do something else. Many have had serious conversations with vocation and formation directors, while others have gone on to volunteer work with the possibility of entering religious life later still in their minds and hearts. At one point several members of the group even considered living together on campus to focus on their spiritual lives, and the Office of Residence Life agreed to reserve a section of a residence hall for the women.

We have engaged in a variety of experiences, from praying the Divine Office together to sponsoring panels on Christian vocations—from sharing prayer partners for Advent and Lent to engaging in small and large group discussions. Annually some go on a “Nun-run,” that is, visiting several different religious groups over the course of a long weekend. Whatever the format or activity, what gathers the women consistently is the recognition that God is significant in each of our lives, and each of us desires to follow God as closely as she can in whatever vocation to which she is called.

A consistent sentiment expressed by the women has been that they are seeking a “place where it is safe to talk about God and my faith with other women.”

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What has changed over the years and what has remained the same? The Women of Faith group continues to form its membership through self-selection, with peer-to-peer leadership as primary. The purpose of the group continues to be to provide a safe place for women to talk about God and about how to live their faith life now and in the future. We

Young people today also want to know more about God and religion, and those with some religious experience want to find ways to follow Christ more seriously and have their religious practice be meaningful.

still eat pizza and grilled cheese, and, oh yes, brownies. In recent years, though, the focus of the group has shifted from a primary emphasis on religious life to a broader focus of discernment for all faith-filled vocations. Interestingly I have also noticed that those women who are interested in religious life today are more concerned with finding a way to develop

their personal, spiritual relationship with Jesus than were those interested women even eight years ago, who focused their desire for religious life more on service and community.

Women of Faith is and has become a familiar place and space on our campus where women of faith can talk about their dreams with other women and be taken seriously—no small thing in a post-modern milieu.

## Elements for programs of discernment

The experience of being involved in—or more accurately, watching—the unfolding of Women of Faith has often led me to reflect on the meaning of my own vocation and the possibility or plausibility of religious life today. I have wondered what college campuses could or should be doing to help young people consider the option of religious life. I've also wondered if we even ought to be encouraging young adults to consider religious life at all when many religious congregations are in such a state of reorganization.

As I look at the literature on young adults, their faith development, and vocations to religious life, my experience resonates with a great deal of it, and, yet, in other ways, it seems to echo a different message. Yes, college students today are coming from a post-modern perspective that has radically influenced them. They are consummate consumers. They are essentially self-interested. They want it all and with

little effort. Most are religiously illiterate, too. And yet my experience, in and out of the classroom, says that young people today also want to know more about God and religion, and, those with some religious experience want to find ways to follow Christ more seriously and have their religious practice be meaningful.

As a college professor I have the opportunity to work with master's level students as well as undergraduates, and I recently worked with a young religious woman on a thesis entitled, "Vocation Discernment in a Post-modern World." In her work, she grappled with the post-modern data that reports that, in an environment of relativity, the development of a clear faith identity in a young person is extremely difficult and unlikely; and that young adults today find it almost impossible to achieve their ideals in a postmodern culture. My student would not be dissuaded by the data, though, since she herself is a "post-modern young adult," and is someone who is pursuing life as a religious woman. Her burning question became: as a campus minister on a large state university campus, how could she help other young adults discern religious life? What did they need? What would work? Her thesis went on to develop a campus program for vocation discernment. Out of her work and my own, I would like to focus on several key aspects of that program that affirm my own experience.

In order for young adults today to seriously consider the option of living into their future as a religious woman or man, a vocation discernment program needs to incorporate the following elements:

- Monthly or bi-monthly gatherings of twenty or less,
- Content focused on faith sharing and faith development,
- Specific experiences of Catholic life and culture,
- Opportunities to witness adult models of faith, and
- Experience with spiritual direction or guided faith sharing.

## Monthly, small group gatherings

For the Women of Faith group, consistent meetings with the same women, once or twice a month, all during the school year, creates a sense of support and safety in sharing a serious exploration of all vocational commitments from long-term volunteering to religious life to marriage. For young adults

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today, finding groups that take God and faith seriously is no easy feat. The culture of many college campuses as inclusive, diverse, and multi-cultural makes it difficult for persons who are searching for identity and meaning to connect with other persons of shared beliefs and values. The self-selection or voluntary participation of each person in the group is an essential component for safety and commitment. Some women participate in the group for all four years of college.

## Faith sharing and faith development

The content of our meetings has varied significantly over the years, as it is developed primarily by the leaders with input from the women themselves. Some years the conversations are deep and significant; other years the group wants to “do” more, like volunteer at Catholic Worker, or perform other types of service. Each set of leaders brings their own questions and faith practices to the group, whether it is a devotional, stories about a saint, or a question about prayer. For our group, the content is never very structured, and yet the sharing and the learning that occur go beyond what they would ever get in a classroom.

The leaders of the group have used different techniques to encourage and develop faith sharing over the years. Generally it works better for us when the women are asked to share in a smaller setting first (one-on-one, a single “flash” response to a question, or sharing a positive and negative of the week), and then asked to share in the large group. One particularly positive process has been pairing the women up with one another as prayer partners and then allowing them time at the beginning of each meeting to catch up with what is going on with each other in their faith life. Another meaningful experience is to have one of the women in the group share her faith story, favorite saint, or even her understanding of a Catholic teaching, e.g., Eucharist, the rosary, Scripture, etc., and then allow for questions or comments. You can see the openness in the women as they listen to the speaker share. Watching them teach each other prayers, stories, and Catholic tradition always inspires me to step out of the way and let the Word speak.

## Experiences of Catholic culture

As mentioned above, for our group, no two years ever turns out the same in terms of what we do or what we talk about. And yet, each year involves some key experiences of Catholic life and culture, whether that is preparing meals at the local

Catholic Worker, signing up for Advent angels, praying the rosary, visiting a convent for the weekend, attending Mass together, or listening to a panel on Catholic life as a single, vowed, or married woman. The women themselves know what they don't know and they are not afraid to ask questions about it. Again, it is often the case that those who have had more religious experience in their family or high school lead the group or share what they know with those who have had less. Sometimes the content reflects a different part of the Catholic culture than I would have picked, but it is always shared with sincerity and reverence, which in the end speaks.

## Adult models of Christian faith

Although I have emphasized the importance of peer leadership in the formation of our group, it is still clear to me that there has been

and continues to be a need for adults like myself to support and be present to the group. The women I work with don't need a lot of input or direction from me (and they usually don't even ask for it), but they definitely need my interest and presence. They also rely on other faculty to share their faith stories, as well as on resident clergy on campus to provide direction and support.

Young adults have always needed role models; that reality is even truer for this postmodern generation.

The importance of the role of the adult leader, as I have come to know it, is that it provides accountability, support and modeling. I meet twice monthly with the leaders and let the women suggest the basic direction of a meeting or event, but I freely interject ideas or concerns that I feel they may have missed. I participate in the group as a member and share my story freely. It doesn't always feel like I do much, but I know from the women's feedback when I have been gone, that my presence matters to them. Earlier in the group's history I felt responsible for and tried to be more directive, but I have learned over the years that they “hear” one another better.

For young adults today, finding groups that take God and faith seriously is no easy feat. The culture of many college campuses as inclusive, diverse and multi-cultural makes it difficult to connect with other persons of shared beliefs and values.

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The role of an adult presence/model/support in groups like this is complex, and I often say that a good mantra for adult mentors would be: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” Then, I received a note from a former Women of Faith member who graduated several years ago. She wrote: “Only now do I fully appreciate and admire you. . . . Thank you for being a voice, even in the face of opposition, and for planting a seed inside of me that is thriving now. I hope you know how much your influence is shaping the kind of woman I am becoming.” Thanks, Kim, now I do.

## Spiritual direction or companioning

As I have watched young women move through a discernment process, there often comes a point at which spiritual direction can and would be most beneficial. The

New entrants are attracted by the spirituality of the community rather than by its distinctive institutional activities—if, in fact, any remain.

difficulty on our campus, and I would imagine on many others as well, is that affordable spiritual directors are severely limited. For many the only source for spiritual direction is the resident priests on campus. Though these men are fine directors, they have full-time jobs

in other areas, and they are limited in their ability to address women’s experiences of discernment. Other sources of guided reflection are the campus counseling center or off-campus spiritual directors who generally charge a fee. This is one area where we as a church could work to provide more support and opportunity for spiritual growth if we want young adults to make authentic faith-filled decisions. I venture to say if a spiritual director on our campus were affordable, that person would easily have a full schedule of appointments.

## Emerging trends

My experience of vocation discernment programs has been limited to the Women of Faith program on our campus and my experience as a congregational director of formation was a decade ago. There is no doubt that it is a new day. Young adults today are different than at any other moment in history, and they are growing up in a culture unseen before. And yet,

religious life has emerged and developed in every generation. Why not now? What does the future hold? I will not pretend to know the answer to these questions, but I do offer three convictions that have emerged from my experience.

1. Young adults today, despite all that we read about their self-interest and their lack of identity, do desire to know more about their spiritual life, i.e., God, prayer, life after death and Jesus.
2. Some young adults are seeking God and holiness through more traditional forms and practices; the majority are seeking God and meaning through more non-traditional forms and practices. Most young adults do want to know and understand God, but on their own terms and in language and practice they can understand.
3. Those young adults today who are interested in religious life are primarily seeking religious life to be closer to God or to be more faithful to their developing spiritual life.

This latter point is a radical departure from previous generations. Recent scholarship is suggesting that the decline in religious life in the 1960s was, in part, a result of the decrease in the cost/risk ratio, i.e., renewal reduced both the cost of being a religious and the benefits. Communities today that are requiring some “cost,” i.e., restriction on freedom, clothing or community, are seeing more applicants.<sup>1</sup> Religious life, for most of its history, has been designed for the pursuit of personal holiness. Perhaps young people today are choosing the structures of religious life for that purpose, while others are using the structures of volunteer programs such as the Catholic Worker or Mercy Corps for apostolic service.

The third point is the one that interests me the most. In a book by Patricia Wittberg, *From Piety to Professionalism – and Back?*, Wittberg states that the shape of religious life for the past four centuries is atypical of religious life as a whole.<sup>2</sup> The immediate past and some of the present represents a radical shift in the goal and purpose of religious life, i.e., a shift from an emphasis on personal piety and spiritual perfection to an emphasis on service of others with personal sanctity as secondary. Wittberg ponders whether some in the present may not be returning to the earlier motivation when she writes:

New entrants are attracted by the spirituality of the community rather than its distinctive institutional



activities—if, in fact, any of the latter remain. The group's basic identity may revert to a religious virtuosity based on the more traditional model of the individual spiritual quest rather than the service-oriented virtuosity that flourished uniquely in Western Christianity between the 1600s and the late twentieth century [page 272-273].

Such a turn would seem to fit this current generation quite well. For young adults growing up in a culture of relativity and diversity, finding a place to stand and to define one's own identity first before turning out to others seems understandable and appropriate, especially for persons for whom self-interest is primary. Forsaking all and clinging to God through identification with Jesus has always been radical. For those of us for whom Vatican II was a personal event versus an historical one, the current expression of a radical following of Christ may look a lot more like previous eras than a perspective with which we are comfortable. But, as Wittberg reminds us, what we see depends on where our vocation story enters history.

My own involvement in young adult discernment all started with an unlikely question, and it comes back to an unlikely question: how can we create spaces and places where it is safe for young people today to say: "Sir, we should like to see Jesus" (John 12:21)? For us, the Women of Faith group has been one answer. ■

1. See Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, "Catholic Religious Vocations: Decline and Revival," *Review of Religious Research* 42:2 (2000): 125-145, for a fascinating analysis of the sociological data on the decline in Catholic religious congregations. They challenge and critique some earlier analysis and its conclusions.

2. See Patricia Wittberg, *From Piety to Professionalism – and Back? Transformations of Organized Religious Virtuosity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), for an insightful review of the departure of religious congregations from sponsored ministries and its ensuing effects on religious life.

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Young adults want a life of meaning, but they often find it difficult to engage in discernment about their life direction. Here are practical ideas for vocation ministers and their communities from the world of young adult ministry.

# Apply best practices from young adult ministry to vocation ministry

BY MIKE HAYES

*Young adult minister Mike Hayes offered readers a list of “hallmarks” of young adult ministry in his book *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s* (Paulist Press 2007). In this article he applies those same hallmarks (or best practices) to vocation ministry, suggesting ways that vocation ministers can meet the spiritual needs of young adults while also introducing them to religious life.*

**W**ITH THE SHORTAGE of religious vocations in American culture, vocation directors often feel overwhelmed, underappreciated and even distraught and hopeless at the task that befalls them.

Needless to say, the mission of those of us who are responsible for vocations in diocesan offices and religious life often seems like an insurmountable task. With so many choices available for young people today, religious life often blurs into the background, and yet it is an important aspect of our tradition to present to young adults.

A quick search of Google Zeitgeist 2007 shows that one of the most popular questions that is searched on the Internet is, “Who is God?” The question, “Who is Jesus?” is not far behind it.<sup>1</sup> Clearly young adults (and others) are interested in

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spiritual questions, and they turn to the Internet for answers.

Perhaps this is good news for vocation directors, but if they don't know how to take advantage of modern technology in order to connect with young adult seekers, those young adults will not be able to explore their Catholic faith nor the richness of religious life. Young adults raised in Catholic families may even find it easier to connect with non-Catholic traditions in the culture and online. So what can be done? What follows are some suggestions about how to engage younger people in their 20s and 30s to consider Catholic religious life as a possibility for their future.

## Proclaim old truths in new forms

In the late 1800s, Isaac Hecker, founder of the Paulist community, told his followers to “Proclaim old truths in new forms,” and that idea still rings true today. We need to be able to use modern means of communication to get our message across to young people. Today media has never been easier. Producing a Web site can be as easy as using Microsoft Word. With a little more effort one can build an online vocations center that tells the story of a religious community through articles, slide shows and other media forms. Podcasts and videocasts can be easily and often downloaded to mobile devices such as MP3 players, iPods and iPhones. In an individualistic age that values privacy in a spiritual search, making available these primarily anonymous ways of seeking information about religious vocations is not only a boon of an idea, but mandatory.

Simply put, if you are a vocation director and are not on the Web in some form—you simply do not exist for most young adults. Google is the first stop for people searching for anything in today's marketplace, including religion. Religious seekers frequently turn to the Internet for answers.

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## Invite those with eclipsed spirituality

With young people frequently absent from the pews, one can note the many competing forces that demand their attention. Whether it is because of the demands of a job, the need to build a social network of friends in a new city or because of family obligations—time is at a premium for young adults. For vocation directors this time crunch is the skull and crossbones of discernment. Young people crave the chance to step back and reflect on where they are going, to discern the value they place on their present careers and to simply consider what kind of life they indeed would like to live.

But what happens? The demands of the world eclipse this longing for a more intentional and personal spiritual search. Just getting through the day is time-consuming enough in a culture that demands production. Getting to the top of the heap each day is an effort, and staying there often demands long hours with little time to rest and recuperate.

We have some anecdotal proof, I think, of this longing for the spiritual search in the increased numbers of diaconal vocations in the United States. People being offered early retirement incentives sometimes consider the diaconate. As people hit 50 they are often pushed out the door in many companies that want to hire younger and cheaper “new idea” people. Men who retain their jobs start to mentor younger men and look for a new way to contribute to the world. Many men are hearing the call to a new life of service within the call of the deacon. The Diocese of Brooklyn, for instance, ordained 64 deacons this past year—more than 30 were Hispanic, too. I haven’t heard of any dioceses or religious orders ordaining similar numbers of priests in the U.S. In fact there are more deacons in the U.S. today than there are priests in religious orders. This popularity of the diaconate is just one more piece of evidence for vocation ministers about the longing that is

always present among the young and old but needs to be awakened within the noisy cry of the workplace, which muffles those longings out of necessity. Once

that longing for God is recognized, young adults immediately respond. As a man who is presently discerning his own call to the diaconate, I have reason to believe that many men and women in the workplace need spiritual mentors who will continually highlight the good work they are doing in the marketplace but also point to where God is working within that vocation. Perhaps an effort to help people see God in a world that often does not value the religious or eschews it for market-values, is a way that vocation directors can make small steps in engaging young people. But that will not happen if we are not in conversation about what young adults’ lives are like.

Simply ask Millennials what their schedule for the week is like. It will be highly structured, and it will use technology to manage it. Secondly the majority of their conversations will be “virtual ones” (text, cell, Facebook, e-mail). How do vocation ministers stay connected to them? Here are a few ideas, based on my experience in young adult ministry.

## Respect the private

Often the spiritual search is not a public one. A recent study called “Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Study”<sup>2</sup> showed that young people do in fact consider ministry as a career, but very few actually seek out a vocation director or priest to help them in the discernment process. Taking that step of going to the vocation office—even for basic information—feels to young adults like the equivalent of

For many young adults the demands of the world eclipse this longing for a more intentional and personal spiritual search. Just getting through the day is time-consuming enough.

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heading to the Army recruiting office, knowing that they are going to try to convince you to sign on the dotted line for a tour of duty. Young adults fear being inundated with paraphernalia on religious life and phone calls inviting them to the next vocational discernment meeting. In truth, the place many are at is merely the “thinking about it” stage.

How then can we allow these young people to be private in their search without losing contact with them? There are several approaches.

## Provide continual moments for contemplation publicly

Religious sometimes fear the return to tradition and ritual practice that today’s young adults are very attracted to. Religious fail to notice that young people engage in practices such as Eucharistic adoration and the rosary because they seek moments of contemplation in their hectic lives. They need the down time and have very little opportunity for it. If vocation ministers are able to call young adults into those private moments of contemplation, they can then allow their hearts to examine where they are being led, instead of letting competing forces distract them from the importance of listening to God.

## Offer adoration 24-7

Religious communities with chapels and churches can keep them open later so that young people who are working all day might find a moment to come in and relax. Religious communities might also hold shorter services that explain the beauty of contemplative prayer and then challenge young people to come once a week to a contemplative prayer service, a rosary group or an adoration hour.

## Widen the vocational search

This notion, of course, goes beyond vocations to the religious life and brings up a second point. Vocations to the religious life are not merely the responsibility of our vocation directors but of all the faithful. The larger Catholic community needs to invite those whom we think have the gifts and talents to be a religious into that discernment process. Vocation directors are indeed responsible for considering the vocation call of all God’s people. So indeed setting up time for adoration and other contemplative methods of prayer can give rise to deeper

discernment on vocational issues. (See the box on page 36 for information on alternative electronic prayer aids.)

## Respect other faiths, but be particular about your own

Pope Benedict is taking the lead in targeting American religious pluralism, and vocation directors would do well to take their cue from the pontiff. As *TIME* magazine writers, David Van Biema and Jeff Israely note in their issue on Pope Benedict’s visit to the United States: “When Benedict zings the Protestants, or his proxies zap scientific atheists, he is actually engaging in cultural pluralism American-style, which resembles a political talk show more than a stately seminar on the Bill of Rights. The desire to *keep talking while airing real differences* may also be influencing his policy toward Islam [emphasis mine].<sup>3</sup> This is a boon on all counts. With the many choices that are in our modern culture on so many levels, the church can ill afford to dampen the affections of young adults. We must be distinct and particular, both in order to gain converts *and* in order to retain young adults who are clearly looking for something to belong to on a much deeper level than the many secular membership affiliations they hold.

Yet at the same time, young adults also live in this world of diversity and pluralism. They are enmeshed with people of all beliefs on the job, in their neighborhoods and perhaps even in their own families. The respect that we must have for these associations allows for conversation without fear of assimilation. We need to trust that our convictions of faith will not be swayed by merely conversing with those of other faiths and studying what they find so valuable. In many ways, this ongoing conversation with people of other faiths and denominations helps us form religious alliances, such as Catholics and Evangelicals uniting to help defeat abortion or Catholics and Quakers working together at peacemaking or social justice initiatives. Listening to what other religions and denominations find as their theological imperative for social action is indeed an important type of ecumenical dialogue. However, even more important is articulating what those issues mean to us *as Catholics*. Why do we Catholics stand for justice, for the poor, for the vulnerable? For the religious life seeker, communities that articulate these motives well and do so consistently are well-positioned to develop relationships with young adults.

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## Be visible

Let other people know that you are a priest, a sister, a lay vocation director; don't be afraid to tell people that this is who you are. Invite young people over for lunch or dinner to expose them to the "behind the scenes tour of religious life"—anything that makes being a member of a religious community seem "less weird."

## Guard against fundamentalism and judgmental behavior; use symbolism well

One of the quickest ways to disaffect young people is to act in a judgmental way toward them, and this happens in all kinds of religious settings. The young man who is not social-justice inclined but has great piety for the Eucharist can lose interest quickly when someone chides him for that inclination. However a solid articulation of Eucharistic theology can push such a young adult to go beyond the mere ritual action of consecration or adoration to serve the least among the body of Christ. This approach brings both the vertical and the horizontal expressions of faith together gently and more directly. Sharing the experience of service to the poor with someone who has remained theologically insular for much of their young life can indeed add to their expression of Christ's call without putting on airs or denigrating someone's spiritual experience.

For Millennials this is almost certainly a way to engage them in new expressions of Catholic imagination. The symbols that mark our faith, and the rituals that bring them to life continue on in action, and one need not denigrate the other. Quite frankly one should not exist without the other. A full-time volunteer who expresses community activism alongside the tenets of Catholic faith provides a great example to those outside of the faith (and perhaps many inside) to see ritual in action. We go beyond the ritual to include Jesus in our lives. This is a new outlook on social justice for the young, who don't merely do service because it is a "nice thing to do." Rather, they have a longing for religious expression that often goes untapped.

Many service trips I have made to the Third World included reflection on why the church acts as it does, and the reaction is almost always the same among first-timers: "Nobody has ever asked me what this has to do with my faith." Vocation directors can and should be at the center of this dialogue, providing experiences for young adults to serve the poor, articulate where this touches them in their

discernment process and keep adding to this repertoire of religious expression.

In fact many vocation directors already do service projects with built-in reflection time. That helps young adults who are eager for service experiences. But there are also ways to move the personal-piety Catholics to expand their horizons to embrace the fullness of social teaching. For instance after a prayer service a vocation minister might get participants to articulate where that day's prayer service is calling them in their own life. Maybe they could even get participants to write down that "call" and share it with others. Or vocation ministers might

If vocation ministers are able to call young adults into private moments of contemplation, young adults can then allow their hearts to examine where they are being led, instead of letting competing forces distract them from the importance of listening to God.

lead a prayer service in which they speak in an evangelical way about what their private prayer time does for them in their own life. I've done this on retreats with young adults during which one of the talks is always about prayer. Why pray? What works for us? Where are we called because of it?

## Taking inventory; discerning gifts

How does one find vocation candidates? A good place to start is by asking direct questions about the vocational call of those with whom we regularly come in contact. Religious life vocations are in all the faithful's best interest—yet very few people ever take the opportunity to address someone who they think may be called in this way. Since I've been in lay ministry, my own call to the diaconate has been fortified by people who see in me gifts of service, preaching the Word and collaboration. They've pointed out to me how deacons have been generous to them over the years and what deacons have meant to their own religiosity. To add to this they encourage me gently to continue on my search, grateful for my service to them as a retreat director, a media minister or even as a lector in my parish and hoping that I can continue using those gifts, pointing to how becoming a deacon would enable me to do more of what I already do well.

One way to get the larger community involved might be to have people in parishes fill out cards with the names of young adults they think might have a religious vocation. Then a vocation minister could contact those who were named just to let them know that somebody was thinking of them in that way and to invite them to have a conversation about it if they would like to know more.

## Use cutting edge technology

The Paulist Fathers have informed their vocation committee that the majority of their inquiries these days come from online sources. Whether someone had found their Web site and then made a personal call to the vocation director (or more likely an e-mail), or whether someone did a Google search on particular charisms that the Paulists hold—the bottom line remains the same: the spiritual search for young

adults often begins online. To *not* be there is simply to not exist in the minds of many.

Is a simple Web presence enough, however? Could not vocation directors produce other forms of technological materials that could garner even more visitors? Perhaps social networks could be designed that would allow people to explore their own individual discernment and keep a record of that to be accessed online and perhaps even shared with others. (No worries, this is BustedHalo Ministries' next hopeful venture!). Vocation ministers might also ask themselves if they are producing videos to be shared on God Tube or other video sharing sites. Video clips can articulate well the beauty of the religious call. What's special about being a priest? A sister? A brother? One of the better expressions of this is the Paulist Fathers' recent vocation video that articulates the different ministries of the Paulists (media, campus ministry, film, parish work). One of the more touching pieces shared here is one of a priest who, having celebrated 50 years of priesthood, tells how much he has enjoyed not only the vocation of the priesthood but also the men with whom he has shared his life. There is a certain holiness there that is far from haughty but rather, a real-world expression of gratitude to God for a life full of meaning.

### Online resources

#### PODCASTS

**Pray As You Go** — The British Jesuits have a podcast that provides the Ignatian method in audio form. The best of these on the Web.

**Pray Station Portable** — Also a prayer podcast that does Liturgy of the Hours.

#### WEB SITES

**Rejesus.com** — Ecumenical site that leads people on a spiritual journey to try to make Jesus more tangible in their lives.

**SacredSpace.ie** — Irish Jesuits have put the Ignatian method into an easy-to-use Web format that walks users through the examen each day, alongside a piece of Scripture.

**BustedHalo.com** — How to Pray Section, [http://www.bustedhalo.com/faith\\_guides/pilot.htm](http://www.bustedhalo.com/faith_guides/pilot.htm). Users can find the method of prayer that works best for them.

## Go where you think you shouldn't go; do what you think you shouldn't do

A priest in an urban parish began to have an outreach to drug dealers and prostitutes in his parish environs. His parishioners began to chastise him for constantly being in the midst of these people, even to the point of treating these people as parishioners when they showed up at the church doors. "After all," one woman noted, "what kind of example is this for our children?" The parish went as far as to bring a committee together to discuss the priest's actions and then even to bring the priest before them to push him towards either ceasing this ministry or to face the prospect of a serious backlash from the parish laity.

His response was beautiful: "I'm sorry you don't like what I'm doing. I just thought that since Jesus spent most of his time in these places, maybe that's where I should go too."

The parish's reaction was one of stunned disbelief and renewed vigor for the priest's ministry to the point that it has become the parish's main outreach ministry and includes people of all ages alongside their pastor.

This is also a point for vocations ministers to heed. Is

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your community going where people are looking, toward conversion—where spiritual fervor may be at an all time high? Secondly, is your community ministering in places where expressions of meaning are being sought by young adults? As an example BustedHalo.com advertised on The Onion Web site, a satirical site where everything and everyone (Catholics included) are fair game to be chastised. It was there that we found people who were very interested in having conversations of deeper meaning, as well as people who hated hypocrisy and were looking for examples of people they might find inspiring. We were able to provide those searchers with a place to engage in that deep discernment. Even our detractors had to admit that they were looking at the very site on which they thought BustedHalo didn't belong! All of us in church ministry really need to be able to engage young people where they are with an eye toward unfolding deeper layers of meaning in their lives.

## Providing Catholic wisdom

This must be done in a non-superficial way, and it is, I believe, an area of ministry that vocation ministry should have at its heart. Why do Catholics believe the things we believe? It is never enough to give a stock answer from the catechism without serious discussion and explanation alongside it. Young people need to engage this material in deep ways in order to decide if this is an endeavor in which they'd like to become more engaged. So serious discussion with catechists and the materials that get produced by them will continue to be paramount. Both ministries of the church should continue to be in dialogue in order to help both catechists and the vocation directors take an honest look at where people are longing for the truth of tradition. Breaking down our tenets into their component parts and expressing that understanding of the faith in online materials and presentations and even in discernment discussions is something that surely gains the respect of young adults who appreciate the time that this all takes.

The need for adult Catholic formation is great. Perhaps vocation ministers from religious communities with a teaching apostolate could encourage their members to get involved in efforts to offer formation to young adults. The more contact that religious have with young adults, the better young adults will know and appreciate religious life.

Lastly, considering all the above, the most important element of vocational ministry with the young is to directly ask them about their thoughts regarding religious life in a

gentle way. All of your community members could be asking young adults this: Have you ever considered being a priest, a deacon, a religious sister, a brother? After I got married many priests and religious told me that they had considered me a good candidate for the priesthood, but only two ever explored that possibility with me. I was open to the conversation, despite the fact that I really thought (and am) called to the married life. The point is I believe that many opportunities to invite young adults to consider religious life go untapped because we fear alienating young men and women from our pews if they think we are “sizing them up” for the seminary or convent. The truth is that it is an honor and a compliment to young people of faith to be considered. In addition there are ways of directly engaging the question without placing pressure on people to make a sudden decision. As the number of brothers, sisters and priests continues to decline, perhaps we need to take an active position of seeking out those who may be hiding from their discernment, who have limited time to explore the big questions and who can indeed contribute much to the Catholic Church as future monks, ministers and leaders. ■

All of your community members could be asking young adults this: Have you ever considered being a priest, a deacon, a religious sister, a brother?

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1. Google Zeitgeist 2007, “Top of Mind,” <http://www.google.com/intl/en/press/zeitgeist2007/mind.html> (accessed June 9, 2008).
  2. Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, “Young Adult Catholics and Their Interest in Ministry,” <http://www.emergingmodels.org/article.cfm?id=41> (accessed June 9, 2008).
  3. David Van Biema and Jeff Israely, “The American Pope,” *TIME* 171, no. 15 (April 14, 2008), 50.

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# BOOK NOTES

## Books reveal truths about young adults

BY FATHER KEVIN NADOLSKI, OSFS

A NUMBER OF RECENT BOOKS examine the role of faith, church, religion and spirituality in the 20- and 30-something Americans that vocation ministers largely engage as future religious. David Kinnaman's *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters* (Baker Books, 2007) and Robert Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, 2007) both provide dense, though helpful, sociological assessments of this demographic. The latter offers an especially fine consideration on the role of technology in their faith life.

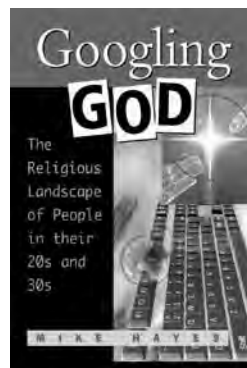
Despite the scholarship and insight of these two books, the vocation minister may appreciate the more accessible books, Mike Hayes' *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in Their 20s and 30s* (Paulist Press, 2007) and Christian Piatt and Amy Piatt's *My Space to Sacred Space: God for a New Generation* (Chalice Press, 2007). These two books look more directly and more quickly at the people they are studying, frequently with interviews, anecdotes and case studies that bring similar data of the other young adult books to life.

Both Hayes and the Piatts approach their subjects from their firsthand experiences of pastoring growing communities of young adults, and they are generous in sharing the challenges and triumphs of their work. While

this is a common strength of both books, there is a key difference in their perspectives that vocation ministers may want to consider prior to choosing which text to read. Hayes' context is the Roman Catholic tradition; the Piatts' is Protestant. While they both shed great light on the groups they study, this difference touches on a number of issues that each book addresses. From the power of symbol and significance of story to the role of authority and image of God, the treatment of these topics varies dramatically.

Nevertheless, the Piatts' book can still offer strong insights to the Catholic vocation minister. For example, they offer a thorough analysis on Americans' image of God and connect it to political leanings and identifications. Whereas sweeping generalizations have been made about conservative people in this demographic, these authors offer the distinction that political views of young adults have more to do with their image of God than their specific religion. Minimally, this could generate great conversation among the candidates with whom vocation ministers work, though more importantly it could offer ministers new windows through which to view and engage candidates on issues of God, politics and ideology.

Another contribution that the Piatts provide is some



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hard data on the financial habits of the young adults they study. A relatively understudied area, the financial choices that this demographic group makes have long-standing implications and consequences for their eventual vocational choices. With more access to credit than any previous generation, today's young adults have more debt as well. And, it is substantial: "Credit card debt among the youngest adults (those ages eighteen to twenty-four) is \$2,985 per month" (p. 70). As most vocation ministers have vowed poverty and strive to live simply, this fact—like others in the book—can

Vocation ministers on limited budgets could easily improve both their Web page and their electronic communications by following some of Hayes' recommendations—several of which are free and user-friendly.

help to stave off judgments on individuals and apply these assessments more gently and with some necessary understanding to the generation from which they come.

A chief strength of the non-Catholic perspective was the

chapter on vocations and seminary personnel. As the Catholic Church sees fewer women and men choosing consecrated and ordained life and ministries, information from Protestant traditions can be consoling. Nearly all Christian clergies and seminaries are struggling now and will be in the long-term. Approximately five out of every six current clergy leaders will retire by 2025. A weakness of this chapter, however, was its lack of nuance in its treatment of the clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Attributing it to a permissive attitude and lax admission standards seems to ignore the real issue of little to no attention to human formation or affective maturity after candidates were admitted.

For the vocation minister, Hayes' *Googling God* really is a trove of necessary information, perspectives and insight into the young adult set. Easily readable and smartly arranged, his presentation offers at least five key points that are essential as vocation ministers seek to understand or reach out to Catholics in their 20s and 30s. First, he makes clear and important distinctions

between Generation Xers and the Millennials across spirituality, ideology, ecclesiology, worship and affection for the late Pope John Paul II. Xers search more for community and faith experiences, especially with service. Millennials seek reason and truth, as they received sufficient loving and "special attention" growing up; now, they want the reason behind the mystery of such love. Second, Hayes' book has a practical treatment of young adults and technology's impact on their faith, religion and spirituality. What's more, he gives easy tips for how ministers can use technology to connect with Millennials. With his experience with BustedHalo.com, Hayes is a trusted expert here.

Third, Hayes grounds his treatment in the theology of the Second Vatican Council. At no time does he unfairly stretch its significance, nor does he constrict its impact on all the adults in question. He skillfully weaves the contributions of Karl Rahner into his discussions on Church and spirituality. Fourth, the book presents clear categories that can help vocation ministers to contextualize the people with whom they are working. Building on the work of young adult specialist Father James Bacik, Hayes offers ways to understand at least seven different expressions of Catholicism that young adults seem to consider as they grow. The author then gives case studies for each of these in order to en flesh potential abstractions. A final strength of the book is a collection of "best practices," though he resists calling them by this name. Vocation ministers on limited budgets could easily improve both their Web page and their electronic communications by following some of Hayes' recommendations—several of which are free and user-friendly.

Undoubtedly vocation ministry is challenging. Changes in the church, technology, family life and many of the cultures from which candidates come to religious life make this ministry both exciting and exhausting. The questions and experiences young candidates bring can exponentially increase the challenge for vocation ministers. Thankfully, committed ministers and social scientists are beginning to investigate the social, spiritual and personal dimensions of young adults to make the tasks of vocation ministry not only more manageable, but readily enjoyable. The authors of these works have helped greatly. ■



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