

# HORIZON



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

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## **CALLED, VOWED, COMMITTED**

**Belonging in a new generation**

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## JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

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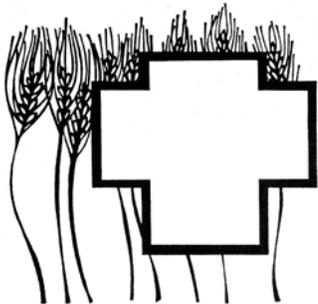
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# HORIZON

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

*HORIZON* serves as a resource:

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

*HORIZON* has a threefold purpose:

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

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

To accomplish this, NRVC provides opportunities for professional growth and personal support of vocation ministers; facilitates regional, area and national meetings for its members; sponsors workshops, seminars, conferences and days of prayer; publishes materials related to vocations for a wide variety of audiences; engages in research, study and exchange on issues of current concern; publishes a quarterly professional journal, *HORIZON*; maintains a Web site; and cooperates with other national groups essential to the fostering of vocations. For further information, contact: NRVC, 5420 S. Cornell Ave., Suite 105, Chicago, IL. 60615-5604. E-mail: [nrvc@nrvc.net](mailto:nrvc@nrvc.net). Web: [www.nrvc.net](http://www.nrvc.net).

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

## Flying above the clouds

**A**ir travel has its annoyances, but I still get a thrill from looking out airplane windows. One of my favorite views is flying above heavy clouds: puffy, gray fluff underneath and full speed into the sun.

That's the image I have of the NRVC convocation the past fall—literally and figuratively. I got in a plane and flew far from the clouds above Detroit, MI to sunny Irvine, CA. The sun went on shining for the full four days of the NRVC convocation. But even if it had been cold and rainy (apparently something that almost never happens in Irvine) the convocation itself produced its own warmth, energy and light. The camaraderie, the prayer and the in-depth analysis and reflection gave us a chance to go beyond the day-to-day ministry and take a longer, broader, more prayerful view of vocation ministry.

In this edition of *HORIZON*, we couldn't package the Irvine sun, but we have assembled the words of all our main speakers. While they invigorated listeners with an inspiring vision of religious life, they also presented some clear challenges to religious communities. Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI urges members of religious communities to go beyond their comfort zone of being "good people" and become more like the great saints in giving their all to God. Sister Laurie Brink, OP exhorts religious communities to give up cynicism, bitterness and disappointment.



Certainly the challenge of difficult spiritual, communal and individual conversion is substantial. Yet the promise of our faith is that in taking the narrow path, in giving ourselves away, we find joy. Our hope is that this convocation edition of *HORIZON*, may you bring you and your communities one step closer to that joy.

In addition to all the keynote convocation addresses, you'll also find a new "Book Notes" section in this edition. This occasional feature will review books relevant to the world of vocation ministry. If you come across a book that merits attention, or if you want to suggest an article, all of us who work on *HORIZON* encourage your input at any time.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor  
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We're connected to those who came before us in community and to those who will follow us. Those bonds have special importance to vocation ministers because we uphold the dream and vision of religious life as we carry it into the future.

# Belonging to God, each other and the future

BY PAUL BEDNARCZYK, CSC

*The following article was the opening address to the 2006 convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference. Brother Paul's words refer to the Scripture readings used in the opening liturgy. Each of the readings featured a theme of God's call and the response of the faithful.*

**T**his past May the NRVC national board held its spring meeting in the Black Hills area of Rapid City, SD. As is our custom, halfway through our meetings we take an afternoon and evening off to enjoy one another, as well as to enjoy the sites of our host city. Our board members will tell you that while we work hard and pray hard, we also play hard!

So our day of sightseeing included the obligatory visit to Mount Rushmore, followed by a chuck wagon supper and some country western entertainment. Also on our agenda that day was a journey to the Chief Crazy Horse memorial located about 50 miles outside of Rapid City. I admit that I was the first to express some skepticism and cynicism about this visit. In my mind I was expecting it to be a cheesy attraction that was simply created to generate tourism in the desolate Dakota hills that writer Kathleen Norris calls "the point of transition between East and West in America, geographically and psychically isolated from either coast, and unlike either the Midwest or the desert West."

I could not have been more wrong. What I discovered rising up out of this land still held sacred by the Lakota Indians was a colossal memorial carved out of a mountain and dedicated to the spirit of a man whose only wish was that his people would live in peace. Although his life was short, Crazy Horse is remembered for his unfailing courage,

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his fierce loyalty and genuine concern for the welfare of his people, especially for the sick, the widowed, the elderly, and, of course, the children. This memorial is dedicated to his enduring spirit and to the Native Americans of North America whose tragic history is littered with oppression, displacement, deceit and numerous other injustices sadly inflicted by the invading white settlers. Like all memorials, it is meant to remind us and the generations to follow of the human potential for greatness, of the virtues of altruism and heroism, and of the inherent power found in the pursuit of dreams.

## Mission and dreams

The story, though, is not just about the sculpture. It is also about the sculptor himself, Korczak Ziolkowski, a Polish-American, who at the invitation of the Native Americans, began his mountain carving in 1948 and worked for 40 years without pay, oftentimes in complete obscurity and in the face of racial prejudice from those who objected to an Indian memorial in the Black Hills.

Because he was so convinced of the need for this memorial, Korczak never abandoned the mountain or his promise to the Native Americans, no matter how much he may have doubted himself or the validity of his life's work. In fact, before he died in 1982, his parting words to his wife and children were, "You must work on the mountain—but go slowly, so you do it right." The "beauty and justice of the Crazy Horse dream," as he called it, soon became the dream of his family as seven of his ten children have since taken up the torch of completing the project under their mother's direction and with the assistance of their grandchildren. As one of his sons had said, "Working on this mountain keeps me connected to my father's spirit."

I share this story with you this evening because in many ways I believe it serves as a metaphor for what we are about as religious and vocation ministers in our church today.

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Korczak Ziolkowski was invited to take up a mission; it was a mission that soon consumed his soul, a mission to which he dedicated his life because he never lost faith in its meaning; and a mission he freely passed down to others when he no longer could continue, because the fulfillment of the dream was still worth it.

In the creative blending of this evening's Scripture readings, we see a similar pattern of response to an invitation as shown by the heroes of our salvation history. As the result of their profound encounter with the Divine, Jeremiah, Moses, Abraham, Mary and the apostles of Jesus, say "yes" to a mission given to them by God despite their utter dismay and wonder. By risking it all, their doubt soon turns into conviction, their anxiety is soon transformed into confidence, and their diffidence is soon exchanged for courageous and bold action.

As religious men and women, and especially as vocation directors, we walk in the shoes of these men and women of Scripture, as we walk in the shoes of our founders and foundresses and their followers, in our continued desire to live out their dreams for the coming of God's reign. Like the family of Korczak Ziolkowski who continue to carve a mountain in their father's name, we too try to carve out in the name of God our own niche in the history of salvation, and in particular, in the history of religious life.

We proclaim that we are called, vowed and committed. But where do we belong and to whom do we belong?

Religious struggle with this question as we repeatedly wrestle with the issues of identity, purpose and relevancy of our vocations today in a post-modern world of relativity and loss of meaning. But millions of our brothers and sisters in our global community today do not have the luxury of debating, either on an intellectual or faith level, their lack of belonging or identification with any greater entity. Their concern is simply survival. Where do people find their belonging when they are displaced from their homes

because of war and persecution, whether it be in the Mideast or in Darfur? How do you feel any security when you live life on the city streets in the face of poverty and abuse? How do you find your place in the world when your home and sense of belonging is literally ripped out from underneath your feet because of the massive destruction of a hurricane or a tsunami?

The question of belonging is not just a religious issue. It is a global issue that challenges us to re-frame the question reflecting the plight of those in our world who long to be with and to be a part of someone or something. In light of our call, vows and commitment, how do we belong in this new generation in this new world entity? I propose that our Scripture readings challenge us to reflect on three key areas: our belonging to God, our belonging to each other, and our belonging to the generations of the future.

God answered Moses, "I will be with you." And God said to Jeremiah, "Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you." And coming to Mary, God's messenger said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you!" Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Mary and the followers of Jesus could only respond to God's invitation because they knew that they had God's unconditional love. Their sense of belonging, their need to be wanted, loved and accepted, is validated and satisfied in their relationship with God.

Likewise, our call, the vows we make and the commitment we live can only make sense in relationship



Paul Bednarczyk, CSC

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with a God who loved us first. It is because of an experience of God's love that we responded like our Scriptural ancestors in total freedom, knowing that ultimately it will be God's absolute love that will carry us to the land of milk and honey. If God is not at the heart of who we are, then the life we lead, and to which we invite others, is simply a shameless fraud.

We belong to each other. Our faith, like our commitment, is communal. The men and women of Scripture were called by God not simply for their own personal salvation, but for the sake of others.

As St. Peter said in his first letter, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people at all, and now you are the People of God..." (I Peter 2:9-10).

Many years have elapsed since the white settlers dispossessed, displaced and disenfranchised the Native Americans from their territories, and sadly, we

still have not learned from our mistakes. Politics, capitalism and imperialism continue to rob people of their rightful dignity, be they the immigrant, the marginalized or the poor. We still dupe ourselves into thinking that securing our sense of belonging can only be ensured with tighter border security, or greater weapons or better economic advancements. How can we, as religious, witness to a more enduring belonging? How can we joyfully proclaim through our lives lived well that true and lasting belonging can only be found in the acceptance of ourselves and each other as daughters and sons of God? As St. Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest with thee."

## Belonging to each other

Secondly, we belong to each other. Our faith, like our commitment, is communal. The men and women of Scripture were called by God not simply for their own personal salvation, but for the sake of others. God called out to Moses, "I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." And Jesus said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of all people."

We do not exist nor do we belong unto ourselves. We exist in and belong to a community, whether they are our religious institutes, the church or the global community at large. To belong to a community, though, requires a personal responsibility and care for the well-being of its members. It calls for a personal investment of myself into the life of this group. By pouring ourselves into the lives of others, and by receiving from them in return, whether we are feeding the hungry or clothing the naked, we deepen our mutual bonds of belonging to each other as children of God.

Crazy Horse knew that he belonged to his people, and to a culture and way of life he fought to preserve to his death, making him chief among all his people.

All of us can tell similar stories of the great "chiefs" in our own religious congregations, those men and women who lived and died by their vows, heroically and unselfishly giving of themselves to provide better health care, better education and better social service programs simply because the people of God were in need. We may not build great monuments to them, but you and I memorialize their legacy every day when we faithfully recommit ourselves to the Gospel, mission, vows and charism to which they gave their lives. During their time on earth they may not have reached the Promised Land for which they had hoped, but like the followers of Jesus, they came together as a community, and with the greater church, they touched, healed and transformed countless lives in their journeys forward.

But those stories are not just found in our archives—they are being told today by men and women religious who embrace each other in their mission and way of life, and who continue the great legacy of self-sacrifice and service inherent in religious life.

We know that the spirit of Francis of Assisi lives, because we have seen it in the Franciscan Friars who opened their monastery doors to people of all faiths who sought refuge and safety during the bombings in Lebanon that took place in July, 2006. Likewise, the spirit of St. Julie Billiart of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur was with Sister Dorothy Stang when she held the Gospel as her only weapon and read from the Beatitudes just prior to her assassination in the Brazilian Amazon. And no one can deny that the spirit and strength of Henriette DeLille is with the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans. After Hurricane Katrina, they suffered devastating losses and destruction of their motherhouse, schools, nursing home and child-care center in the ninth ward. Undaunted by their misfortunes and remaining faithful to the charism of their beloved foundress, just this month these courageous

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women opened a new school in New Orleans for 600 pre-K through grade 12 students.

Korczak Ziolkowski's son said that his work on the mountain in some way connects him with his father's spirit. Being part of the legacy of religious life, we connect with the spirit of the generations who have preceded us and with those who continue to walk with us. Both you and I should stand proud, for we belong to them as much as they belong to us.

When the monument is finally completed, it will depict Chief Crazy Horse with his left hand pointing, which he did in answer to a white man's question, "Where are your lands now?" "My lands are where my dead lie buried," he replied.

## Belonging to the future

As religious we need to point to the glory of those who have gone before us, but we also need to point to the future and to the generations that await us. Our vows are made not just to those who share our life with us—they are made also to those who preceded us and to those who will follow us.

God cautioned the men and women of Scripture that what they did today would have an impact tomorrow. Yahweh says to Abram, "All the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you.... It is to your descendents that I will give this land." And to Moses on the day of Passover, "This day is to be a day of remembrance for you.... For all generations you are to declare it a day of festival forever." In Deuteronomy, we read, "Choose life, so that you and your descendents may live!" Likewise, in the words of Mary we pray every evening in the Magnificat, "From this day all generations will call me blessed, for the almighty has done great things for me."

Scripture reminds us over and over again that we must never lose sight of the future because we have God's assurance of what awaits in the Promised Land. But for some of us, our eyes have grown tired from overwork; our sight has become clouded by an aging population with fewer members, and our vision has become obscured by a tragic sense of loss and disillusionment because of unfulfilled hopes and desires. Tragically, like many in our world who may have succumbed to a life of cynicism and despair, some may even believe that the dream of the Promised Land may be just that...a dream.

We, as vocation directors, though, are entrusted with the sacred responsibility of keeping the dream of religious life alive for the sake of future generations. With each phone call made, letter written, talk given and e-mail sent, our message must be one of hope and promise, because our future brothers and sisters deserve nothing less.

We live in precarious times. While our earth and environment groan from destructive human forces, people of different faith traditions continue to fight in the name of God, posing a direct threat to our future world order and stability. As a result, countless innocent lives have been lost to the mad reality to which we belong. I am reminded of the old African proverb: "When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled."

Religious life is needed today more than ever to remind all people, for the sake of our future, that all of us belong to something greater than ourselves. God's call to us was based in love, and we said "yes" out of love because we know that all of our belonging can only be found in God. Our vows are a celebration of that love, and by our religious living, we witness that we belong to one another, whether it be in our shared faith or in our shared humanity. We are able to commit ourselves to live this life forever because we believe in God's promise that the best is yet to come.

Because of several factors, no one can really predict when the Chief Crazy Horse Memorial will be completed. Most likely it is a project that will never end, because it is more than just the carving of a mountain, like the wanderings of Moses and the Israelites were more than just a journey in the desert for 40 years. Similar to our call, vows and commitment, the carving of the memorial is about preserving a legacy and a dream, which at times can be elusive, but yet also inviting and alluring.

Korczak Ziolkowski once said, "When the legends die, the dreams end; when the dreams end; there is no more greatness." And so Korczak kept carving the mountain, as do his children, and his children's children today. As religious you and I do not have a mountain to carve, but we do have a legacy and a dream to which we belong. And so, let us go on carving together the dream of the future of religious life, so that generations from now may one day look back on the legends that have gone before them, and hopefully, they will give thanks to God for the witness of greatness we have given them and to which they, too, will one day belong. ■

With each phone call made, letter written, talk given and e-mail sent, our message must be one of hope and promise, because our future brothers and sisters deserve nothing less.

We can only call others—and attract others—to this life when we live it with compassion and self sacrifice.

# Jesus' deep invitations to contemporary religious life

BY RONALD ROLHEISER, OMI

**M**y goal in this presentation is to read the signs of the times for this moment in religious life and to ask what the deeper invitations of Jesus are for us in religious life at this moment. So let's begin by looking at the context within which religious life exists. In Western society today, we live with the greatest freedoms and opportunities of any human beings who have ever walked the earth. No kings, no queens have ever had the opportunities and freedoms we have today. We are laden with opportunity. That is a gift from God.

Our freedom, too, is a great gift from God. Sometimes you'll hear religious people say otherwise, but freedom should never be denigrated. It's taken a lot of wars and bloodshed for us to be free. If we mishandle freedom, the answer is not to reduce freedom. The answer is to become more mature so that we can use these freedoms to build the kingdom.

You see that sort of mature freedom in Christ. Jesus was the freest person in the world. He went everywhere and associated with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. He ventured into every sinful place, but he didn't sin. What we need to do is incarnate that freedom of Jesus so that we, too, can walk in every taboo place and do it in freedom and maturity.

At this moment in the history of religious life, it's clear that our generation has been given an unprecedented opportunity: to walk in a powerful new freedom, which also gives us a tremendous responsibility to be mature. We need a deep grounding in the spirit of Jesus in order to be able to go

forth and be powerful witnesses to the world. Our challenge is to live within the great freedom of our times without denigrating it in any way and to learn and mature so that we can carry that freedom into every dark place. That's quite a challenge, but that's what is being asked of us.

## The intoxication of Western secular culture

The second thing I want to say about our culture and our generation is that the culture we live in is very, very intoxicating. That's not to say it's all bad. No, many aspects of secular Western culture are valuable expressions of God's commands. For instance, in many Western, highly secular countries today, the death penalty has been abolished, the poor and the fragile are well-cared for. So I don't want to condemn the whole culture.

At the same time, we need to recognize that Western popular culture is both powerful and intoxicating. There's a story of a journalist who had lived for several years in Paris in a sort of alternative lifestyle. He didn't have a TV; he and his wife and son lived with a group of artists. They were somewhat removed from things like reality TV and media hype. When he and his family left Paris for New York City, another journalist asked him, "Has your son held out against American culture?"

He replied: "Well for about 5 minutes! Of course he didn't 'hold out' because Western popular culture is the most powerful narcotic we have ever perpetrated on the planet."

As I see it, a narcotic isn't always bad. It plays an important role, but it is a narcotic. That's exactly what Al Queda has recognized: that Western popular culture is one of the strongest forces on earth. Al Queda members reason that they need to stop this culture in God's name. God can't survive in this kind of culture, they say, and we have to stop it by force. That's where they're wrong, but notice their insight: God can't survive in this kind of a culture.

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Our question, as vowed men and women, is to ask: how do I live in this culture, carry this kind of freedom, walk in maturity, and do as Jesus did? He went to all the dangerous places in his own culture and remained without sin. If we can answer how to do the same for our times, then religious life can become vibrant again. There will be religious communities on into the future that are called, vowed and committed.

## Keep turning water into wine

As we ask ourselves that question about living with freedom while living within a culture filled with temptations, Jesus' invitations come to us in many forms. Jesus' invitations are not one-size-fits-all. He isn't addressing everybody at the same time. Some invitations are asking people to initial conversion; others invite the converted to deeper levels. Many of them are subtle, but they're clear. Our question is: what are the deeper invitations of Jesus? For those of us in consecrated life, what are the deep invitations of Jesus?

I suggest that one important invitation is to keep turning water into wine. Let's look more closely at the Scripture passage from which that phrase comes. Although we all know the story of the wedding at Cana, sometimes I think we don't know the story at all. John tells in Chapter 2 that one day the mother of Jesus was invited to a wedding. Notice that she's the central player, and she took Jesus her son along. Jesus was the tagalong, and she's the main character. At some point at the wedding she comes up to Jesus and says, "They have no wine." She doesn't say, "Gosh Jesus, I think the caterer came up short on this one." She doesn't say, "I checked the refrigerator and they don't have any yogurt in there. There aren't any carrot sticks, no alfalfa sprouts, no low-carb foods." No, she says they have no *wine*. What does she mean? What does wine signify?

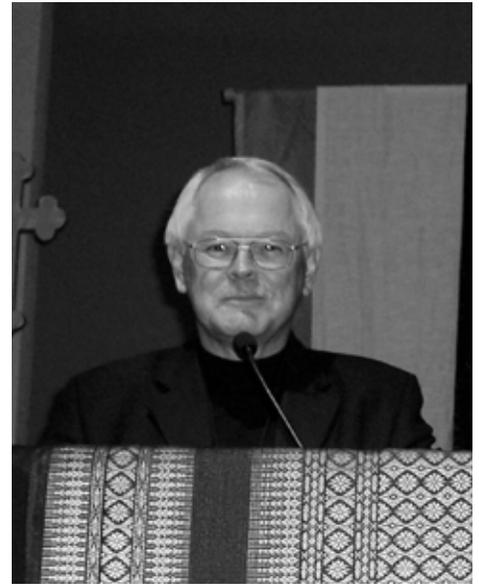
Wine is something extra. It's a symbol of celebration, of

festivity. There's a wedding here, she's saying, but there's no joy, no zest, no dancing, no deep life happening here. Maybe they had the yogurt and the carrot sticks, and they're doing OK; they're getting by. But there isn't any *wine*; there isn't any joy.

A lot of times in my life there is no wine. There may be bottles of wine in the house, even an open bottle in the refrigerator. But at the archetypal level, there's no wine. I'm flat, I'm dead, I'm going through the motions, I'm hacking my vocation. I'm technically faithful. I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. But if Mary the mother of Jesus walked into my life, she'd say, "There's no wine." This guy's dead. He's doing it all; he's doing it right, but there's no life. The story of Cana, then, is talking about something much deeper.

Jesus' reply to his mother at Cana was, "What's that to me? My hour hasn't come." Let's read that line correctly. He didn't say, "Mom, the Father and I have worked out a schedule, and this is too early in my career to start working miracles." No, that's not what he's talking about. His "hour" is his death. He's saying, "I'm not sure I'm the right person to call in here because I haven't put my life on the line yet. I haven't suffered yet." What turns water into wine is suffering, self-sacrifice. He hasn't suffered, and since he hasn't yet given himself over body and soul, he's not sure he's the right person to work a miracle.

So even though Jesus would rather have waited to show



Ronald Rolheiser, OMI

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that self-sacrifice and suffering are what precede the wine and the miracles, in John's story of the wedding at Cana, Jesus did the miracle pre-emptively. Jesus calls for the waiters to bring him the wash water—the water for laundry and bathing—and he turns it into wine.

What does this mean for us? So often we look at our lives and we say, "There isn't any wine." This is a reality that comes and goes. Some days we have the lightness, the joy, the enthusiasm, and some days we don't. Yet you can't just manufacture it. You can't crank up joy. You can't crank up wine. It's a by-product of self-sacrifice. After we've given our lives over, after we've walked the way of the cross, then we will find wine in our

lives. We'll have joy. And there will be young adults coming and joining us because they will sense the wine that comes from a life given over in love and service.

## Invitation to the rich young man

Another story that gets to the heart of Jesus' deep invitations is the story of the rich young man. The Irish would say to us, "He's your man." And he truly is "our man" —the person in Scripture who speaks to us in consecrated life. One day a young man comes up to Jesus and says, "Good master, what must I do to possess eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus replies. His reluctance to let the man use this term comes from a common sentiment. Many of us escape the demands of discipleship through admiration. We look at Mother Theresa and say, "Isn't she wonderful?!" Jesus is telling us to leave that kind of hero-worship for rock stars.

The next problem with this young man is that he wants to possess eternal life. He wants the security, even though you can't possess heaven the way you store up money in the bank or grain in a barn. Jesus is going to correct the young man's verb a little later, but first he says to him, "What does Scripture say?" The young man tells him, "It says to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul and your strength and to keep the commandments." This

is an advanced disciple. He's already well along the path of discipleship. Then Scripture tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Whenever Jesus looks at someone in Scripture it's always a look of love. Jesus says to the man, "To receive eternal life you need to sell everything and come follow me." He's already well along the way, and he's done 90 percent of what he needs to do in order to receive heaven. It's just the 10 percent that's holding him back. Scripture tells us that he went away sad. So nothing has changed. This young man came to Jesus as a good, rich, sad young man, and he goes away as a good, rich, sad young man.

What's the sadness in him? The philosopher Léon Bloy says that at the end of our lives, ultimately there's only one sadness, the sadness of not being a saint. If you're in this room today, you're a good person. Most of us have lived in religious life and have made every effort to be good people, to be faithful followers of Jesus. We're good. But many of us are not great. We're 90 percent there, mostly there. What does it take to be a saint? It takes everything, pure and simple! What Jesus asks from the rich young man is everything. We have to give it all or we have that sadness of a good person who isn't a great person.

When I look at religious communities, that describes us. We're good; we're not always great. We're proficient. We're generative. We live our lives for others. We're not always happy about it; and we're not always producing wine. Mother Theresa was one who went across the line. She was good *and* she was great. She gave the extra 10 percent, so that when she entered the room, there was wine, and her energy lit up the room like a light bulb.

I think religious communities today are much like the rich young man. We're doing everything right. We're good. We're standing where the rich young man was standing. We want to know how to make the next step, to go from good to great. Too often we can't make that next step, and we remain the way we are. There isn't a lot of wine. Saints produce wine.

In Scripture we see that some invitations are for those who haven't yet begun the path of discipleship. Jesus shows them the joy, the wine, that can be had with discipleship. But the next level of discipleship calls us to walk in pure faith. We can't see what we're walking toward. "Sell everything," Jesus says to the rich young man, "then you will receive heaven." You can't know heaven until you take the risk of selling it all. That's clearly where we're standing in religious life today.

This mandate leaves us with yet another question, which is: how do we bring ourselves to give to God our remaining 10 percent? I hazard to say that it involves moving from the

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baptism of John to the baptism of Jesus, which is what I want to talk about next.

## We need a baptism of fire

Let's begin with the baptism of John. A man comes up to John and says, "Are you the messiah?" John says, "No, I only baptize with water, but somebody is coming who will baptize by fire." Water can wash something clean, but only fire can transform.

John Shea has a poem that captures this difference between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. This is John addressing the crowd when they mistake him for the Messiah:

I can denounce a king, but I cannot enthrone one.  
I can strip an idol of its power, but I cannot reveal  
the true God.  
I can wash the soul in sand, but I cannot dress it in  
white.  
I can devour the word of the Lord like wild honey,  
but I cannot lace his sandal.  
I can condemn sin, but I cannot bear it away.  
Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of  
the world

I can condemn George Bush, but I can't stop the war in Iraq. I can criticize the sins of the church, but I can't reform the institution. In the recent intellectual history of the West we've had decades of deconstruction, which has been very important. It's prophetic, it unmasks idols, all of which is very valuable. But it doesn't change anything. You won't get a new church until you've figured out what's wrong with the old. In the Gospel of John, when John sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he's the Messiah, he's afraid of the answer. John didn't want Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus came as a gentle, loving baby in the straw, and John wanted the Terminator, someone who'd blow sin off the planet. There's a message here for religious communities. For the last 30 years we've been very prophetic, and that's been great. We've performed a valuable service to ourselves and the church and the world, but there's a missing piece: the fire. We've got the water to wash things clean. We know what's wrong in the world and in the church. Yet we need fire to transform, to transform ourselves and to transform the world. How do I fix the world? How do I give up my bad habits? How do I stop being angry? How do I stop my compensations? How can I forgive? We need fire. Only Jesus can take away the

sin. We can condemn sin, but only Jesus takes it away. The baby in the straw can melt a cold heart.

## Continue to sing sacred songs

This invitation from Jesus is an image from the Book of Daniel, Chapter 3. The historical facts behind this story are unknown, yet the larger truth of the story is very appropriate for religious communities today. Chapter 3 of Daniel tells of an entire nation that is apostatizing. King Nebuchadnezzar told the people he ruled that they would have to worship the golden calf or die. Three Jewish men refuse. This enrages the king, and he threatens to make a furnace seven times hotter than normal. When Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego continue to refuse to worship the golden calf, King Nebuchadnezzar has the three men tossed into the white-hot flames, expecting them to burn to a crisp. Yet when the door is opened, there are the three young men, walking about, singing sacred songs in the white-hot furnace.

We are walking in flames  
that are seven times  
hotter than normal:  
those flames are called  
greed, sex, lust, pleasure,  
bitterness, anger, power,  
and so on. We don't  
walk in an easy time. This  
is a difficult time to be a  
religious.

That's a great image about surviving in an intoxicated culture. Today it isn't much of a stretch to picture this image. We are walking in flames that are seven times hotter than normal: those flames are called greed, sex, lust, pleasure, bitterness, anger, power, and so on. We don't walk in an easy time. This is a difficult time to be a religious, to keep vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The flames often burn at seven times the normal heat.

However, if we keep singing the sacred songs within these flames, we won't get hurt. What are the sacred songs? One sacred song is to give glory to God, not because God needs to be glorified, rather because we need it. The second that we stop looking up toward God, giving glory, singing sacred songs, the flames are going to burn us. We each have different Achilles' heels: for some it's anger, for others it's pleasure, still others will find their weakness in sex or power. We all have our weaknesses as we walk among the flames.

How do we live a chaste life when everything around us is so sexualized? How do we keep a mellow heart in a society and church that are terribly polarized? How do you keep yourself from not getting angry, from not lashing out, from not becoming bitter over distrust or betrayal? How do you stay vulnerable, trusting? To not get scorched in the flames, we better be connected to something else, something much bigger and wiser and deeper than we are.

Ultimately, it's that connection to God that each of us is looking for. All our lives, we are seeking and yearning for God to pronounce our name—our individual name—in love. In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene is searching for Jesus on

The rest of religion isn't going to work if I'm not intimately connected to Christ and getting fed by Jesus at a deep, personal level.

Easter morning. Jesus sees her and says, "What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for the body of Jesus," she replies.

And Jesus simply says: "Mary." He pronounces her name in love. In the end, nothing else matters unless we get to that point where we hear Jesus pronounce

our name in love.

In John's Gospel: the "beloved disciple" is not meant to be John. The beloved disciple is everyone: you, me, all the people throughout time who have ever picked up the Gospel of John. Notice that in John's Gospel, the beloved disciple is leaning on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper. That's an incredible, mystical image. If you lean on somebody's breast, you hear their heartbeat. John's idea of a true disciple is having your heart on Christ's breast, listening to his heartbeat as you gaze out at the world.

The rest of religion isn't going to work if I'm not intimately connected to Christ. I can't live my vows and be chaste, mellow, open and loving and produce wine if I'm not getting fed by Jesus at a deep, personal level. We need to sing sacred songs inside of the flames.

## We need to wash each other's feet

Another Scriptural image that helps us to give the remaining 10 percent in our lives and in our communities is that of washing each other's feet. Let's begin with the idea of becoming "perfect." How is a person "perfect"? To understand this, we have to distinguish between Greek and Hebrew concepts of perfection. For Greeks, perfection meant no flaws,

no faults. For Hebrews, "perfection" meant compassion. Be compassionate as your heavenly father is compassionate.

What is compassion? Theologian Walter Bruggeman says that if you look at the Old Testament you'll see different phases in faith. First is distinction or identity. The operative questions are: who is in? and who is out? This calls into play proper doctrine, catechesis, liturgy. He can touch this; he cannot touch that; he can go in the sanctuary, he cannot go in the sanctuary. But Israel's understanding of religion doesn't stop there. At a certain point in her history a number of prophets come along who radically challenge the notion that religion is about doctrine, catechesis and liturgy. In their view, what God cares about is the poor! The Old Testament prophets had strong statements that the quality of faith will be judged by the quality of justice in the land, by how the poorest are treated. When God looks at North America, then God won't ask about catechisms, but he will ask how the poorest people in the country are surviving.

Notice that in Matthew 28 there are no catechetical texts, no moral tests, no liturgical tests, no rubric tests. It just says, did you feed the hungry? Give drink to the thirsty? Visit the prisoners? We're all going to come in front of Jesus and get his questions about our actions toward the poor. The Old Testament doesn't end with prophecy, however. The prophet prepares the way for the Christ. The Old Testament ends with wisdom literature, which is all about compassion. The Old Testament starts with the law; then it says, boundaries are important, but even more important are the poor. Then it says, justice is important, but even more important is compassion, a heart that is big enough to embrace everybody.

Jesus describes compassion as a house with a lot of rooms. That image is the best description of Catholicism there is. Jesus says, "In my father's house there are many rooms." It's wide, inclusive. He illustrates that with stunning examples that I don't think we ever really take seriously. He tells the story of the Prodigal Son. The compassionate father is the most important person in the story. Here's a person who can embrace the weakness of the youth and the anger of the aged. He can embrace everybody. God's love shines on the good and the bad, just like the sun shines on the flowers and the weeds. The Father's love is for everyone. Michael Himes, a wonderful theologian at Boston College, teaches this with an example. He asks people if they think God loves Mary more than the devil. No, he doesn't, because God is love. His love goes everywhere; it even descends into hell. Mary responded differently to God's love, but that doesn't diminish the love God has for even the devil. Ultimately, that's what we're asked

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to do. We're asked to become compassionate and to radiate in our personal lives and community lives the wide, expansive embrace of God.

John illustrates this concept with the image of washing each other's feet. Most of the homilies about this text are usually about humility. That's a motif, but it's not the central one. John's main message in the washing of the feet is that Jesus is washing the disciple's feet as a gesture of compassion and the cost of compassion. In John's day, the church was fighting about everything, especially about the Eucharist. They disagreed about how often they should have it, who should preside, whether to use wine, how much to use, and on and on. John was saying that the cost of compassion is this: we have to give up our right to be right. It's more important to be together than to be right. It's more important to be compassionate, to have community, than to be right. So in John's Gospel, at the Last Supper the major image is Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. It's a gesture of compassion.

In today's church, maybe John would tell us to wash each other's feet in the case of many of our divisions. Maybe the pro-life and the pro-choice people should wash one another's feet. Maybe then they could give up their right to be right so that they could begin to create a world with fewer abortions.

That's a challenge. That's also the maturity of religion. To get to heaven, we have to go through dogma and catechesis and liturgy; we go through prophecy, but at the end, if we want to be with the Father, we have to have a heart like God's heart that is able to embrace everybody. You could get to heaven and find yourself next to Adolph Hitler. It's good to get a little practice down here in stretching our hearts. God's light shines on the good and the bad.

Notice that the father in the Prodigal Son parable embraces everything and everybody. It doesn't mean our boundaries disappear, or that we're wishy-washy, or we're no longer prophetic. It means we don't stop at boundaries or rules or prophecy. It means all of that is grounded in compassion. Today we really need religious communities that can radiate that wide, inclusive Catholicism, that takes us beyond liberal and conservative, beyond who's right and who's wrong. We need to see our Catholicism as a place with many rooms, rooms for people who wear religious habits, rooms for people who don't wear religious habits; rooms for pro-choice and rooms for pro-life; and rooms for everybody in between.

Can we embrace that? Can we embrace that kind of a wide, far-reaching, ample compassion? Maybe we can't. Maybe we're not at that level. It's legitimate to be at the level of Deuteronomy, and there's a place for that. It's legitimate

to be at prophecy, and sometimes we need to be there. But they're not the whole of religion. Jesus tells us that to get to heaven, we need to develop a heart that stretches and touches everybody. If I'm a liberal, I better develop a heart that learns how to love conservatives. If I'm a conservative, I better learn how to develop a heart that loves liberals. And I better develop a whole ecclesiology that goes beyond the labels.

Jim Wallace, an Evangelical leader, tells people not to be a liberal or a conservative. Be a woman or man of faith. I ask students to tell me if Jesus was a liberal or a conservative. That depends line by line in the Gospels, they'll tell me. We can't pigeonhole Jesus because

he was fully compassionate. And sometimes that takes you over with the liberals, and sometimes that takes you over to the conservatives. Sometimes you're in the middle. Be fully compassionate, and see where that takes you. Living with full compassion means we have to get to a very mature level of discipleship. As religious communities at the beginning of the 21st century, we need to be fully mature in order to walk in freedom and bring Christ's compassion to every dark corner of the earth.

John was saying that the cost of compassion is this: we have to give up our right to be right. It's more important to be together than to be right. It's more important to be compassionate, to have community, than to be right.

## Speak with authority

Religious communities today also need to speak with authority. Let's look closely at what that means. In the Greek New Testament, we read that Christ spoke with great power, or great authority. There were a few different Greek words for "power." There was *energia*: the power of the athlete, muscle power, youth, energy. They never say Jesus had that kind of power. Then there's dynamic power, *charisma*: that's the power of Mick Jagger strutting across the stage. The word they use for the power of Jesus is *exousia*, which has no English translation. The best translation is vulnerability, innocence, the power of a baby, moral power, the power that can change you, melt your heart. Jesus had great *exousia* when he spoke. Notice that when Jesus sent his disciples out to preach, he

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stripped them of everything: no money, no cloak, no sack.

We always want a big dramatic kind of power from God. But when we see power as coercion, as force, that's not from God. What gives us authority as Christians, as members of religious communities, is that we're under God. No matter how brilliant, bright, charismatic or beautiful we are—and those are each great things—we need to be under God. We can be all those things and be about God, and our real source of power will be the vulnerability, the moral authority of God. We need to be this way in our religious orders. To be all about

Once I put myself  
within the power of  
God, then I can have  
the power to call.

God, not about ourselves  
and not even about our  
own communities. When  
we can be firmly rooted in  
God, then we'll have the  
power to cast out demons.

Once I put myself  
within the power of God,  
then I can have the power

to call. All of us are gathered here in the name of vocations. Vocations have to be called. We don't volunteer for God, although maybe we think we do. But somebody called us. If you have a real vocation, somebody called you. But to be the person who calls, we must be vulnerable and committed enough to God to have a right to do that.

When I look at my own vocation to the priesthood, I recognize that I was called by my parents. They had their faults, yet they were people of profound faith. That's what gave them the authority to say to me when I was 17, "I think you should be a priest, the world needs priests." They had the moral authority of having given themselves over to God, not just in word but in the way they had lived lives of integrity. They had given their lives away to others. When you've given your life away, then you have the right to say to someone else, you should give your life to this. Mother Theresa and Jean Vanier sometimes have stunned people by telling them flat out that they should become priests or nuns. They could do that because they had already put their lives under God.

If I haven't given my life away, I can't go up to someone and say, "I think you should be a sister." If I haven't given my life away already, beneath the surface that person will be thinking, "You can't ask me that because you haven't given your life away, even though you are a priest." We only have power to call if we, too, have given ourselves completely to God. That power to call has nothing to do with how charismatic I am or what a great speaker I am or how well I plan a vocation event. The power to call comes from the

authority of having given our lives away—only then can I dare to ask someone else to give their life away.

## A few practical suggestions

Before I end, I want to make some practical suggestions to religious communities about new membership.

1. *We need to re-inflate the romantic imagination.* The romantic imagination is different from the intellectual imagination or the theological imagination. We have enough great theology and great Scripture scholarship today to save two worlds. But we don't have a great sense of romance these days. St. Francis of Assisi was not a great theologian. He was a great artist. When he took off his clothes and walked naked out of Assisi, that was worth more than a lot of books. He inflamed the romantic imagination, and we've gotten 700 good years out of that bold action of his.

People have to fall in love with religious life. They have to fall in love with our communities. Very few people make a rational decision to get married; no, they fall in love. The same needs to happen with religious life. People have to fall in love with it. For 20 years after Thomas Merton wrote *Seven Story Mountain*, the Trappists had to beat people away from their monasteries because so many readers discovered their inner monks. Merton caught the romantic ideal, which is what we need in religious life today. We religious communities have a powerful romance, and if I knew how to capture it and package it, I would.

2. *We need to re-inflate the religious imagination.* Wendy Wright of Creighton University does this very well, documenting her own conversion in *Sacred Heart: Gateway to God*. Her religious imagination was kindled by reading the biography of St. Hubert. It amazed her that he was bi-locating, doing miracles, living discipleship in a very mystical way.

The religious imagination is full of mystery, wonder and grace, and we need to get back to that. We're children of the Enlightenment, and we try to do theology with computers, but it doesn't work.

3. *We need to offer a religious life that shows the compassion of Christ.* Again, we need to live a compassion that is wide enough and inclusive enough that after awhile we don't have to have all the arguments about liberal models or conservative models—we'll simply have Catholic models. Notice that inside of Catholicism, everything fits. In the year 2004, the two most popular movies around the world were Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 411*. The two movies had something in common: both of them

were made by Roman Catholics acting on their Catholicism. We have Mel Gibson and Michael Moore inside of the same church. Our communities need to start negotiating that. That's the beauty of Roman Catholicism; you don't have to pick which camp you're in, whether you're with Mel Gibson or Michael Moore. Catholicism is big enough for both. If you put Mel Gibson and Michael Moore in a blender, you'd get Dorothy Day, who shows us another way to walk the road of discipleship as a faithful Catholic.

4. *We need to offer practical community.* When Jesus said, "Come and follow me," he actually was offering a practical alternative. We, too, need to offer practical, real communal living to the people who are looking for it, and that's most of the people looking at religious life. People are living lonely lives, and they are longing for community. We need to have actual community for them to move into. That's a challenge for us. In my community, the Oblates of Mary, our superior general is telling us, "I don't care how you're doing it—one roof or five roofs—but you need to be living a real, communal life." Can we offer people something other than alone-ness? Can we offer them community? That's the direction that the renewal of religious life is going to take.

Finally, to bring us back to the idea of centering our lives on God, I want to end with a poem by the Indian mystic Kabir:

**THE TIME BEFORE DEATH**

Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.  
 Jump into experience while you are alive!  
 Think ... and think ... while you are alive.  
 What you call "salvation" belongs to the time before  
 death.

If you don't break the ropes while you are alive,  
 do you think ghosts will do it after?

The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic  
 just because the body is rotten  
 —all that is fantasy.

What is found now is found then.  
 If you find nothing now,  
 you will simply end up with an apartment in the City  
 of Death.

If you make love with the divine now,  
 in the next life you will have the face of satisfied  
 desire.

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So plunge into the truth, find out who the Teacher is,  
 Believe in the Great Sound.

Kabir says this: When the Guest is being searched for  
 it is the intensity of the longing for the Guest  
 that does all the work.

Look at me, and you will see a slave of that intensity.  
 —Kabir ■

Although some religious communities have grown older and more settled, they can still find ways to recover the passion and commitment of earlier decades.

# Can we allow a new generation to shape religious life?

BY LAURIE BRINK, OP

*Call me Bitter, for Shaddai, the Almighty, has made my life bitter.*  
—Ruth 1:20

I went away full, but God has brought me back empty. I set off on a grand adventure with Confidence as my husband, Youth and Naiveté as my offspring. Shrouded in a mantle of Catholic cultural piety, I had no idea of the storm of change brewing at Vatican II. But with Confidence, Youth and Naiveté, I met the challenges head on. The Grand Silence, fear of particular friends, the dreaded Mangle—none of it dampened my enthusiasm. Hard is good. Difficult breeds spiritual maturity. Salvation was at hand.

“I bounded out of the novitiate and into a classroom, with little or no preparation. I packed my trunk every June and wondered if I would return, mindful that itinerancy was the lot of our beloved Lord and Savior, who said, ‘Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head’ (Luke 9:58).

“But a funny thing happened on the way to salvation... the 1960s! The war in Vietnam, the spread of communism, the civil rights movement, and close behind, the women’s movement. The documents of Vatican II were slowly trickling down, and I began to see my life as a religious differently. The Holy Eucharist as sacrifice was also the ‘bread of communion.’ The people in the pew were the people of God, called, baptized, sent. The world, from which I had carefully guarded myself, had suddenly been redeemed. As *Gaudium et Spes* intoned, ‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties

of the men of this age [I’m sure they meant women, too], especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.’<sup>1</sup>

“I left the classroom for the soup kitchen. I saw myself not so much as a holy bride of Christ but as a companion to Jesus, treading among the poor as he had done. I stepped out of the habit and into polyester. We who embraced change left the institutional convents for intentional communities, where we intended to live more simply, pray more spontaneously and work ever more constantly. And despite the difficulties and the innumerable skills we had to learn to really live together in peace, we had fun! The church was changing, the world was changing, and I had absolute Confidence that the reign of God was dawning.

“After a time of intentional community, my ministry needs and my personal needs called me to live singly. For the first time in my life, I didn’t share a bathroom! My Youth and Naiveté had grown into Middle Age and clarity. I saw myself, my congregation, my church and the world more realistically. My spirituality, once nurtured by the sacraments, now blossomed in alternative liturgies. Jesus who had been Christ of God, then Word of God, was now Wisdom of God. But just as I had settled into this new stage of religious life, someone knocked at the door.

“She was perky and pretty and wildly enthusiastic—not necessarily solely about ministry. No, she wanted to pray, talk about God, live together in community, witness to some reconciling presence in the fractured, alienated world. And go to church! Eucharist had some strange, strong pull on her heart and soul. Did she not recognize the inherent patriarchy in the church? Did she not see how women were excluded from the priesthood? Had she missed hearing of the scandalous behavior of some? How dioceses had declared bankruptcy after having paid out recompense for the abuse done by its priests? And on top

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of all of this, she wanted the habit?! Had she totally missed the '60s? Was Vatican II no where on her intellectual horizon? She had already served as a volunteer, building homes for the poor, and now she wanted to 'love and serve God and to live in community.' How naïve! Well, don't expect me to move. Been there, done that, had the habit.

"Call me bitter, but after all these years, am I really expected to change to accommodate this confident, naïve and youthful woman with an alleged vocation?"

## Naomi-Ruth, a tale for our times

Meet Sister Marah who is a composite of many sisters I have encountered in my years of initial membership. Though a good and kind person, she has somewhere along the line lost sight of the passion that first ignited her vocation. She has grown comfortable and complacent, and her bitterness is a poison dart that can quickly kill the enthusiasm of a new vocation.

I've been asked to address a very daunting set of questions: What does it mean for religious priests, sisters and brothers, who are primarily middle-aged and senior members, to belong to a new generation or a new era of religious life in our church and in our world? What is being asked of us as we strive to remain faithful to our church and vocation in a time of rapid change and upheaval? How do we discern with those men and women looking at our life, and how do we form them into committed religious for our future? How do we remain faithful to who we are, yet remain open to the challenges of new expressions of living religious life by new membership, especially if they are younger?

And my answer to all of these is: I have no earthly idea. When Brother Paul knocked on my door a year and a half ago and asked if I'd speak at this convocation, I thought he had the wrong office. I'm a biblical scholar, not a vocation director. The only thing I know about religious vocation is that I think I have one. And I'm awfully grateful God called me to be a

Dominican Sister of Sinsinawa. So I'm going to try to address these questions in the manner that I am most comfortable and most familiar: by way of the biblical story.



Laurie Brink, OP

This morning we will be spending time, as you may have guessed by the opening narrative, with the Book of Ruth, a novella sandwiched in our canon between Judges and 1 Samuel. Whereas Judges is a book of terror and treachery, alternating tales of forsaking God and begging for God's intervention, Ruth has no villain. The male characters encountered in the Book of Judges often destroy the women folk, offer them up for violent sex to save their own skin, or cut up their bodies to make a point (and the point is?). The female characters in the Book of Ruth are the protagonists whose reliance on their own ingenuity and *hesed* (loving-kindness) leaves no room for the intervention of a deity. As such, the Book of Ruth stands in our canon as a critique of Judges.

Ruth also provides a narrative of the trials of an older woman whose comfortable life suddenly changes and she must set out on a new journey in a different direction. And while she presumes she is destined to go alone, her stubbornly faithful daughter-in-law tags along.

Freed from her original covenant (her marriage to her husband and subsequent care of children), Naomi attempts to free Ruth of her own obligation. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, returns to her people. But Ruth makes a new covenant with her mother-in-law:

"Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you, for

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wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die, and there be buried. May the LORD do so and so to me, and more besides, if aught but death separates me from you!” By virtue of her oath to Naomi, Ruth is no longer a daughter-in-law, but a true daughter.

## Why we’ve lost sight of our covenant

The lens of *covenant* provides a way to view the next stage in the story of Naomi as she returns home. I propose it also

The covenant between Naomi and Ruth created a new relationship between the two and paved a way for a new future. The covenant we made at our profession did likewise. But that covenant often needs renewal.

provides us with a lens to view the question of middle-aged and older religious belonging to a new generation.

The difficulty of using *covenant* within our Western framework is that we have very few examples of successful covenants. Can we “conceive and imagine relationships built upon little more than promises reliably made and honorably kept”<sup>2</sup> in an age of deceit and distrust?

According to Old Testament scholars George Mendenhall and Gary

Herion, a covenant is a combination of a series of acts. The first are historical events that precipitate the need for the covenant and create relationships, usually between unequal partners (that idea rankles our democratic sensibilities). Secondly, these acts include customary ways of thinking characteristic of both parties, especially common religious ideas associated with deities. Next are descriptions of norms for future behavior (not to be confused with laws). Finally, literary and oral forms in which the agreements are couched and ritualized come into play. “Almost always some ritual act is regarded as essential to the ratification of the binding promise.”<sup>3</sup> Let’s examine each one by one.

### A. Historical events create relationships

For Naomi, the loss of her husband and sons made way for a new relationship with Ruth. Concerning our topic today, it’s the historical, social and cultural *umwelt*, or world view, out of

which our vocation grew. Think for a minute.

- How old were you when you began to seriously consider entering religious life?
- Who was president?
- Would you characterize your vision of America as positive at that point?
- Were there economic possibilities you could foresee for yourself? If you were a woman, was it a limited choice among housewife, teacher or nurse?
- How did you view the church? Where was the sacrament of Eucharist in your spiritual life? Did you even understand yourself as having a “spiritual life”?

### B. Customary ways of thinking about the holy

Naomi is a believer in Adonai, the God of Abraham and Sarah. Ruth is a Moabite, presumably a follower of the Moabite gods. She relinquishes her gods and chooses the God of Naomi. A covenant relationship demands that the two parties stand on common holy ground.

- How would you characterize your relationship with God when you entered?
- Was Jesus the Christ? The historical person? The embodiment of holy wisdom?
- Did you participate in the sacraments regularly?
- Was outreach a natural response to your faith? And most importantly, did your views of the holy mirror those of your intended congregation?

### C. Norms for future behavior

As the story of Naomi and Ruth continues, Naomi will send her covenanted daughter to the fields to glean. This not only provides food, but, as luck would have it, allows Ruth to meet the owner of the field, Boaz, who is a kinsman to Naomi’s dead husband. In what can only be described as scheming, Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor at night with some interesting directions: she is to uncover Boaz’ feet as he sleeps. I will skip the various interpretations of this act. Suffice it to say, Naomi recognizes the game rules. Boaz is a kinsman and as such can marry Ruth and provide an heir to carry on the family name. While all of this sounds a bit shady to us, the key players all exemplify *hesed* or loving-kindness, behavior that goes beyond the requirements of the law.

Let’s consider these questions:

- When you first made your profession, what were the norms of behavior in your community?

- Did you don the habit? Or were you in-between—neither in a full habit nor completely secular clothes?
- Were you assigned to a mission? Did you have a say in the ministry you would do?
- Was there a superior of the house?
- Was there an horarium?

#### D. Literary forms and rituals

The covenant Ruth makes to Naomi comes down to us in literary form, but most covenants in the ancient world were first and primarily oral. The ancient Hebrew concept of *Hadebar*—the word—had power. Once spoken it could not be taken back. Sort of like hitting the send button on your e-mail! Ruth ritualizes her commitment by following her new mother into a new homeland. Often with the Abrahamic covenant treaties, an animal is split in two (Genesis 15:10) and the one making the covenant walks between the split carcass, symbolizing, “May it be done to me as this beast, if I break my word.” Gruesome but effective!

Now think back to your ritual of commitment.

- Did you make profession in the context of a Eucharistic liturgy or prayer service?
- What were your primary emotions?
- Did you have any doubts?
- What is the most memorable image that comes to you when you think of that covenanted moment?

The covenant between Naomi and Ruth created a new relationship between the two and paved a way for a new future. The covenant we made at our profession did likewise. But that covenant, like the biblical ones, often needs renewal and remembering. The Scriptures are full of God’s promise to remember this covenant:

- Leviticus 26:42: “I will remember my covenant with Jacob (and Leah and Rachel), my covenant with Isaac (and Rebeckah), and my covenant with Abraham (and Sarah); and of the land, too, I will be mindful.”
- Ezekiel 16:60: “Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you when you were a girl, and I will set up an everlasting covenant with you.”

And occasionally, the people needed to remind God of God’s part:

- Jeremiah 14:21 “For your name’s sake spurn us not, disgrace not the throne of your glory; remember your covenant with us, and break it not.”
- 2 Maccabees 1:2 “May God bless you and remember

the covenant with God’s faithful servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

But the remembering is both parties’ responsibilities, as we hear in Leviticus 26:45:

- “I will remember them because of the covenant I made with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt under the very eyes of the Gentiles, that I, the LORD, might be their God.” Remember then, it is the LORD, your God, who gives you the power to acquire wealth, by fulfilling, as he has now done, the covenant which he swore to your fathers.”

God remembers and we remember.

As I see it, part of the difficulty for “settled religious”—sounds better than “older”—is that we’ve lost sight of the power and passion of our original covenant with God. When Naomi accepts Ruth’s covenant, the text reads “they went on together” (Ruth 1:19). The two create a new life. At the story’s end, Ruth and Boaz are married, and Ruth bears a son. The town women exclaim a magnificat: “Blessed is the LORD who has not failed to provide you today with an heir! May this one become famous in Israel! He will be your comfort and the support of your old age, for his mother is the daughter-in-law who loves you. She is worth more to you than seven sons!” (Ruth 4: 14-15). Naomi, who began the story bereft of male kin and left only with a daughter-in-law, is now surrounded by blessings and a future she could not have imagined.

I think “settled” religious are very much like Naomi on the verge of her return to Bethlehem. Their naiveté and youth are long spent, and their confidence in their vocation and their God is often tepid.

#### Vocational malaise

I think “settled” religious—those who have been professed since the ’70s or earlier—are very much like Naomi on the verge of her return to Bethlehem. Their naiveté and youth are long spent, and their confidence in their vocation and their God is often tepid. I’m tempted to call this the “middle-age of vocation”—the time when the original energy has been tempered by reality and lived experience—but it’s more than a personal life phase. It’s not just a few sisters, priests or brothers who exhibit a sense of vocational malaise. It seems to

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me to be more pervasive and far-reaching. It exhibits itself at community meetings, when you invite your sisters or brothers to participate in vocational awareness programs. And the responses are “I’m too busy,” “That’s your job,” “I don’t know any young people,” or “We’re dying anyway, why bother?”

A month before I entered the Dominicans of Sinsinawa, I attended a congregational gathering that was really a state of the union report. One of the general council members announced with great enthusiasm that we had accepted our 100th associate. Since no one was entering these days, the future of the Sinsinawa Dominicans was in the capable hands of the associates. Great applause. The vocational team then

got up and reported that two women were entering. That’s nice, but only two. It’s a good thing we have the Associates.

A sister with whom I currently live is celebrating her silver jubilee this year. She is the only member of her crowd. It’s long since past when groups of 10, 20, 30, or in our case, 100 candidates entered our congregations. And if truth be told, that bulge of the 1950s and early ’60s was an anomaly. Religious life historically has never

In biblical terms, the covenant was broken. I can only imagine the excitement—coupled with trepidation—that many religious felt after the Vatican II Council, only to arrive at their golden jubilees still awaiting that promised breath of fresh air.

been a well-traveled path. Quantity never marked the success of a congregation.

Certainly there is a number under which community is no longer viable. But what is that number? It’s a question some of us “younger professed” have often asked. Remember Abraham’s negotiating with God about the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-33): “Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? Suppose there were 50 innocent people in the city; would you wipe out the place, rather than spare it for the sake of the 50 innocent people within it?”

Abraham argues God down to 10. If there are 10 innocent people...God will spare the city.

So, here’s how we figure viability. Name 10 people in your congregation you would want to go into the future with and why. If 10 is enough to spare Sodom, 10 is enough to have a future. You’ll find it difficult to limit it to 10!

We tell a story in our congregation about our founding days. The fledging Sinsinawa Dominicans had only four sisters. Prospects looked dim. Our founder, Venerable Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, gathered the sisters together to discuss whether they should disband or go on, trusting in Providence. In an enlightened move that I don’t think we’ve ever repeated, but I would highly recommend it to all—the sisters asked the youngest to decide. Rachel Conway announced, “In the name of God, let us go on in our present community.” And so we did. And so we do. Of course, Rachel eventually left Sinsinawa for the Dominicans in Kentucky and later in life was a founding member of the Springfield Dominicans.

## Low-grade fever

This sense of malaise is like a low-grade fever infecting a good number of communities—not just my own, I hear. While certainly as we age our energy, enthusiasm and flexibility change, I think this depression lies in a profound disappointment. Kenneth Briggs has authored a recently published book on women religious, titled *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church’s Betrayal of American Nuns* (Doubleday, 2006). He writes, “While the nuns were central to the story of American Catholicism and were key in showing the nation’s women the possibilities of assuming leadership positions in society, they have been largely overlooked or ignored by historians and journalists. In part, this neglect has been the result of the nuns’ exclusion from positions of power within the church. Their subjugation to a male clerical order, I believe, not only kept them out of the public eye but also ultimately crushed their efforts to refashion themselves boldly and creatively. Much of the demise of religious orders at the dawn of the 21st century can be traced to the hierarchy’s refusal to make good on the promise of renewal made by the Vatican 40 years before.”<sup>4</sup>

In biblical terms, the covenant was broken. I can only imagine the excitement—coupled with trepidation—that many religious felt after the Vatican II Council, only to arrive at their golden jubilees still awaiting that promised breath of fresh air. But there are also those congregations for whom the 40 years since Vatican II have been a time of wandering in the desert, awaiting the church to come to its senses and return to its earlier, better self. This pall of disappointment may not be the experience of everyone, but the numbers can be great enough to cast a shadow over all.

A sister was retelling an experience she had had in parish ministry, and when I asked a question for clarification, she

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responded with, “You’re not honoring my anger.” It wasn’t a lack of honor on my part, but a whole and complete lack of understanding. We who only know Vatican II from a history book have no idea what the church and religious life were like prior to its gathering. Nor do we know the excitement and potential that folks felt in its wake. We simply look around at our religious communities and wonder, “Why’s everyone so angry? What’d I miss?” And when we newer members fail to respond with the same heightened level of outrage over yet another hierarchical chokehold, we are often chastised.

Another sister said to me once in response to some papal announcement, “You should be angry about this.” Perhaps I would be if I shared the same context. And that I think is one of the chief dilemmas for newer members. Older professed presume we share the same context, whether historical, social, cultural or even spiritual, as they do. They presume we know their experience of disappointment or even their experience of success and happiness.

To answer in part the question, “How do we remain faithful to who we are, but yet remain open to the challenges of new membership, especially if they are younger?” I say recognize that your life experience in community is history to us. That’s not a pejorative statement. It’s a fact. Our perceived “insensitivity” is often ignorance on both our parts. I don’t know your context, and you presume I do.

This vocational depression that I see manifests itself in three ways: individualism, consumerism and irreconcilable differences when it comes to the church. Let me explain.

## Individualism

Briggs noted, “American democracy and the spirit of freedom it engendered, especially in terms of personal choice and mobility, have placed pressures on the American convent that are unsurpassed anywhere in the world.” And he goes on to warn religious in other countries, “The story of American sisters on the frontier of modernity is, then, a lesson or a cautionary tale for sisters in other advancing societies in Africa and Latin America, where the numbers of nuns are increasing.”<sup>5</sup>

We have a saying in our congregation, which is often retold with some pride. “When you’ve met one Sinsinawa Dominican, you’ve met one Sinsinawa Dominican.” Some of our spirit of individualism may come from our foundation on the American frontier, where self-reliance meant survival. But today, when distinctive dress no longer identifies a religious, when convents have been repossessed by the diocese, when

sisters often minister singly in secular non-profits, our individualism has led to our invisibility.

When a sister and I were meeting with our potential landlords, we explained that we were Dominican sisters. They seemed puzzled. We were Catholic sisters. A polite nod. “Okay, great,” they said, “We’ll still need to do a credit check and a criminal background check.” How can young men and women consider religious life as a viable option for them when they have no idea we even exist?

## Consumerism

And if they did know about us, what would they see? Men or women religious are often living either alone, in twos or in small groups. We live in apartments or convents, where each sister has her own television, cell phone and computer. We’re in rectories or friaries where the beer and soda are on tap, and the community gathers regularly for cocktails before dinner.

Vowed religious, who once couldn’t even drive a car, now all have access to their own—for ministry, of course. There was a time when religious men and

women saw their lives as a witness to counter-cultural values. Today, we are caught in the riptide of a consumer culture, and we’ve grown tired of swimming against the current. We over-eat, under-exercise, all the while being consumed with our personal well-being. The young adults I have taught have often remarked on the cultural status quo guarded zealously by the religious they’ve met. We eat better, dress better, and drive better cars than they do.

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## Irreconcilable ecclesial differences

In *New Wineskins*, Sandra Schneiders describes profession as a formal, solemn and public act. “By making public profession the religious assumes the responsibility to live religious life in the church and to be held accountable for how he or she carries out that responsibility.”<sup>6</sup> Note the language “in the church”—therein lies the problem for some religious, particularly some women religious. Different ecclesiologies

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are at work today. For some, the failed accomplishments of Vatican II, the growing obstinacy of the church hierarchy when it comes to any issues dealing with women and their voice and power in the church, and the actual experience of abuse and oppression by pastors have left the once hopeful, committed religious alienated and angry. The church that for a bright moment was “people of God” has been entrenched and fortified into a renewed bastion of patriarchy.

Far too long we  
have measured  
our viability by our  
ministries, by what  
we have done. I  
would suggest,  
rather, a renewed  
commitment to seek  
the triune God.

But for us newer  
professed, prior to our  
entrance the church has  
been our only access  
to spiritual growth. We  
have never experienced a  
Catholic culture as it existed  
prior to Vatican II. We do  
not know about practices  
such as adoration of the  
Blessed Sacrament, first  
Fridays, novenas; devotions  
such as the Sacred Heart  
or the Rosary; saints and  
feast days are lost on us.

When asked to lead the  
rosary many years ago as a younger candidate, I came to one  
of the sorrowful mysteries and drew a blank. Then it came  
to me, “Veronica wipes the face of Jesus. Hail Mary, full of  
grace...” The prayers, practices, obligations and celebrations  
experienced by the vast majority of our religious are unknown  
to most of us professed in the last 15 years or so.

For the opening of the John Paul II Cultural Center  
at Catholic University of America, Russell Shaw wrote an  
interesting article called “Restoring the Catholic Subculture.”<sup>7</sup>

With all its limitations, the [Catholic subculture]  
of the past had some important strengths. Indeed,  
for a time back in the 1940s and 1950s...it may  
have positioned the Catholic community to become  
the main culture-forming agent in America. But the  
subculture was scrapped, the moment passed, the  
opportunity lost. What’s needed is not mere replication  
of the subculture that was — the construction of a  
Catholic theme park, as it were — but the shaping of  
a subculture grounded in institutions, organizations,  
and programs that reflect the authentic spirit of  
Vatican Council II and are able to undertake the new  
evangelization urged by the present pope. Without  
that, the slippage of the last several decades will go on.

Or, as is being seen in the building of the Catholic town  
of Ave Maria, FL, conservative Catholics with clout and  
money will construct a Catholic culture ignoring Vatican II.

## Starting from scratch

The vocational malaise expressed by rampant individualism,  
an unbridled consumerism and an inability to create common  
ground when it comes to issues related to our church create  
an environment toxic to any new vocation and potentially  
paralyzing for the realization of any new era in religious life.

“What is being asked of us as we strive to remain faithful  
to our church and vocation in a time of rapid change and  
upheaval?” Nothing short of starting from scratch. Or in  
our case, starting from the initial impulse toward religious  
life. As Schneiders noted, “Positively religious commitment  
has involved some kind of active involvement in the trans-  
historical project of realizing in this world the reign of God  
which, although occurring in history, is not produced by  
history.”<sup>8</sup> While Vatican II encouraged religious and the  
church as a whole to see and respond in light of the signs of  
the times, that response has always been understood as part  
of the larger trans-historical reality of the reign of God. To  
feed the hungry, to visit the imprisoned, to proclaim sight  
to the blind are to be our response to having received the  
Spirit of the Lord. These ministries are not an end in and of  
themselves.

Rather, our commitment to peace and our work for  
justice are a demonstration of our deeper commitment  
to intimacy with God. Far too long we have measured  
our viability—both personally and communally—by our  
ministries, by what we have done. I would suggest, rather,  
that a renewed personal and congregational commitment to  
seek the triune God within—though not exclusively limited  
to—the Christian tradition, and participation in the sacrament  
of Eucharist as the church’s unifying symbol will make your  
congregation a more fertile field for vocations and bear an  
unimaginable harvest of hope. Such passionate recommitment  
to the God quest will inspire us to acts of extraordinary  
kindness, the *hesed* of Naomi and Ruth. One of the sisters  
with whom I lived wondered if such acts of extraordinary  
kindness would manifest themselves differently according to  
each congregation’s innate charism. Indeed, her insight has  
etymological verification. The Greek word from which we  
derive “charism,” *charis*, means both “a kindness done,” and  
“a gift received.”

That is why our elderly religious are every bit as holy in

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their retirement as they were in their active years. They are still about the God quest. The goal has never been Catholic education, anti-racism, ending hunger, or caring for the sick. These are the by-products of a life professed to be wholly consumed with the pursuit of God.

In sum, we are called, like Naomi, to give up our bitterness, our disappointments and to enter into a new covenantal relationship with the Ruths who follow after us. We have no idea how this covenant will mature, how it will be tested, or where it will lead us. But as Naomi was blessed with a future impossible for her to imagine, so too will we be, if we can overcome our vocational malaise, and strive for a renewed intimacy with God. All else will follow.

## Bearers of life and hope

So far we've revisited the story of Naomi, an old widow whose life seemed bitter and hopeless, and Ruth, a young woman who steadfastly clung to the widow despite that reality. Neither could have imagined the end of the story. Neither could have predicted that their covenant to each other would become part of salvation history. In non-religious terms, Rainer Marie Rilke puts it this way:

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.<sup>9</sup>

We are, as men and women religious, living our way into the answer of what religious life will be in the future. Of course, we do have some possible scenarios. The much publicized report about the future of religious life, done by David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis in 1992,<sup>10</sup> predicted that religious congregations had a 10-year window of opportunity, after which they would face irreversible decline. The authors listed the "restraining forces" as individualism, work absorption, materialism and parochial assimilation, while the forces that could open a way to a future included reclaiming the vocation to religious life, excellence in leadership, recognition of the charism of religious life, role clarity and greater corporate identity.

Let's take a moment and think about our own

congregations in 1992. Let me jog your memory. George Bush, Sr. was president. This time working with the UN, the United States was waging war on Iraq. In the last 14 years or so, how has your congregation addressed some of the "restraining forces" about which Nygren and Ukeritis warned?

Let's turn again to Scripture to shed light on our reflection. I'd like to begin with the Infancy Narratives in the Gospel of Luke. The first two chapters are seemingly about births—John the Baptist's and Jesus'. But on a deeper level, the Gospel writer is connecting the expectation of the Old Testament with the

realization of the New. Enter Elizabeth, who we are told, along with her husband, is righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly. But despite all her efforts, her advanced age and barrenness leave her without much hope of a future. Unlike Hannah who implores God for a child, we are not told that either Elizabeth or Zechariah besought God's intervention. In fact, Zechariah is a bit startled when the angel appears standing by the altar of incense. The angel promises joy and gladness, a remarkable son will be born to them, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit and "will turn the children of Israel to the Lord their God" (Luke 1:16). Zechariah greets the news rather suspiciously, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18). For Zechariah's failure to believe his good fortune, he is silenced until the child is born. Elizabeth is not much better. The text says she went into seclusion for five months.

Perhaps Elizabeth could not believe her good fortune. Perhaps the thought of life continuing on after her was too overwhelming, too much to hope for. Or, perhaps as the text tells us, it was only with Mary's greeting that Elizabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit. Only with the arrival of her younger pregnant kinswoman can Elizabeth dare to hope that she, too, can create new life. Mary's absolute trust "that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Luke 1:45) releases Elizabeth from her own fears. There is company in the process of birthing new life. Neither the elder woman nor the younger will be alone.

We are called, like Naomi, to give up our bitterness, our disappointments and to enter into a new covenantal relationship with the Ruths who follow after us.

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Both women, despite their ages and unusual circumstances, have the potential to bring forth life, even though neither could have imagined it. The Future of Religious Life study focused metaphorically on the barren

There is a pull within congregations to be inclusive and welcoming. But, as sociologists and biologists have shown, neither groups nor living entities survive without well-defined and well-maintained boundaries.

women in Religious Life, suggesting that only if they engaged in “convergence” or “reorientation” would they produce a future for their congregations. But what could not be measured in the study was the power of God, which “is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). Nor could the writers have anticipated the

potential life that new entrants can engender among the old.

## The future of religious life

The Nygren-Ukeritis study did suggest that there could be a future for religious life, but this new life required boundaries, high membership costs, and a strong sense of the distinctiveness of a religious vocation. While “the prevailing espoused orientation of religious orders since Vatican II has been toward the prophetic, emphasizing systemic and personal service to the poor as a fundamental distinguishing attribute of the vocation to religious life ... in the Visioning Groups research unit, the contemplative dimension was listed as the most important element in the transformation of religious life.”<sup>11</sup>

They also noted: “Those (religious orders) that are most responsive to pressing human need and motivated by the love of Christ will be vitalized as long as their efforts are consistent with their tradition.”<sup>12</sup> In the vernacular, prayer changes things. Those congregations who delve deeply into their own tradition of contemplation and prayer will find transformation, a transformation that will be visible in their response to real needs.

### A. Defined boundaries

Vague boundaries hinder growth in membership. In those

congregations with “lay association programs that accord equal rights to members and affiliates,” “aside from the belief about a vocation as a unique call, there is little to be gained by the enormous sacrifice to the vowed life as compared to the affiliate requirements for membership.”<sup>13</sup> Several years ago, an associate of ours was interested in becoming a vowed member. However, in the course of the process, she discovered she could have the same benefits of membership without professing the vows. Clear boundaries allow religious orders to remain as distinct entities in the church, “otherwise, religious orders will become voluntary agencies with highly permeable boundaries, characterized by lower-order requirements for membership, and exerting a lesser impact than was previously the case.”<sup>14</sup>

There is a pull within congregations to be inclusive and welcoming. The oft used Scriptural support is from Isaiah 54:2: “Enlarge the space for your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly; lengthen your ropes and make firm your stakes.” But as sociologists and biologists alike have shown, neither groups nor living entities survive without well-defined and well-maintained boundaries. Creating and sustaining boundaries is a mechanism for survival, and unbridled altruism is biologically wasteful. Groups set up boundary markers that included kinship, commensality and common cult. The group is related, eats together and shares religious activities to strengthen itself as a community while distinguishing itself from the “other.” In religious life, we have fictive kinship (sisters and brothers), common life and common holy ground, the dissolution of any one of these threatens the identity and cohesiveness of the group.

### B. High cost for membership

According to Nygren and Ukeritis, thriving religious orders “have a dual formula of both a high cost for membership and high commitment rituals and practices to differentiate this group from any other. Until religious orders again understand the dynamics of commitment to prophetic and mystical witness, they are not likely to see dramatic increases in membership.”<sup>15</sup> Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion, tried his hand at the spread of early Christianity some years back.<sup>16</sup> He concluded that one of the reasons Christianity seemingly spread so quickly was its strong moral requirements. Citing Mormonism and religious cults, Stark demonstrated that the more difficult the requirements for membership, the stronger the desire to belong. This high cost for membership decreased the possibility of what he called the “free rider” syndrome, where members joined casually and left equally as casually. If

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I'm going to give my life to a religious congregation, I want it to mean something, to look differently than my life before I entered.

### C. Distinctiveness of vocation

The profile for religious who recognize the distinctiveness of their vocation includes “a radical dependence on God, whom they see as a benevolent authority, and a capacity to enter the life of another for the sake of that other and not in order to meet their own personal—even though seemingly altruistic—needs. They also possess a deep desire for oneness with God and with others. They are deeply committed to their congregation where by objective standards, the costs of their work and membership, are very high.”<sup>17</sup> In our desire to be inclusive, we have often fallen short on identity. What does it matter that I am a woman religious and not a lay woman working in the church? Does my witness to poverty, chastity and obedience mark my lifestyle as different? Is there really a value to this vocation in and of itself? And so the Elizabeths among us must ask.

### Bridging the gap

Clear boundaries, high costs and distinct identity are the expectations of new members joining religious life. Whereas Nygren and Ukeritis proposed these as elements of transformation, we newer members presume our religious congregations are and have always pursued these. And we are disappointed when we discover that the verbiage on the vocational brochure is actually the rhetoric of a life either not yet realized or hence past. The disappointment is further heightened by defensive “settled” religious, who hear our confusion as a condemnation of their current lifestyle. And sometimes, it is. To address the question how do we of a different age cohort and from a different generation find belonging and aspire to commitment, we need to return to the various elements of covenant. A covenant is a combination of a series of acts which include historical events, customary ways of thinking about the Holy, norms for future behavior, and literary forms and rituals. I will revisit the first three.

### A. Historical events for a new generation

A few years ago Sean Sammon, FMS, wrote an insightful and very helpful article titled, “Last Call for Religious Life.”<sup>18</sup> He noted that there are currently three ways to look at the future of religious life and religious vocations: we die with dignity, or we return to traditional practices, or we become

missionaries. The first two have a variety of proponents. It is his last scenario that is most intriguing. He reminds us that missionaries or from my Maryknoll training, I would say, missionaries, move into a mission field and immediately do three things. They learn the language. They learn the culture. They actively seek vocations. The future of religious life is found in the mission field, he says. And this isn't some exotic place up the Amazon or on a secluded island. The mission field for vocations is surrounding us. They are Generation X, the adults born between 1961-1981, and, coming upon the stage, the Millennials or Generation Y, those born in the '80s and '90s. I am a member of Generation X, so I feel I can speak with some level of authority. Various studies conclude that we of Generation X:

- are more tolerant of diversity than the previous generations;
- are the first generation of Americans whom other people took pills not to have;
- are the grown-up “latchkey kids” who are delaying life commitments and looking for a world and church that is stable;
- took on adult responsibilities at an early age because of absent parents;
- define family without relying on blood ties, because of our high experience of divorce; trust friendship over all other relationships;
- are slow to commit; in fact, we really need to be taught commitment in small bites;
- long for institutions to live up to their claims.

In our desire to be inclusive, we have often fallen short on identity. Does my witness to poverty, chastity and obedience mark my lifestyle as different?

We are often considered a cynical generation, growing out of our distrust of institutions, particularly marriage and government. According to a study on Generation X and the news, Cliff Zukin reported that our uncertainty started in the home. When the bottom fell out of the institution of marriage, Xers were the victims. And it left a scar. The divorce rate and the percentage of children born outside of marriage in the United States doubled between 1965 and 1977. In the 1970s, their Boomer parents achieved the dubious distinction of having the world's highest divorce rate—40 percent of all marriages ended in divorce.... the Gen X culture has been

largely formed in the petri dish of uncertainty: Uncertainty about family, uncertainty about economic security and the future, uncertainty about where one fits in the larger society and the world.<sup>19</sup>

## ***Which generation are you?***

Sean Sammon, FMS devised a simple test to determine if a person belongs to Generation X.

1. Were you on hand for the home delivery of your family's first television set?
2. Can you answer to this question: "Where were you when John F. Kennedy was shot?"
3. Were the Sunday evenings of your childhood made memorable because of radio programs like "The Shadow" and "The Lone Ranger"?
4. Do the phrases "Catonsville Nine," "Berrigan brothers," and "Kent State" make any sense to you?
5. Can you recall the Latin mass, Saturday afternoon confession, Vatican II, a pontiff known as "Good Pope John," and a fast before communion that started at midnight?

If you have answered yes to more than one or two of these questions, rest assured: there is little chance that you are a member of Generation X, according to Sammon. Now see if you can answer the following questions:

1. Who was Marsha Brady?
2. How long were Gilligan and the Skipper supposed to go out to sea?
3. What is "retro"?
4. The Gap is a) a space between your teeth; b) a distance between generations; c) a trendy store.
5. Do you recycle? Eat vegetarian? Worry about the environment?
6. Who is Darth Vader's son?
7. Where would one find "South Park"?
8. What is the Kevin Bacon game?
9. What's the difference between an I-Pod, an X-box and an MP3 player?

If you can answer these, either you're a member of Generation X or you're in touch with us.

We often hold antipathy toward social movements because we suffered from the activities of the 60s (AIDS epidemic rather than sexual liberation, nuclear anxiety rather than peace). We are the clean-up crew for the century.

But Generation X is not the only fertile field for evangelization and vocation. Our younger siblings, the Millennials, are three times the size of Generation X! According to statistics, the Millennials are the most ethnically diverse generation to date, and they have emerged with distinct characteristics (see sidebar on page 27). The historical, social and cultural world out of which we—both Gen X and Millennials—come to our covenant relationships in religious life is radically different from most community members' historical, social and cultural world. Ours is a world overshadowed not by communism and the threat of nuclear annihilation but by terrorism and radical fundamentalism—whether Muslim or Christian. We are used to and expect immediate gratification and instant messaging. We see the world through the television screen or the computer screen, and we often have fewer interpersonal skills. When I taught at Dominican University, I used to take a group of students to Montana via South Dakota for an experiential learning trip. On one such trip, a sophomore, absolutely mesmerized by the stunning beauty of nature outside the van window remarked, "This is like TV."

We were a generation without a hero, until a little known cardinal from Poland became Pope John Paul II and announced a preferential option for youth. He made being Catholic public, and he made young Catholics proud to be Catholic. For a generation between the Baltimore Catechism and the New Catechism, we had little sense of what being "Catholic" meant. That desire for a clear, Catholic identity continues to plague us as vowed religious.

### **B. Customary ways of thinking about the Holy**

Our customary ways of thinking about the Holy are limited by our experience and knowledge of our Catholicism. If I could give one piece of advice to you who are charged with the ministry of vocational discernment it would be this: develop parish-based programs for spiritual catechesis for young adults. These young people cannot hope to discern a religious vocation if they do not have the skills or the vocabulary to engage the pursuit. As is evident with the Millennials, we have done an excellent job of instilling a sense of social responsibility in our young. From confirmation service requirements to Catholic high school service requirements for graduation, we have allowed the next generation to

experience the joy of ministry, but we have not provided them with a sufficient foundation for their own spirituality. They serve, but why? Theological reflection following their service would provide an excellent avenue to deepen their commitment and explore their call. One example of a program that is doing much of this is Catholics on Call, a new Lilly Initiative sponsored by Catholic Theological Union. It provides programming and Web site information for young adults exploring a possible life of service to the church.

If we Gen Xers do pursue a religious vocation, our language, images and questions are sometimes labeled as conservative and non-feminist. We understand our vocation as a call from Jesus, with whom we are passionately connected. Having lost various liturgical practices and devotions through the reforms of Vatican II, the Eucharist is the one bit of mystery that we can experience. If we didn't attend Catholic schools, our religious education was comprised of making felt banners and singing, "Sons of God." Or later, anything from the St. Louis Jesuits. The finer nuances of theology are lost on us, since we have little basis for conversation. Thus, for some of us, we are easily threatened by adherents of New Age spiritualities and

cosmology within our own congregations. We are unable to see where being part of the Universe story intersects with our understanding of the Christian story.

An article from *America* magazine<sup>20</sup> by Mary Ann Reese, the former director of Young Adult Ministry for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, sheds some interesting light on young adult Catholics and their faith. Mary Ann has been one of the pioneers of young adult ministry for Catholics. Many years ago, more than I'd like to admit, Mary Ann was a law student and my high school CCD teacher in Knoxville, TN. She introduced me to the wonders of Christian spirituality and invited me to join a Christian Life Community. The two of us, along with a lay couple, a Jesuit priest and a Mercy sister met at a Jesuit House of Prayer in the mountains of North Carolina and explored various prayer styles. I credit Mary Ann with sowing the seeds of a religious vocation by providing me the tools to develop my own prayer life. So when she writes about young adults and their faith, I take notice.

Young people have tremendous gifts to offer the church. And they desire to do so.

Mary Ann acknowledges what I have experienced at Catholic Theological Union and Dominican University— young people have tremendous gifts to offer the church. And they desire to do so. From her observation and experience she outlined eight different types of young adult Catholics. They are:

- *The Church in Mission* This is the group of young people who identify heavily with the servant Jesus, immerse themselves in service projects and volunteer programs and desire to make a difference.
- *The Church in Search* This group is composed of single and divorced young adults, typically over the age of 30. They go to church to find community and common values.
- *The Church Youthful* These are the youngsters graduating from high school and moving on to college. They are very active in their Newman Centers and campus ministry.
- *The Church Apologist* Mary Ann describes these folks as "filled with awe for the transcendent God." They find the clarity of the New Catechism and papal teachings helpful in a world of ambivalent morals. The prayers of this particular group tend to be traditionally devotional.

### ***Some Millennial characteristics***

- SELF-CONFIDENT ("most 'hovered over' generation ever in our country, unprecedented parental supervision and advocacy," as opposed to Generation X, also known as "latch-key kids").
- OPTIMISTIC AND HOPEFUL, INDEPENDENT, GOAL-ORIENTED, DIVERSE, INCLUSIVE (have experience and respect of the "other" whether the other is one who is racially, culturally or economically different or possessing a different sexual-orientation).
- MUCH MORE GLOBAL-, CIVIC- AND COMMUNITY-MINDED, AND SERVICE-ORIENTED. Unlike their older siblings in Generation X, Millennials are less cynical and more concerned with social issues.
- TECHNO-SAVY AND CONNECTED 24-7.
- HIGH-PERFORMANCE AND HIGH MAINTENANCE! They expect your attention and they do not suffer loss well, having little experience of failure.

- *The Church Devotional* Less attuned to internal church politics than the Church Apologist, this group is not particularly interested in evangelizing. They are less interested in traditional movements, and can often be found participating in Theology on Tap and parish activities wherein they can learn more about Jesus.
- *The Church Busy* Young professionals and young families make up this category. Their church involvement is normally limited to Sundays and time-limited activities.
- *The Church Creative* This group is open to various religious traditions, often blending different faith practices together. They are well-educated and well-read, and most comfortable in multi-cultural and university parishes.
- *The Church Disconnected* These young adults were raised Catholic and may have even graduated from Catholic high schools, but for a variety of reasons, they are distant from the church. As Mary Ann notes, this group is mission territory.

To help prepare this presentation, I gathered several young adults who either work or study at CTU. These are men and women who have already committed themselves to church ministry, though not necessarily as vowed religious. Their comments confirm Mary Ann's acknowledgement of the gifts of the upcoming generation and its variety.

"Community and shared mission are terribly attractive to me," Megan admitted. "Part of me believes and hopes that there will be a new way of being in our church for shared vocation and mission. But I don't know that I have enough trust in the church that in the long haul its actions will match my conscience."

Cristina had a slightly different view, "I have a great desire for Catholic identity. Nobody ever came to our (Catholic) high school and talked to us about religious life. It was never a visible option for me. I like seeing the habit, particularly used at liturgy. It's the identity."

Kyle also spoke of issues of identity, "Religious life is attractive to me because I like having my identity tied to community, yet knowing that I can still be my own person. But my friends are nominally Catholic and didn't have a strong Catholic identity growing up."

Beth acknowledged the current abuse scandal. "It makes people wonder if this is a group to publicly bind my life to?"

Yet, despite all their uncertainty and questions, these young adults affirm the necessity and place of a religious vocation. They commented that a distinct identity and community were significant factors in their understanding of

religious life. And their advice to you is "Let people know that you love the life."

The variety of groups among young adults provides an interesting challenge for the church as it tries to provide ministry among the youth. For those of you in vocational ministry, recognizing the variety can help you tailor programs that meet the interests and needs of different segments. For young men and women entering religious congregations, formation programs must address their strengths and their weaknesses when it comes to knowledge of and participation in the church. As Mary Ann stated, "in addition to capitalizing on their own gifts, the young people in each group can grow and develop through exposure to the complementary charisms of the others."

### C. Norms for future behavior

Because we are loosely catechized in the faith, we seldom feel a strong sense of identity. As we look at religious life, we are attracted to the outward symbols that reflect our inner longing. Belonging for this generation can manifest as a desire to wear the habit, not necessarily for reasons of power or privilege. When I was making my first profession as a member of the Order of Preachers, I very much wanted to receive the Dominican habit. I was quickly disavowed of this idea and subsequently held in suspicion. I was told, "That's not who we are." Obviously the habit means something very different to those "settled" religious than it does to us who are younger. For me, I wanted to put on a symbol of my membership in the Dominican Order, so that when I preached, I visibly and tangibly participated in the 800-year-old history of the Dominican proclamation of the Gospel. It was a symbol of my belonging and of my commitment and a reminder that I was not the first Dominican, nor will I be the last. Our congregation has now recognized that perhaps we are at a new moment. Our sisters who have made finals of late have requested and have received the preaching habit.

If wanting the habit wasn't bad enough, young people today looking at religious life want to live in community. Often we have already experienced common life during our time as volunteers, and we long to deepen our commitment to being a reconciling presence of peace through local community. We have already had our own apartments and owned our own homes. We know too well our own space. We would like the opportunity to live in common space, to pray in common, to grow in love of the other so as to become better, healthier, holier persons. We desire deeply the bonds of affection we heard were once your experience of common life.

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Our former leadership was concerned with what they perceived—and, in truth, what we experienced—as a lack of affection among the most recently finally professed in our congregation. There are about 30 of us who have made profession since 1979. Of that number I have only lived with three of them. How do we build bonds of affection if we do not know each other? Without the opportunity to live common life under one roof, we will never strengthen our sisterhood beyond the sense of obligation. I care about you in some cosmic way, but I do not know you. And, likewise, you do not know me. I believe this lack of being known is part of what led to an exodus of my peers within the last eight years. All of my age peers who have been in initial membership and temporary profession with me have left the congregation, save one. And that one, I live with in community.

Like the parable of the seeds that fell on rocky ground, my peers' experience of religious life was never allowed to be grounded in the fertile soil of our community life. Their tenure with us saw the continual closure of convents, the movement to living singly or in couples and leadership's absolute mystification about what to do. New members, like myself, were placed in communities that happened to have an open bed; not ones that were necessarily life-giving or even healthy. In my 14 years as a Dominican of Sinsinawa, I have only lived in a larger convent community for two years. My other placements have been apartments, which I have had to locate, rent and furnish. Unwittingly, we have made living in community under one roof the responsibility of individuals who feel so called, rather than the right of each member and the responsibility of the congregation as a whole. If living together in community with more than just my best friend does not develop within congregations (and here, I speak from the experience of women religious), we will have no religious life in the future. Quite frankly, ministry, prayer, study—all these I could do without making profession. It is in the context of life in community that I come to know myself as a woman religious.

Perhaps because we, and the generation following us, have had personal relationships and sexual experiences before we entered, we recognize that to sustain celibacy, we need strong local communities. Since the structures of convent living were cast off in an effort to respond more authentically to the call of Vatican II, we find ourselves wanting to be part of a way of life that is mostly a memory in someone else's mind. Superiors are a thing of the past, and common life has come to resemble convenient life. In order to bridge the gap between current religious and our younger brothers

and sisters, we must recognize that some structure might be needed.

I have had sisters explain to me that religious life is in transition; all is up in the air; we have to be flexible. For my generation, we have only known a world in upheaval. Our primary experience of our national government is one of distrust. Growing up, our church treated us with benign neglect. The economy was in shambles when we entered the job market. We cut our teeth on insecurity and instability. We look to religious life not as some panacea for our experience of disorder, but as a beacon of hope, whose traditions—of which the last 40

years are a drop in the bucket—have strived for peace among the chaos, and have offered order and simplicity in various ages of conflict and distress. That 40 years after Vatican II we are still making excuses for the instability of our way of life tells me we've lost sight of our larger history and our larger mission.

We look to religious life not as some panacea for our experience of disorder, but as a beacon of hope, whose traditions have strived for peace among the chaos, and have offered order and simplicity in various ages of conflict and distress.

We desire to live in obedience, not as some throw back to a bygone era that we've never known. But we want to experience being called and sent. We want our gifts recognized, and we want help knowing where best to use those gifts for the building of the reign of God.

So you can see that perhaps there is a gulf between the historical events, articulation of the holy and expectations of normative behavior on which we younger religious based our covenant in comparison to older religious.

## Enthusiastic belief

We do not first become committed to religious life. We first become convicted of, and some of my peers in religious life, would say “infected” by the power of the Gospel story and its message. Whether we are Elizabeths with decades of experience as religious, or Marys, just setting out, we should be contagious with enthusiasm about the story of mercy, compassion and salvation incarnated by Jesus at any age. That enthusiasm bubbles over into our lives as human beings and

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as religious. It is out of that enthusiastic belief in the power of the Gospel that we are then committed to the life of a religious.

Too often we have measured our success by how well we lived up to the quintessential narrative of Christian community found in Acts of the Apostles:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

—Acts 2:42-47.

In his rule for religious, St. Augustine cites this passage as the Scriptural foundation for our common life. But let me tell you as a Scripture scholar, this was Luke's utopia, a hoped for reality, not the actual experience we hear tell from Paul's letters.

Let's look at how this idealized group came to share all things in common, as the text says. It starts long before they sell all their property and spend their time praying and

Our world is so very weary, so desperately in need of a good story, something to believe in. And, my friends, we've got one.

breaking bread. It really starts with a misunderstood message about a new kingdom. It reaches its low point when their leader is crucified, dies and is buried. I suppose to use St. John of the Cross' terminology, this is their "dark night of the soul." Hiding out together

in the place that once held much joy, they are a crowd of cowards, disillusioned and depressed. And some would say they didn't even have enough insight or courage to realize it was over, pack it up and go home.

Who knew that resurrection would happen? Who could have believed that the impossible would be made real? But it's not even the fact and experience of the resurrection; it's not just the encounter with the Risen Jesus; it's not just a thing to be known. For as the beginning of Acts narrates, it is the coming of the Spirit that changes them. Conversion isn't a

head thing; it's a heart and soul thing. And as we see in this story and in many since, it is a communal thing.

Perhaps our current experience of religious life is much like those forlorn people huddled together in the upper room. Haven't we heard others say, "Why don't you sisters and brothers just close up shop? Religious life is dead and you don't have the decency to bury it." Or even in our own communities, we have turned on each other, "Those young sisters get anything they want. When I was a young professed, I..." Those men and women in the upper room stayed together because there was something so powerful in the life and death of Jesus, so compelling in his words and deeds that even in the midst of tragedy and death, they waited. And after the experience of resurrection and after receiving the Spirit, they became a force so powerful and so pervasive as to threaten politics and society. Aren't we glad they didn't go home!

I can't tell you what tomorrow will look like anymore than those gathered in the upper room could imagine the Resurrection. I can tell you that the story still has power. No matter our generation, we are communal beings who gather around a common story, eager for companionship and insight. As vowed religious, young and old alike, we hold a special place in that circle. We are the storytellers and the story-livers, or to use a church term, the catechists. As Ezekiel (3:1-3) writes, we are to take the scroll filled with the bitterness of life and eat it and find the sweetness there. Is there a more worthy task than to proclaim a word to the weary? Our world is so very weary, so desperately in need of a good story, something to believe in. And, my friends, we've got one. Let us believe that our particular way of living and sharing that story is enfolded in a unique and vital way.

As Sean Sammon writes, "One must wonder actually if together, rather than witnessing to the death of apostolic religious life, we are at last at a point where we can try to live it for the very first time."

One of the young adults I met with it said it best, "I want you to live out your vocation, and I want you to want that for me." And I would add, so that young and old alike can exclaim of one another, "Blessed are you." ■

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2. G. Mendenhall and G. Herion, "Covenant" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman, et al; 5 volumes (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1.1179.

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16. Rodney Stark. *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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The witness of community living is a gift that religious can offer to both a divided world and a divided church.

# The role of religious in the church and the world

By JOHN L. ALLEN, JR.

*The author spoke at the NRVC Prayer Breakfast held on the final day of the 2006 convocation.*

**I**n the spirit of G.K. Chesterton, who once observed that the fact of sin is “plain as potatoes,” I’d like to open our reflections with another fact, just as obvious as sin, and equally depressing. It’s a reality painfully well-known to those of you in this room who bear responsibility for vocations within the religious communities you serve. That fact is the steep decline in religious life, at least in the Northern hemisphere. Expressed in quantitative terms, we are living through one of the most pronounced “bust cycles” for religious life in its history.

A few drearily familiar statistics make the point. From its peak in 1968, the number of religious women in this country has dropped from 204,000 to 67,000, a dizzying decline by any measure. Just as alarming, the average age of American religious women today is 69 and rising roughly a year for each year that goes by. Numbers for the men’s communities are comparably discouraging.

But you don’t need me to catalog this litany of woe, because it’s the stuff of your daily experience. Those of you in this room are no doubt being pulled in more directions than the typical religious man or woman of a generation ago, in part in order to “pick up the slack” in communities which lack the personnel to cover all their commitments.

Apropos of this reality, I’d like to deliver a message to you this morning, one which I suspect you do not hear nearly often enough: “thank you.” Your fidelity offers a precious witness that religious life—what the Holy See in its document

“Starting Afresh from Christ” called “this chosen host” among the sons and daughters of the church—has a future. Indeed, without you we could not be the church. I can imagine a Catholic Church without its bureaucrats and without its chains of social institutions; I can even, God help us, imagine a Catholic Church without Vatican correspondents. But a Catholic Church without men and women religious is unthinkable. Both individually and as communities, you show us that the values of the Kingdom are tangible flesh-and-blood possibilities that still have the power to shape lives if we but have the courage to say “yes” to grace.

If you hear nothing else from me today, please hear this, and from the bottom of my heart: “thank you.”

## New sense of purpose, new life

Yet the integrity of your witness does not dispense us from the necessity of making sense of the signs of the times. So, what answer are we to give to the fact “as plain as potatoes” of the numerical crisis of religious life?

It is, perhaps, easier to identify the wrong answer than to lay our hands on the correct one. The wrong answer, I would submit, is succumbing to a quantitative mentality whereby any model that seems to offer some promise of stemming the bleeding is to be embraced. Some zealous young people seem to respond to habits and veils? Fine, dust them off and put them back on, as long as they sign up. Other candidates seek a post-modern form of religious life where we make only temporary commitments, and adjust our traditional spiritual disciplines to suit everyone’s tastes? Again, fine, as long as there are new parts to keep the machinery running. Without passing judgment on these ideas, a willy-nilly metamorphosis driven by the numerical bottom line is, I would submit, a prescription for losing your way.

You don’t have to take this on my authority. Sister Joan Chittister recently said that focusing on the numbers in

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analyzing religious life amounts to “giving a capitalist answer to a Christian question,” while Pope Benedict XVI in his meeting with religious superiors on May 22 warned of the dangers of seeing consecrated life within “the framework of worldly logic.” When Joan Chittister and Joseph Ratzinger are in lockstep, ladies and gentlemen, I would suggest that we have come across a truth that lies beyond the realm of ideological spin and competing theological agendas!

For you, this ought to be a liberating insight. It implies that your primary concern in a time of declining membership should not be reversing those declines, at least not directly. Of course, growth is ordinarily a sign of vitality, and a consummation devoutly to be wished for. Yet what drives you in the first place ought to be how to express the traditional genius of consecrated life in today’s context. Seeking growth for its own sake puts the cart before the horse. When people become aflame with purpose, devoting themselves to an ideal for which they are willing to live and die, that conviction radiates a gravitational pull which inevitably pulls in others.

The key to recovery, therefore, is not primarily new vocations, but a renewed sense of purpose.

I am not a religious, and hence any counsel I can offer has to be taken for what it’s worth, as an outsider’s contribution. But in this quest for purpose, I wonder if religious life could profitably employ an image that Benedict XVI has used to describe the situation of Christianity in the post-modern, secular West, which is that of a “creative minority.” He draws the concept from Arnold Toynbee, who wrote that the revitalization of a society always depends upon its creative minorities, subgroups who exercise a disproportionate influence by virtue of their imagination and their passion. As applied to Christianity, the Holy Father’s insight is that the church today can no longer depend upon the instruments of the state or the popular consensus of an overwhelming majority. Instead, Christianity’s short-term future rests with what he’s termed “islands of spiritual

composure,” groups of committed Christians who come together to live the faith with joy and integrity, and whose witness is vital for the broader culture. Even if the vast majority of post-modern



John L. Allen, Jr.

men and women are not willing to commit themselves to all that such a life entails, Benedict says, they may nevertheless recognize that this is the direction in which the future lies. In the same way, I wonder if religious communities today might think of themselves as a “creative minority” within Catholicism. In other words, what Christianity is to secular society, religious life can be for the church—a series of “islands of spiritual composure,” however depleted in membership, which nevertheless plays a critical role in equipping the church to respond to this cultural moment.

Serving as a creative minority requires a grasp of the particular challenges Catholicism faces today. I’d like to draw your attention to three “mega-trends” in the life of the church, which come into focus at three different levels of magnification. I highlight these trends neither to applaud nor to condemn them, and certainly not because they add up to John Allen’s personal vision of an ideal church. Whatever our personal opinions, they are the seismic shifts today realigning the tectonic plates of the church, and for that reason they’re critically important in shaping the context in which your reflections must take shape.

## Global context: shift North to South

I begin with two snapshots of the global church at different moments in time. In 1900, at the dawn of the 20th century, there were 459 million Catholics in the world, of whom 392

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million were found in Europe and North America, and just 67 million scattered across the rest of the planet, principally in Latin America. Christianity 100 years ago remained an overwhelmingly First World, largely white phenomenon. In 2000, by way of contrast, there were 1.1 billion Catholics in the world, with 380 million in Europe and North America, and the strong majority, almost 800 million, in the global South. Roughly half of the Catholics in the world today live in Latin America alone. Africa in the 20th century went from a Catholic population of 1.9 million in 1900 to 137 million in 2000, a staggering growth rate of 6,708 percent. Given demographic and religious trends, this population realignment in global Christianity will continue. By 2025, only one

Ninety-four percent of the Catholics in the world are not like us, and American priorities and sensitivities cannot always set the global agenda.

Catholic in five in the world will be a non-Hispanic Caucasian. This is the most rapid, and sweeping, demographic transformation of Christianity in its 2,000 year history.

The new growth in Africa and Asia, and to some extent in Latin America, is not merely replicating pre-existing European patterns.

Instead, it's creating myriad new forms of Christianity as the faith mingles with indigenous customs and concepts.

By the way, this is not all good news for the Catholic Church. The fastest-growing brand of Christianity in the southern hemisphere is formed by a bewildering variety of Pentecostal and evangelical groups, which are attracting significant numbers of converts from Catholicism. In 1930 Protestants amounted to 1 percent of the Latin American population; today it's between 12 and 15 percent, some 64 million people. A study commissioned in the late 1990s by CELAM, the federation of Latin American Catholic bishops' conferences, found that 8,000 Latin Americans were deserting the Catholic Church for Evangelical Protestantism every day. (This defection has given rise to the gallows humor that after Vatican II, the Catholic Church chose the poor, and the poor chose the Pentecostals!) The same tendencies can be found in Africa and Asia. The future of Catholicism in the southern hemisphere will therefore be shaped to a large degree by the encounter with Pentecostalism and with the new urban mega-churches, which means different interlocutors, and a different

set of questions than those which set the theological agenda in the North.

Another point worth noting is that the 67 million Catholics in the United States represent just 6 percent of the global Catholic population of 1.1 billion. We are just the fourth largest Catholic country in the world, after Brazil (144 million), Mexico (126 million), and the Philippines (70 million). What this means is that 94 percent of the Catholics in the world are not like us, and American priorities and sensitivities cannot always set the global agenda.

Increasingly, power and influence in global Christianity will shift with population. São Paulo, Jakarta and Nairobi will be to the Catholic world what Leuven, Milan and Paris were in the counter-reformation period, meaning the primary centers of intellectual and pastoral energy. Among other things, this will imply a more literal reading of Scripture, along with a more vibrant and charismatic style of worship; as the Catholicism of the future speaks with an African and Hispanic accent, it will increasingly speak in tongues. The vitality of this brand of Catholicism will cheer Western conservatives with its emphasis on traditional sexual morality, and gladden the hearts of liberals with its sharp critique of global economic structures and American militarism. Increasingly, this global church will be a challenge for all sorts of First World sensibilities.

That challenge, by the way, is something the leadership of the church will encourage. During a September, 2006 trip to Bavaria, Pope Benedict XVI spoke to German Catholics about his experience of meeting with bishops from other parts of the world on their *ad limina* visits.

"Every now and then," the Holy Father said, "some African bishop will say: 'If I come to Germany and present social projects, suddenly every door opens. But if I come with a plan for evangelization, I meet with reservations.'" The pope went on to say: "People in Africa and Asia admire our scientific and technical prowess, but at the same time they are frightened by a form of rationality which totally excludes God from man's vision, as if this were the highest form of reason, and one to be imposed on their cultures too. They do not see the real threat to their identity in the Christian faith, but in the contempt for God and the cynicism that considers mockery of the sacred to be an exercise of freedom, and that holds up utility as the supreme moral criterion for the future of scientific research. Dear friends, this cynicism is not the kind of tolerance and cultural openness that the world's peoples are looking for, and that all of us want!" My own experience of traveling in the global South and interviewing

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bishops, theologians and lay activists from Southern churches suggests this diagnosis has some merit, and it promises interesting times ahead.

## Roman context: concern for identity

In his famous homily at the Mass *pro eligendo papa*, celebrated the morning of the conclave that just 24 hours later would elect him pope, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger laid out what he saw as the central challenge facing the church in our time. He memorably defined that challenge as the “dictatorship of relativism,” meaning the widespread modern tendency to reject not merely this or that truth claim, but the very idea that there is such a thing as objective truth. In some circles, relativism, and its related virtue of tolerance, have come to seem like prerequisites for a pluralistic world. Benedict, however, believes relativism is profoundly dangerous. To take the most dramatic example, in a world not convinced that every human being possesses objective dignity, the weakest and most vulnerable are placed at greatest risk.

Like John Paul II before him, Benedict is therefore keenly concerned that Catholics do not assimilate to this broader secular mentality, that we do not, in Biblical language, become “like salt that has lost its flavor.” As the practical translation of this imperative, the church has seen a growing emphasis over the last 25 years on what sociologists call the “politics of identity”—efforts to preserve our own distinctively Roman Catholic language, practices and belief systems, our markers of difference in a rapidly homogenizing world. Pressures for religious to wear habits, or to return to traditional forms of prayer and devotion, stem from this source. Shaped by these concerns, many bishops and other leaders coming on the scene today believe that the optimistic openness of the immediate post-Vatican II years too often degenerated into what Jacques Maritain called “kneeling before the world.”

The concern can be exaggerated, but few would deny the danger. Some years ago I was invited to address a group of missionary congregations which had gathered to take up the fascinating theme of “evangelizing secularity.” One thing that struck me, I told these missionaries, is that we have been discussing secularity as if it’s a reality out there somewhere, when in truth we ourselves are the sons and daughters of secularity, often unaware of the profound ways it has shaped our psychology even in areas of life we mark off as “religious.” As proof of the point, I noted that we tend to reproduce within the church the same polemical attitudes and interest group tactics one finds in secular politics. Far from

evangelizing secularity, too often we have been evangelized by secularity. Indeed, I sometimes wonder if the world turns a deaf ear to the church because we look, sound and act so much like it, when people expect something better from us.

John Paul and Benedict, it should be said, did not invent the thrust toward a more clear Catholic identity. It forms part of the Catholic culture of our time, perhaps partly as a reaction against excesses of the post-conciliar period, perhaps as a simple recognition that we live in a secular world that in a thousand and one ways tempts Christians to blend in. Whatever its roots, the current longing for identity, for doctrinal clarity and moral absolutes is unmistakable. I’m sure you can identify it in your own experience, especially among young Catholics who seek a clear sense of what makes them different, including a laudable, if perhaps at times over-heated, desire to “think with the church” as a means of marking themselves off from secular society.

While recovering our traditional, spiritual and intellectual vocabulary offers a fertile “common ground” for internal Catholic conversation, it also poses new challenges in terms of addressing the world outside, since our points of reference may become increasingly alien to the broader secular culture.

The church has seen a growing emphasis over the last 25 years on what sociologists call the “politics of identity”—efforts to preserve our own distinctively Roman Catholic language, practices and belief systems.

## American context: Catholic tribalism

The Catholic Church in the United States is rich in virtually every sense of the word. We have vibrant parishes, world-class universities, top-flight Catholic hospitals, and the most theologically literate Catholic laity in the world. John Paul II once said that he believed the reason the “new movements” had not really taken hold in the United States is because it is the only country in the world where the revitalization of the parish as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council had really occurred as the council intended. Reflecting the pluralistic character of American culture, we count Catholics of all shapes and sizes—of all ethnicities and languages, all

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socio-economic and cultural subgroups, all ideological and theological convictions. In principle, this is a tremendous—indeed, I would argue, a globally unparalleled—blessing.

Sadly, however, we don't always experience it that way. On the contrary, this diversity is more often the cause of rancor, pitting left against right, liturgically oriented Catholics against social activists, and so on down the familiar litany of internal fractures. For anyone with a sense of history, the situation facing Roman Catholicism in the United States cannot help but seem ironic. The American Catholic community spent the first half of the 20th century

American Catholics today by and large move in self-contained circles, and quite often they're not on speaking terms.

clawing its way out of a ghetto imposed upon it by a hostile Protestant majority. We then spent the second half of the century constructing ideological ghettos of our own choosing, insulating ourselves not so much from Protestants as from one another. If we're honest, I submit that

the bitter debates within Catholic circles during the Bush/Kerry election in 2004 suggest that this problem is getting worse rather than better. It's instructive to note that no other Catholic culture on earth has gone through a similar upheaval about denying Catholic politicians the sacraments on the basis of their voting records; without assessing the rights or wrongs, I suspect the terms of the debate themselves speak an important truth about the punitive nature of Catholic division in this country.

American Catholics today by and large move in self-contained circles: "social justice Catholics," "charismatic Catholics," "neoconservative Catholics," "Vatican II Catholics," "traditional Catholics," to name only a few. This division is usually characterized by the term "polarization," but that's misleading if taken to suggest that the only fault line of consequence runs between right and left. "Tribalism" is a better word for the sociological reality. In a sense, there is no such thing as "a" Catholic Church in the United States; there are multiple "Catholicisms," and quite often they're not on speaking terms.

Today's problem is not so much that we have divisions, a reality of Christian life that goes back to the Acts of the Apostles. The problem is that we lack a common language even to discuss those divisions. On the rare occasion when

today's American Catholic encounters someone from another point of view, it's not merely that they disagree on issues, but they have widely different senses of what the issues are. They have gone so far down separate paths as to lack common points of reference, which would render dialogue problematic even if both parties were interested in talking to each other. In practice, however, the parties are rarely all that interested. The result is that moving across the party lines in American Catholicism can be a depressing exercise. Granted that this is an over-generalization, it nevertheless captures something real that I believe most Catholics can recognize from their own experience.

## Religious as artisans of community

As you have no doubt already surmised, each of the megatrends I have described carries the risk, and, in many cases the reality, of division. Each pivots on a potential fracture: North versus South, Catholic identity versus secularity, and, for lack of a better taxonomy, left versus right. Facing this peril of Balkanization, what would it mean for women's and men's religious communities to be a creative minority? How might diminishing numbers of religious nevertheless fashion a life that would be recognized by the men and women of our time as pointing the way towards a less fissiparous future, one based on dialogue rather than diatribe?

With no credentials or standing whatsoever to make this suggestion, I nevertheless dare to propose that one way of doing so is by conceiving of yourselves as women and men with a special apostolate for community, taking as your motto Christ's final wish for the church expressed in the priestly prayer of John 17—*ut unum sint*, "that they may be one."

The church has always been "catholic" in principle, as a theological affirmation in the Creed, but we are now becoming sociologically "catholic" for the first time in our history, which cannot help but destabilize our already fragile internal ecology. Liberal reformers in the West may find that Southern Christians simply are not interested in their projects, especially on issues of human sexuality such as gay marriage. Neo-conservatives may be alarmed at the increasingly sharp critique of American foreign policy that bubbles up to the leadership ranks in the church. Average parishioners may resent the new pastor with a thick African or Indian accent, and Western Catholics may resent the way that Europe and North America increasingly seem like the ecclesiastical periphery rather than the center.

Other strains abound. As Rome presses for ever-greater

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clarity on Catholic identity, some Catholics may chafe at what they see as false litmus tests or selective versions of Catholicity. Women and men outside the church may have a hard time understanding Catholic discourse, as it recovers vocabulary and concepts from an earlier age that simply don't reflect the argot of MTV or the stock market. American Catholics caught in the crossfire of ideological trench warfare within the church may despair of finding spiritual comfort. I've been using the modal verb "may" in describing these dangers, but in truth they are already recognizable features of our common experience.

A towering imperative of our time is to ensure that these tensions remain creative rather than destructive. On this front, you in religious life possess unique resources. You have a deep experience of forging communities that do not deny differences, but which relativize them, so to speak, with respect to a common life. This is what consecrated women and men down through the centuries have always done; you are artisans of community. Father Timothy Radcliffe has referred to the Dominican "culture of conversation," and in different forms all of you have similar legacies. Your spiritual patrimony allows you to foster the primordial Catholic instinct that being family is more important than being right, that taking a seat at the common table of faith is more valuable than rushing to the barricades to defend our own private agenda.

Your communities already straddle each of the divides we have outlined. Within religious communities, one finds women and men from the developed North and from the growing South; members thoroughly immersed in the hustle and bustle of secular life, as well as those more attuned to the ancient language and rhythms of the church; members who are more liberal in their political and theological instincts, living alongside those who are more conservative. Your tendency, I suspect, is to take this unity-in-diversity almost for granted, because it has always been thus. What I am proposing is that the polychrome communities in which you live are not merely a precondition for apostolate—they *are* your apostolate in this era, in the sense that your mode of life, and the values which underlie it, are like balm for an ever more broken church. Your call is to become steadily more intentional about promoting the value of community in the broader Catholic discussion. Your orders, for example, might sponsor retreats around the idea of bridging the North/South divide; you might volunteer as spiritual mentors for parishes where ideological divisions have fractured a sense of common purpose; you might launch lecture series or publications on

the common life; you might simply be more conscious about inviting others in the church to share life with you. Whatever form it takes, the church desperately needs your wisdom.

For 2,000 years your commitment to community has been a precious gift, but today it looms as a *sine qua non* not merely of our vitality, but of our capacity to function at all. Our future consists either of growing heartache and division, or the strength and passion that flow from a genuine experience of spiritual family. To be honest, I do not believe that the hierarchy, Catholic intellectuals, the Catholic press, the parish system or any other piece of our ecclesial infrastructure is equipped to help us in quite the fashion of religious men and women. Dostoyevsky once said that only beauty will save the world; I would contend that in this new era, only community will save the church.

This is the moment of opportunity, I would propose, awaiting you as a "creative minority" within the Catholic fold. For the foreseeable future, perhaps relatively few of us will step forward to become Franciscans, or Viatorians, or School Sisters of Notre Dame. We pray this is not so, yet it is certainly a plausible scenario. However few you may be, you will be light and life to the church if you hold up models of authentic community, built not on ideological self-selection but on real catholicity, where robust debate and common purpose are not at odds, and where clarity of identity and openness to the other are two sides of the same coin. In the end, vocations will come from your passion for community—communities will not come from your passion for vocations.

Assuming this role as a creative minority is a task for serious and imaginative people. I very much look forward to watching you rise to the occasion, as I have no doubt, none whatsoever, that you will. ■

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Films can be a way to illuminate the divine in our own lives and in the world around us.

# Movies that point toward Mystery

LOU ELLA HICKMAN, IWBS

**M**ovies can help us reflect on the mysteries in our everyday lives. When young adults take time out to engage in spiritual reflection, that pause from the activity of life can bear fruit in a life lived more contemplatively and more intentionally. Four films from the past few years deal with what people often take for granted or chose to ignore.

## Narnia

The first such film is *Narnia*, a movie adaptation of C.S. Lewis' classic tale, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Since its release, the film has inspired numerous articles and books enriching society's understanding of the wonderful land of Narnia. With so much material in print about Narnia, one might wonder what else could be said. Yet no matter how many books and articles could be written, Narnia is a mystery that will never be explained fully. Lewis' tale continues to remind people of faith that Mystery is the heartbeat of what we believe; for it is when we encounter Mystery we discover the paradox of vocation—that in finding we are found. For even the desire for God is both gift and mystery.

For those who have not read the book or seen the movie version, the story is set in England during World War II, and it revolves around four children who are sent from London to a country house for safety. One rainy afternoon, Lucy, the youngest, comes across a wardrobe (closet) filled with heavy coats. Going in to hide during a game of hide and seek, Lucy discovers a place where "it is always winter and never Christmas." When Lucy's older sister Susan and older brothers

Peter and Edmund also enter the wardrobe, they all embark on their adventure as Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve. Their adventure takes on new meaning when they encounter the Christ figure, Aslan, who helps them battle and overcome the evil witch. With the spell broken, not only does Narnia return to its original beauty, the children also fulfill their destiny as kings and queens of Narnia.

The mystery of Narnia is Lewis' gift to the world. However, this gift may be overlooked. Mystery in our own lives can also be overlooked, for mystery is not merely the unknown but often an understanding that goes well beyond the simplistic. Although we often want simple answers, to truly live life one must encounter the profound—a reality that is multi-layered and multifaceted. We, like the four children, are challenged to respond in order to discover our true selves. This movie sets before us the mystery within mystery, that is, the mystery of vocation that must be discerned within the great mystery of sin and redemption.

## Finding Neverland

*Finding Neverland* (2004) deals with a family coping with the great mysteries of death and dying. It is also a story of how the power of imagination helps heal and helps create a classic of children's literature. Who exactly was James M. Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*, before he wrote his wonderful tale? The movie reveals a man struggling with failure—not quite the man we expect to meet. Early on he encounters a young widow (whom we later learn is dying) and her four sons. James soon becomes a father figure for the four boys. They enjoy one glorious summer that turns James' sense of failure as a playwright and as a husband into a magical story of a boy who never grows up. As a result of his relationship with the family, James comes to terms with his failures and, as a result, awakens to profound possibilities. He can then translate the mystery of seemingly senseless pain into beauty and meaning.

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Perhaps it is no surprise James' book revolves around not wanting to grow up—that complex mystery bound up in flesh and bone, emotions, and learning to choose one's own ideals. Joseph Cunneen wrote in his article "Faithfulness and Film: Movies and Childhood," "Of course, our Christian ideal is not that of Peter Pan: Children need to enter the adult world."<sup>1</sup> Yet a pivotal point of Christianity is conversion; that is, we become like children. One of my graduate theology professors once remarked, "Christianity is only religion where people grow up to be children." Conversion is the universal call to holiness and we enter it through the door of mystery.

We see this spiritual growing up in a fleeting scene in which James tries to explain to the oldest son, the actions of his mother regarding her illness. "Look at that ... the boy's gone. Somewhere in the last thirty seconds you've grown up." George has "grown up" because he has learned compassion in the midst of the confusion his family is experiencing.

## The Day After Tomorrow

Another movie that lets us delve into some of life's mysteries is *The Day After Tomorrow*. The consequences of global warming provide the framework for a father-son relationship. In the chill of a worldwide arctic winter, the mysterious resilience of the human spirit is played out. The tension in the film arises from the fact that few high-ranking government officials believe Professor Jack Hall's predictions concerning a catastrophic, world-wide climate change. When the change occurs quite unexpectedly, he must rescue his son who is stranded in New York City. For a few moments they communicate by phone, and the last thing the professor can tell Sam, his son, is, "I will come for you." Later, he tells a friend who is stranded with him, "He'll make it." After the force of the storm has been spent, Professor Hall stumbles on the shelter where Sam and his friends have been staying. Sam wakes up to see his father walking through the door.

His simple response, "My father," reveals the absolute trust he has for his dad.

If we are to live holy lives, we must learn to listen to the patterns of God's voice speaking in our lives. Are we like the government officials who refuse to hear Jack Hall's warnings or like the son who trusted a father's love? St. Ignatius of Loyola understood this type of listening when he articulated in his famous Spiritual Exercises, especially in his method of "discernment of spirits." Thus, at a certain level, *The Day After Tomorrow* asks, "How do we listen to God?" One young priest I know answered that question well when he commented, "I became a priest because of my dad."

Mystery in our own lives can be overlooked, for mystery is not merely the unknown but often an understanding that goes well beyond the simplistic.

## Signs

There are also those who are already living out their vocation as clergy or religious in terms of the mystery of faith. A little older movie, *Signs* (2002), concerns a minister's loss of faith. Crop circles signal the arrival of an invasion of aliens, and woven through the movie's main story is another story about the death of the Rev. Graham Hess' wife. The ordinariness of a tragic car accident is juxtaposed against an event that is so extraordinary, it is extraterrestrial. The idea of mystery is repeated again and again—there are no coincidences, and the phrase "we are not alone" can suggest either divine presence or that of the aliens. When Graham regains his faith and returns to the active ministry, the viewer is left to wonder, "What happened; what exactly was the grace that touched his life?" Was it his encounter with the aliens, or was his turning point when he spoke to his children about the details of their birth? Or was it the scene where his younger brother

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confronts him about his lack of faith? Perhaps it was all three.

A young priest I know strongly objected to the movie. He felt the film was helping to erode respect for the clergy. Not long after *Signs* came out, yet another a priest spoke during a homily about his own faith crisis. My esteem for the latter priest grew because he was able to share his humanity with the people of God. Edward C. Sellner comments in his book, *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship*: “If we identify for example, with a healer archetype in our work or ministry (a common identification for those who seek to be of help to others), this archetype needs to include a wounded side. Henri Nouwen’s *The Wounded Healer* is based upon this insight. Not to recognize and accept our wounded, limited side in ministry will drive us mad, sometimes literally, or at least cause the sickness called burn-out.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, *Signs* remains a wonderful reminder of what clergy and religious are meant to be. In terms of faith, we are neither superheroes nor plastic statues on pedestals. We are real people who struggle to come to grips with the meaning of mystery. Perhaps the greatest hunger in our modern society is more than just a hunger for meaning; we hunger for meaning hidden within the ultimate mystery of God. The saints got it right—they allowed themselves to be embraced by God. And this can be our lifetime adventure as well, with perhaps a little help along the way from some favorite movies.

In the end, all we need do is to let Mystery enfold us, and we will learn everything worth learning.

## Suggested reflection questions

### THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE

1. At the very beginning of this movie the picture of the children’s father is shattered. How does this influence Edmund throughout the movie? What are some of our images of God that need to be shattered? How can people come to terms with their shattered images of God? How has your image of God changed?
2. Even though the story was originally written for children, how could it also speak to teenagers as well as adults?
3. Friendship is very important for teenagers. What does the movie have to say about friendship that could speak to teenagers? What does it say about friendship with God?
4. How do the children discover their vocation as Kings and Queens of Narnia? Jesus said that we should enter our room to pray in secret. How does the movie speak about the call to contemplative life?
5. What is the film’s message about mystery?

### FINDING NEVERLAND

1. Often God hides behind the mask of failure. In what ways does James Barrie’s failure as a writer and husband reveal God’s mysterious ways?
2. Too many teens do not have the skills to deal with failure in relationships and so resort to suicide. In what ways could this film speak to such young people? How might a teenager use this film to help a friend in this situation?
3. What reasons could the mother have had for not wanting to talk about her illness? How did this affect the family?
4. Much of the story revolves around James mentoring the boys through her silence. When someone encounters mystery in the spiritual life, he or she finds it difficult to talk about it. What are some the fears of not wanting to open up, and how could this person work through them?
5. A number of scenes show the boys at play. How are play and fun part of the spiritual life? How do people “grow up to be children?”
6. The characters all have different responses to the various mysteries in their lives. How does this reflect the way most people respond to mystery?

### THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW

1. How did Sam’s trust allow his leadership skills to surface in a way that would ultimately save him and his friends?
2. What does the film say about deep listening? The father is committed to finding his son. How do deep listening and commitment in relationships go together? What could the movie’s message about global warming as well?
3. At the end of the movie one of the librarians refuses to use a copy of the Gutenberg Bible for fuel. What does this action say about him as a person of faith?
4. The professor’s wife is willing to stay behind with a sick child. When people arrive at a dry spell in their prayer journey, they need to just wait and trust. Does the wife’s decision reflect that need?
5. The idea of mystery seems to be more in the background than in the other above movies ... or is it? In what ways can this film be considered a vocation film?

### SIGNS

1. While this movie is an older one (in terms of movie watching) it still is a very important film that could be used for vocation work. The poet Walt Whitman once wrote, “Every cubic inch of space is a miracle.” How does this apply to the characters in the movie?
2. Graham begins the movie by waking up suddenly. He has

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become hyper-vigilant as a father due to his wife's death. After his encounter with the aliens, he is transformed and becomes a person who is aware. What "aliens" do you need to face in your life?

3. Graham's son suffered from asthma which kept him from inhaling the alien's poison gas. St. Paul experienced something similar when he wrote, "When I am weak, then I am strong." In what ways do our weaknesses reveal God's strength? In what ways would my weaknesses as well as my strengths help me discern my vocation? With this in mind, what kind of minister do you think Graham became? Why?

4. The movie centered on the mystery that there are no coincidences. Many saints encountered "coincidences" that led to their conversion and/or vocation. Who are the saints that could speak to young people today? ■

1. Joseph Cunneen. "Faithfulness and Film: Movies and Childhood," in *Keeping Pace: 25 Years of Theology, Education, and Ministry* from PACE, ed. Padraic O'Hare (Dubuque, IA: Brown-Roa. 1996), 326.

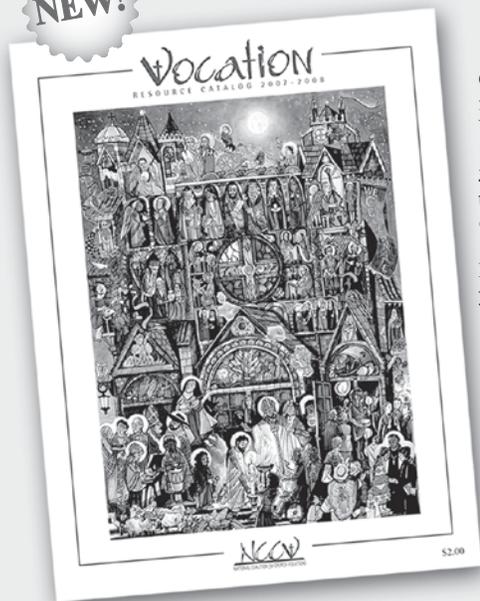
2. Edward C. Sellner. *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship*. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1990), 122.

3. For further reading: Rev. Robert E. Lauder. *Magnetized by God* (Totowa, NJ: Resurrection Press, 2004), 140 pages with reflection questions.

4. A resource for vocation ministers and spiritual directors is: John Pungente, SJ and Monty Williams, SJ. *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies*. (Boston, MA: Pauline Media, 2004).

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# BOOK NOTES

## Do priests need better preparation?

BY KEVIN NADOLSKI, OSFS

*“Vocations to the priesthood and religious life are not lacking in our world; but discernment, listening, accepting and trust, however, do seem to be in short supply”*

—Bishop Wilton Gregory, p. 5, in the summary publication of Pope John Paul II’s Third Continental Congress on Vocations, 2002.

A recent study by sociologist Dean Hoge will further assist the discernment and listening required for those who work in the vocation ministry that leads men to the priesthood. At first glance, the recent book that elaborates on the study, *Experiences of Priests Ordained Five to Nine Years* (National Catholic Education Association, 2006, order at <http://services.ncea.org/source/orders/index.cfm?section=orders>) appears to be required reading only for seminary personnel and those who work in priests’ continuing education ministry. The book discusses strengths and weaknesses of seminary training and articulates the professional needs of priests now hard at work. Yet, thanks in part to the accompanying commentaries that the publisher included, this book has real and urgent value for vocation ministers, too. As Hoge collects, lists and analyzes the experiences and comments of newer priests, important implications surface for vocation ministers.

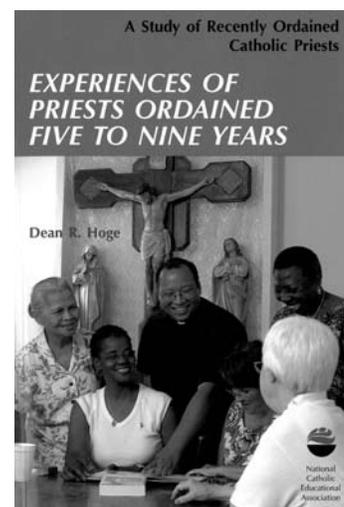
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Kevin Nadolski, OSFS is a vocation minister for the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales and is a member of the Editorial Board for the National Religious Vocation Conference. A Philadelphia native now living in Washington, DC, he has also ministered in Catholic education as a campus minister, teacher and principal.

The chief and clearest finding of the study is that priests ordained five to nine years—regardless of their ideological or pastoral leanings—find themselves under-prepared and lacking when it comes to managing personnel, supervising budgets and planning strategically for the needs of parish communities.

A second area for which priests were under-prepared is what a commentator, not Hoge, labeled “people skills” (Monroe, p. 155). These include: problem-solving community-life issues and conflicts, negotiating the seemingly countless and competing expectations of parishioners and staff, and negotiating responses that are both pastoral and professional.

It is refreshing that the priests involved in the study, which is a continuation of earlier works of similar longitudinal ambition, did not expect seminaries to redesign their already-packed curricula. This is where vocation ministers can take heed. A cross-section of priests ordained five-to-nine years report that they need more training in people- and management-oriented areas, and they concede that these things cannot readily be taught in seminary. The same priests admit that there is little time for them to acquire such important skill sets prior to their appointments as pastors, due to the speed with which men assume such posts in the present American context—another finding of the study.



In response to these findings, vocation ministers could refine the discerning and listening practices in their ministry for men who already possess (or who could develop) the people skills that are lacking. This is a clear call of the study. If men enter the seminary deficient in people skills, there can be no expectation that they will develop them, much less master them, according to the needs of the church they are called and ordained to serve. Thus, vocation ministers, emboldened with this empirical data from priests themselves, would serve the church well in welcoming only men with promise or success in these areas. The church needs priests who can relate effectively in situations that call for a host of interpersonal skills, and those skills should already be developed and honed. If men enter the seminary without people skills sufficient for conflict resolution, the management of people and their expectations, and basic employer-supervisory skills, they may never learn them, and they could harm the progress of a parish community.

### **Aptitude for creativity needed**

Another insight vocation ministers can glean from this study is the demand and capacity for creativity. With the publication of the fifth edition of the “Program for Priestly Formation” approved by the Vatican (August 2006), it appears that greater attention will be given to the study of philosophy instead of field education and preaching, courses that would situate the seminarian directly amid the needs of the people he would eventually serve. Creativity, which is the baseline aptitude that feeds the skills that ground the priest in the ministries where he most meets people, appears to have fewer opportunities to develop in the seminary. Again, a majority of priests in this study reported that these skills were not taught to them during their professional training in seminary.

Vocation ministers could note that a capacity for creativity should not be optional among the men with whom priestly discernment occurs. If a man has little to no creative dimensions in his personality, one may question suitability for priestly ministry. In her commentary, Theresa Monroe essentially affirms this with the unwieldy term “higher stage of cognitive and developmental consciousness” (Monroe, p. 165).

While most of the book is given to the aforementioned findings of the Hoge study, six commentaries punctuate them. Here, a good amount of reflection is available for many, including vocation ministers. Although they cover different territory in the fields of ministerial preparation, the commentaries address a timely topic: models of priesthood.

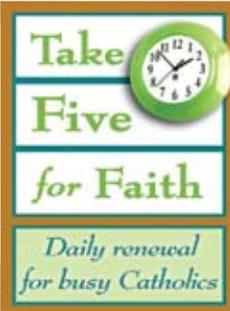
Much has been written about the competition between the cultic and servant-leadership models of priesthood.

They have appeared heretofore to be in acute competition. This study shows a good bit of agreement, especially in the areas where seminary preparation has left priests in need of more training. Monsignor Jeremiah McCarthy advances the discussion—and may potentially ease the competition—with the consideration of a rabbinical model of priesthood as a bridge to the former that sets the priest apart from those he serves and the latter that situates him in parallel fashion as a baptized leader among the other baptized whom he serves.

Thankfully, Hoge’s study offers no evaluative quality to either of the two models. In fact, vocation directors—who presumably find comfort in one or the other—could learn the value of the one to which they do not subscribe from his findings. The rabbinical model offers the best of both and emerges from the essence of Vatican II’s call for priestly service that is connected with healthy expressions of leadership and management, rooted in authentic administration as “ministry for others” (McCarthy, p. 142). This model offers the vocation director a point of convergence to which he may point a man in discernment for the priesthood.

Hoge’s study is necessarily replete with quantitative data. In his commentary, Father James Bacik offers an adept and accurate qualitative summary to the numbers: “There are good reasons for suggesting a couple of additional skills which will help priests minister more effectively, namely, the ability to appreciate and utilize the diverse theological tradition and to make appropriate connections between the Christian message and contemporary concerns” (Bacik, p. 122).

As the worldwide Catholic Church seeks progress and understanding in Catholic-Muslim relations, vocation directors are likewise called to realize the need for sensitivity to pluralism within the church and beyond. The future pastoral ministry of the priest-candidate with whom a vocation director is working will demand no rigidity whatsoever, heightened awareness and appreciation of religious expressions beyond Catholicism, and openness to a vision of church dialogue that is necessary and welcomed, not feared or considered a personal or ecclesial threat. These characteristics are not just needed for the future priests in our church. They are to be sought by our present pool of vocation directors. Without such traits, discernment, listening, acceptance and trust may be in even shorter supply than they exist at the present moment. Or worse, without them, priests and the people they serve may be fewer. ■



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28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

**Are the rich in or out?**

Blues singer Bessie Smith said, "I've been poor, and I've been rich. Rich is better." Despite all the cautions about the dangers of wealth in scripture, few people set out to be poor, not even for the sake of the Kingdom. It's easy to point fingers at those richer than ourselves and say they're in trouble with God and feel pretty smug ourselves because we're not in the Fortune 500. But the danger is not in possessing money or things: The danger is in things possessing us. No one wants to be poor, but when we believe it is our stuff that makes us matter, we just have to ask whether our stuff makes a difference to God.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30*

*"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!"*

MONDAY, OCTOBER 16

FEAST OF MARGARET-MARY ALACOQUE, VIRGIN, RELIGIOUS

**Slow and steady wins the heart of Jesus**

The superiors at Visitation convent never saw much promise in Sister Margaret-Mary (1647-1690); in fact, they considered her "quiet, slow and clumsy." She was entrusted with lowly, assistant positions. Yet at the heart of every day, Saint Margaret-Mary placed the Body of Christ. While kneeling once before the Eucharist, she heard the voice of Christ declaring she (of all people) would help spread his Sacred Heart through the world. As part of this duty, Margaret-Mary was to encourage Communion on the first Fridays of the month. Often we cannot keep pace with others, but Christ most cherishes those whose pace is toward him. This week, try making time for the Eucharist in your daily life.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Galatians 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1; Luke 11:29-32*

*"For freedom Christ has set us free."*

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