

# HORIZON



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

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*Presenter Father Ray Carey is a priest of the Archdiocese of Portland, OR and a clinical psychologist.*

This workshop presents theory of behavioral assessment and practical interview suggestions. The focus is the initial assessment of candidates with its implications for possible future seminary and religious formation. Workshop participants study sample cases and learn skills for interviewing and guidelines for organizing information into reports. Topics include areas pertinent to healthy assessment, including interview subjects such as:

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*Presenter Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC, Executive Director, NRVC*

This workshop is intended for new and recently appointed vocation directors. Its goal is to provide participants with the necessary skills, context, theory, challenges, and practicalities of contemporary vocation ministry. The NRVC Vocation Director's Manual, which complements this workshop, is an optional but recommended resource. Topics include:

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- discernment
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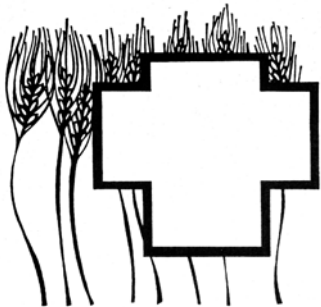
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# HORIZON

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

*HORIZON* serves as a resource:

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

*HORIZON* has a threefold purpose:

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

## National Religious Vocation Conference

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

To accomplish this, NRVC provides opportunities for professional growth and personal support of vocation ministers; facilitates regional, area and national meetings for its members; sponsors workshops, seminars, conferences and days of prayer; publishes materials related to vocations for a wide variety of audiences; engages in research, study and exchange on issues of current concern; publishes a quarterly professional journal, *HORIZON*; maintains a Web site; and cooperates with other national groups essential to the fostering of vocations. For further information, contact: NRVC, 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

## Off to the monastery with two dozen friends

I've always loved the lives of saints because, as Frank McCourt pointed out in his memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, they're full of the most amazing stories of romance, mysticism, lust, perseverance and heroism. I go so far as to feel a little sorry for Protestants in their bare, statue-less churches (although, let's face it, a lot of them know the biblical stories of love, revenge, treachery and bravery better than their Catholic brothers and sisters).

The other day, in a children's book of saints, I discovered the saint who ought to be the patron of vocation ministers if there isn't one already: Bernard. He was a good looking guy who knew how to party, according to *Saints for Young Readers for Every Day* (by Susan Helen Wallace, FSP, 2000, Pauline Books & Media). Wallace writes:

Yet one day, Bernard greatly surprised his friends by telling them he was going to join the very strict Cistercian order. They did all they could to make him give up the idea. But in the end, it was Bernard who convinced his brothers, an uncle and 26 friends to join him.

Did you get that bit about 26 friends?! Now there's a man a vocation minister can appreciate. I don't know if I even have 26 friends, let alone 26 friends I could talk into a lifetime of austere prayer and no desserts. There's more, though:

As Bernard and his brothers left their home, they said to their little brother Nivard, 'Good-bye little Nivard. You will now have all the lands and property for yourself.' But the boy answered: 'What! Will you take heaven and leave me the earth? Do you call that fair?' And not too long after, Nivard, too, joined his brothers in the monastery.

Bernard and Nivard lived in the 11th century, but they are both very much alive today in the young people we meet who are seeking a deeper spiritual life. Young Bernards and Nivards are exploring religious life today, and it is our privilege to be their companions on the journey. May this edition of HORIZON make that walk easier and more fruitful. St. Bernard, pray for us!

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, editor  
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After several busy years “getting the good news out about religious life,” this vocation minister was burning out. She and her community regrouped and found new energy and direction by focusing on core community values.

# How I found my center as a vocation minister

BY DEBBIE DRAGO, RGS

**I** BEGAN VOCATION MINISTRY in September 1997. With a decade of experience, I can now look back and see how I have shifted my approach to this ministry, discovering that by focusing on my community’s core identity and charism, I have become both more effective and more satisfied.

I came to this ministry as a newly graduated social worker, having spent my entire adult life, 17 years at the time, working with adolescent boys and girls with special emotional and behavioral needs. In what I now know was an atypical move, I myself requested to do vocation ministry. I came to religious life in 1985, post Vatican II, when not many women were entering. Although I had experience with the sisters who taught me in elementary and high school, long gone were the days when most young Catholic women thought of entering the convent. In fact I knew of no one contemplating such a vocational choice. The idea, even in my own heart and mind, although exciting and hopeful, also seemed strange and abnormal. Although today uniqueness is appealing to many adolescents and young adults, in my day no one wanted to be considered so different. I believe that the wonderful mentors that God put in my path during my days of discernment are what planted the deep desire within my own heart to help

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young women come to know and respond to God’s call. How grateful I am to those women religious who encouraged me to follow that deepest place in my heart, which led me to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

## Scattered energies

I began vocation ministry with a great deal of passion and enthusiasm, and perhaps a good dose of ignorance. I hadn’t a clue as to what I was supposed to be doing or how to go about doing it. Those first years were what I call less defined and open years—filled with activity, events, travel and a large learning curve. I volunteered for everything, everywhere, any time. I just wanted to be doing something to get the good news out about religious life. I participated in elementary and high school presentations, confirmation retreats, diocesan events, young adult gatherings, collaborative Come and See retreats with other women religious vocation ministers. We had follow-up days to our retreats, short-term volunteer experiences and vocation fairs. Most of these activities were promotional and seminal, with a generic feel to them. Everything I was involved in was wonderful, worthy, helpful and needed, but after several years I found myself getting burned-out. I was trying to be all, for all. I was all over the place, and my community saw very little return on these highly labor-intensive projects. I needed to do something different.

At the same time I was coming to this realization, my vocation team in the New York Province was involved in developing a strategic plan. I began to take a whole new look at vocation ministry from the specific perspective of Good



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Shepherd mission, philosophy and spirituality. What would be different about this work if I were to approach it like any other Good Shepherd ministry?

What I was beginning to sense in an organic sort of way was confirmed for me in what appeared in Sandra Schneiders book, *Selling All*: “The necessity for those who feel attracted to religious life to discern the congregation within which they will test that attraction probably suggests that congregations need to do considerably more to present their own life for such discernment.”<sup>1</sup>

This was the missing link for me. In my desire to be inclusive, collaborative, sensitive to the diversity of my vocation colleagues, politically correct and open, I was approaching my ministry as a vocation director in an all-encompassing, vague sort of way without realizing it. I was hesitant to talk specifically about religious life as a Good Shepherd Sister in the presence of members of other communities. I did not want to appear to be promoting my Good Shepherd way of religious life over and against other communities.

Each of us vocation ministers, in our own way, consciously avoided pushing our own agenda—perhaps so much so that it was difficult to distinguish one congregation from another. I often felt that participants in our collaborative Come and See retreats most likely left without really knowing who was who on the retreat team and without experiencing the different communities and charisms we each represented. Schneider’s assertion freed me up. Not only was it OK to talk about religious life from the perspective of Good Shepherd, it was necessary. I felt renewed energy.

A number of things immediately came to mind. What

do we as Good Shepherd Sisters explicitly value in our mission and our relationships? How do we specifically approach people and work with people in our ministries? There are a number of core Good Shepherd tenets that expressly shape who we are and how we are with others:

1. One person is of more value than a world.
2. Goodness is inherent in the individual.
3. Within each person is the potential for change and growth.
4. Through relationships people grow in self-understanding and self-esteem.
5. People develop best in an atmosphere of kindness and respect.
6. Respect for the customs and traditions of others is essential in working with diverse cultures.
7. People do best where there is a partnership, and where there is participation in decision-making.
8. Each person has the right to self-determination (including us as vocation ministers).
9. Our loving care follows persons and supports them to be faithful to their truest selves.

In my desire to be inclusive, collaborative and sensitive to the diversity of my vocation colleagues, I was approaching my ministry as a vocation director in an all-encompassing, vague sort of way without realizing it.

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## Taking the Good Shepherd approach

This was exciting to me. Are these not the criteria needed for good discernment? Would not these same criteria help

Let your charism guide you. Follow it, believe it, love it. It is not so much a matter of your taking it, but of your charism reclaiming you in all that you do as a vocation minister.

me deal with difficult situations, situations that all vocation ministers face and often dread, especially inquiries from women and men who are not emotionally or psychologically free to enter into a discernment process? The core tenets of Good Shepherd freed me up to be in relationship the same way I would be in any other Good Shepherd

ministry with each person who contacted me via e-mail, phone, letter or retreat. There was nothing to fear. I began to relate to each individual person and her unique situation and life history from the premise that this person is of more value than a world. This person, through an atmosphere of kindness and respect, deserves to know the truth from me, even when it will be disappointing and difficult to hear. This person, if she really seems to be called to Good Shepherd religious life, deserves, through my love and support, to be challenged and encouraged to move in the direction of trying out the life. This is so even when uncertainty and fear are alongside her feelings of hope and enthusiasm. In every situation and relationship, I ask myself: What would our foundress, St. Mary Euphrasia, do? How would Jesus, the Good Shepherd, handle this situation? How can I best articulate who we are as Good Shepherd Sisters to women desiring to know about our way of life? What is in the best interest of the community and this individual? How can I best be of service to both the community and those in discernment? This is what motivates me and replenishes my zeal for vocation ministry. Ultimately this is my best gift to the church, the people of God, my community and those in discernment.

Because of Sandra Schneider's urging that congregations do considerably more to present their own life to discerners, four annual Good Shepherd Retreats were developed. They are the Good Shepherd Discernment Retreat, held two times a year in two different locations; Good Shepherd Spirit and Mission Retreat; and our One Week A Shepherd Retreat. I love doing these retreats, and I'm convinced that they are of

tremendous value to those who participate.

This poem by Claire Blatchford sum up much of what I've learned about finding my center as a vocation minister.

Do not come to a standstill at the realization  
That you receive guidance.  
Follow it, believe it, love it.  
Then it can shape you.  
It is not simply a matter of your taking it,  
But of its taking you.  
It is the difference between standing on the shore,  
Feeling an occasional wave on your foot,  
And going into the ocean.  
That way you will be truly shaped anew.<sup>2</sup>

Don't be afraid to plunge into the ocean of your charism as you approach vocation ministry. Let it guide you. Follow it, believe it, love it. It is not so much a matter of your taking it, but of your charism reclaiming you in all that you do as a vocation minister. You will feel the difference between standing on the shore with an occasional wave washing over your foot, and going into the ocean deep to be shaped by the gift of your congregation's spirituality and mission. By consciously returning to the core of Good Shepherd philosophy, as a rudder directing all of my relationships, program planning and decisions as a vocation minister, the effects of burn-out have been replaced with renewed energy, zeal and hope. As a result I have become more centered, authentic, focused and effective. If we are true to our core, even the most difficult challenges can be borne lightly. ■

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1. Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM. *Selling All* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 24.

2. Claire Blatchford. *Turning: Words Heard from Within*, (Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), 49.



We know from experience and from research that most Catholic young people are disconnected from the church. How can we change that? What are the important questions for vocation ministers and others to ask?

# Let's ask the right questions about engaging Catholic youth

BY CHARLOTTE MCCORQUODALE AND LEIGH STERTEN

American Catholic youth today are largely disengaged from their church and poorly educated about their faith. This picture of Catholic young people is not new; and, as the following article points out, it's also backed up with hard science. While a distressing situation for the entire church, youth indifference gives vocation ministers particular pause, because shrinking numbers of committed young Catholics mean fewer people who will consider religious life. Given the current scenario, many in the church are asking what can be done to evangelize and invigorate youth. The idea promoted in vocation circles that religious communities make a "preferential option for youth" may be part of the solution.

Following is a measured reflection on the question of engaging Catholic youth from two national leaders in youth ministry. They invite vocation ministers to be part of a concerted effort to enliven the faith and commitment of Catholic young people.

"Instead of promoting a new paradigm, we must deconstruct the old paradigms and then propose a series of reflections on culture, the church and the state of youth ministry as we begin the third millennium."

—Tony Jones in *Postmodern Youth Ministry*<sup>1</sup>

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Leigh Sterten holds master's degrees in theological studies and in administrative studies and has worked in youth ministry since 1988. She is co-founder of Ministry Training Source and is treasurer of its board of directors. Her speaking and training efforts have focused on developing leadership in young people and fostering youth ministry in rural and small town settings.



FINDINGS FROM the 2001-2005 National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)<sup>2</sup> reveal that the Catholic Church in the United States does not have effective answers to the important questions concerning the engagement of the majority of its youth in matters of faith. More so, the church may not be asking the correct strategic questions when considering the many critical issues identified by one of the most significant studies to date on youth and religion, conducted by Dr. Christian Smith. The gravity of the situation is captured by Dr. Smith in his book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005). He describes the immense potential the church has for engaging its youth and the great distance the church must travel to meet that potential.

Getting from where the majority of U.S. Catholic teens currently are in their faith lives to achieving the huge potential that appears to exist for them requires that the church invest a great deal more attention, creativity and institutional resources in its young members—and therefore in its own life. Undeniably the future shape of the U.S. Catholic Church virtually depends on it.<sup>3</sup>

Supporting Smith's conclusion, our analysis of Catholic

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youth and their parents found many similar areas of disconnect in which the reality and the potential were not concurrent. This disconnect was most evident between what the young people say or believe and what they do in practice. For example, the Catholic youth in the NSYR sample expressed a high level of importance of faith, with 84 percent

“The youth group model—sometimes referred to as the ‘one-eared Mickey Mouse’ model of ministry—created an environment in which youth, isolated in an ‘ear’ on top of Mickey’s head, had only marginal contact with the rest of the body of Christ.”

(11 percent extremely, 31 percent very, 42 percent somewhat) saying that religious faith is at least somewhat important in shaping daily life. However, less than half of those youth (39 percent) attend Mass on a weekly basis, which is considered a normative practice in the Roman Catholic Church. Many measures of Catholic identity, such as the intent to want to remain Catholic at the age of 25, were high (76 percent), yet active participation in various Catholic faith practices and programs were generally low. Additionally 74

percent stated they are either very or somewhat interested in learning about their religion, but only 21 percent participate weekly in religious education programs sponsored by parish communities, with 34 percent never having participated in these programs.

A related challenge to the one that Dr. Smith put forth in *Soul Searching* is presented by Tony Jones in *Postmodern Youth Ministry*. Jones’ challenge can be found in the opening statement of this article and is directed to a broader group than the Catholic religious tradition, to include all religious traditions. He explains the need to move beyond the search for a new paradigm and to do the hard work of deconstructing old paradigms and seriously reflecting on what it will take to engage the young church in the third millennium.

As both practitioners and researchers in the field of Catholic youth ministry, we concur. Based upon the findings of the NSYR, there is a great need for serious reflection by the Catholic faith community. To that end, this article examines key elements of the current paradigm operating in the Catholic Church’s approach to engaging, educating and

integrating Catholic young people into the life of the faith community.

## Tearing down the old paradigm

Ministry directed toward youth as a specific population in the U.S. Catholic Church (outside of the Catholic school setting) is less than 100 years old, and in the past it has been commonly referred to as the Catholic Youth Organization or CYO.<sup>4</sup> The CYO paradigm, or youth group model, is considered outdated by many currently ministering to youth, especially by those who adhere to a paradigm based on a comprehensive vision of ministry to youth. However the CYO paradigm is still in many ways the current one within parish youth ministry.

In this model, successful youth ministry is to, with, by and for young people and looks primarily like gathered programs for age groupings of youth. Youth ministry efforts in the majority of dioceses and parishes across the country focus on the development of youth groups or groupings around gathered programs. These programs typically target young people only and increase the segregation of youth from the rest of the faith community, rather than integrating them into it. Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster used a memorable image to illustrate this model: “The youth group model—sometimes referred to as the ‘one-eared Mickey Mouse’ model of ministry—created an environment in which youth, isolated in an ‘ear’ on top of Mickey’s head, had only marginal contact with the rest of the body of Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

*The question is not, “What is our vision for ministry with youth?” but, “Why has the clearly articulated vision for ministry with Catholic youth not been realized?”*

The CYO paradigm definitely flies in the face of the operative vision of youth ministry in existence in the Catholic faith community for 30 years, which advocates a comprehensive approach to ministry with youth.<sup>6</sup> The NSYR findings clearly indicate that the Catholic community is failing to live out its prescribed comprehensive vision with the majority of Catholic young people.<sup>7</sup> In 1976, “A Vision for Youth Ministry” outlined the need for the community to change its approach from programs with a limited focus—such as CYO or Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD)—into a more comprehensive approach that takes into account the multi-faceted needs of Catholic young people based upon the changing realities of family, culture and institutions such

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as schools, parishes and neighborhoods. The comprehensive vision was renewed and affirmed by the highest level of church leadership in 1997 with the approval of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops in *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, (RTV), the guiding document for Catholic youth ministry in the United States.

The primary purpose of the NSYR was to describe the spiritual and religious lives of American youth, not to measure effectiveness of various ministry efforts with youth. Even though the purpose was not to measure the effectiveness of comprehensive Catholic youth ministry as defined by RTV, the study did shed some light on the church's overall effectiveness—or lack thereof—in engaging the majority of Catholic young people. Overall the findings of this study lead to the critical issue of how little of the vision has been realized.

## Engaging Catholic adults

*This leads to the first question, which is not, “How do we engage youth,” but, “How do we engage their parents and other adult Catholic Christians in the faith community?”*

The guiding documents set forth by the Catholic Church are clear and consistent about the centrality of the faith community in areas of faith formation, youth ministry, catechesis and evangelization of children, adolescents and adults.<sup>8</sup> The past decade has seen important strides in increasing this essential role of the faith community through intergenerational and whole-community catechesis programs. The NSYR suggests that one facet of the challenge in engaging Catholic youth is the lack of effectiveness in engaging the adult community, especially the parents of Catholic youth. This critical conclusion of the NSYR researchers says that young people are both a “mirror” and a “barometer” of the religious and spiritual lives of the adult faith community. The reality is that young people, as well as adults, are not engaged in their faith, as shown in the data on Mass attendance and participation in other religious activities.<sup>9</sup>

...American youth actually share much more in common with adults than they do not share, and most American youth faithfully mirror the aspirations, lifestyles, practices and problems of the adult world into which they are socialized.... Adolescents may actually serve as a very accurate barometer of the condition of the culture and institutions of our larger society.... American teenagers actually well reflect back to us the best and worst of our own adult condition and culture.<sup>10</sup>

For many years, parents have been named and identified by the church as the primary religious educators and faith formators of their children. Recently, this has been re-affirmed with the publication of the *National Directory of Catechesis*.<sup>11</sup> While it is the current vision of Catholic youth ministry that the entire faith community is responsible for the transmission of faith (i.e., “it takes a village”),<sup>12</sup> findings from this study point out that this aspect of the renewed vision for Catholic youth ministry is based on a false premise that the majority of the adult community—especially parents—is engaged enough in their faith to pass it on to anyone. This leads to the next question.

The link between the vocation office and formation program is crucial. Both ministries need to make sure they are on the same page and that the vocation directors are accurately presenting the formation program.

## A place in the church for youth

*The question is not, “How many resources are needed to minister effectively to youth?” but rather, “What paradigm shifts are needed to re-position the place that young people have in the life and community of the church?”*

In the report published by the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry, we concluded that in terms of Catholic youth who are engaged in their faith, “more equals more,” meaning that when Catholic youth participate in some youth programs, they are more likely to participate in others. Youth who attend Mass more frequently are more likely to participate in youth groups, religious education, retreats and other youth ministry programs than youth who do not attend Mass, or who attend less frequently.<sup>13</sup> Additionally we found that young people who actively participate in youth groups, parish religious education and/or attend a Catholic school engage in fewer at-risk behaviors.<sup>14</sup> Based on this conclusion, it is obvious that age-segregated programs do have a role to play in the church's overall effort to engage all of its youth; however, the degree or extent of that role is still unknown. This is especially true given the chilling fact that the majority of Catholic youth are uninvolved (24 percent or less participate regularly in a youth group, parish religious

education and/or attend Catholic school, and only 39 percent attend weekly Mass).<sup>15</sup>

The financial and human resources currently invested in the church's younger members go primarily to these types of gathered programs and groupings (including Catholic schools). Smith and Denton concluded that more resources need to be allocated for ministry efforts aimed at engaging youth. As we examine our current paradigm regarding youth-only programming, the current allocation of resources toward that programming (limited though they are) begs the question, "Is this the best use of them?" Other important questions regarding resource allocation include, "What would it look like to have sufficient human and financial resources in the church's efforts to engage youth?" and, "What will it take for the Catholic faith community to re-prioritize the utilization of its resources?" We might also ask, "Do we need more full-time paid youth ministry leaders, because we assume that employed leaders increase the overall

effectiveness of the youth ministry program?" This leads to the next question.

## What strategies convey relevance of faith?

*The question is not, "What do youth need to know about their faith and why can't they articulate it?" but, "What strategies are required to help Catholic youth understand the relevance of faith to their lives, relationships and moral beliefs?"*

As a result of conducting face-to-face interviews with teens from the NSYR sample, Dr. Smith noted that, while American youth in general are "incredibly inarticulate" about their faith, Catholic youth are "particularly inarticulate" regarding matters of faith.<sup>16</sup> Speculation abounds about the reasons for this; some already have been reflected upon in this article, such as the need for a religiously articulate adult faith community, the importance of resource investment (financial

### ***Key questions for vocation ministers about young people***

*In light of the finding that Catholic youth need to be engaged more effectively by the entire faith community, we pose these questions to vocation ministers.*

1. How can vocation ministry leaders dialogue and collaborate with the Catholic faith community in engaging Catholic young people?
2. Who are the key diocesan, parish and school leaders that should be part of this dialogue and collaboration?
3. How can vocational leaders be considered partners in fostering both the faith and vocation discernment of Catholic young people?
4. How will parents be involved in this dialogue?
5. What types of collaborative programs and efforts

can help foster relationships between Catholic young people and vocation ministers?

6. How will the vocation ministry leaders study and communicate to their community the findings of the NSYR regarding their importance in fostering the faith of the young?
7. What should the target be regarding the church's measure of success in engaging Catholic young people religiously and spiritually?
8. How do the current activities and efforts of vocation ministers help the church attain that targeted measure of success?
9. What should be changed or created to be more effective in this area?

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and human) by the religious tradition whose young people are more articulate, and the benefit of integrating young people and catechesis into primary religious activities, such as worship.

A deeper look at the issue reveals a more troubling reality. While Catholic young people value their faith and identify with it, there is a large gap between what they say is valuable and how they live out that value. The NSYR found that faith and religion operate in the background of young people's lives, and there is often a lack of relevance of this faith to their daily activities and decisions.<sup>17</sup>

Often the question is "How can we foster Catholic identity in young people?" But is fostering identity the critical question for reflection? If identity is measured by the intent to continue being Catholic, then it is not a question of identity. Seventy-six percent of Catholic youth indicated their intent to attend a Catholic Church as adults, and 83 percent stated that they definitely or maybe plan to attend Mass at the age of 25.<sup>18</sup> According to Smith and Denton, "Catholic youth move relatively further toward pluralistic and individualistic approaches to faith."<sup>19</sup> Data support this conclusion; 54 percent of Catholic youth say it is OK to pick and choose religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of the faith as a whole, and 67 percent do not agree that in order to be truly religious and spiritual, believers need to be involved in a religious congregation.<sup>20</sup> Catholic young people may be identifying with an incorrect understanding of what it means to be Catholic.<sup>21</sup>

The challenge in this lack of understanding of what it means to be Catholic is how to respond. The logical conclusion may be that they are being taught the wrong thing, but the NSYR data point to the reality that the majority of Catholic youth are not being taught. Most do not attend weekly Mass, do not participate in formal religious education or faith formation programs, and their parents are falling short in their role of teaching the faith, because they lack the necessary understanding.

## Making a change

*In conclusion the question is not, "How do we change young people?" but, "How do we need to change as Catholic adults and leaders in our efforts to engage Catholic young people?"*

In order to answer the change question, it is critical that church leaders ask, "What is, or should be, our goal in measuring a successful strategy for increasing the engagement

of Catholic youth?" Unfortunately, the NSYR does not conclusively tell us what the measure of success should be. It focuses on what it should not be. Incredibly inarticulate is not success. Only a third of Catholic youth attending weekly Mass is not success. A relativistic, individualistic definition of Catholic identity is not success. However, such a negative approach is more often a measure of failure rather than success and can result in a minimalist attitude of focusing on what level of failure will be tolerated instead of what standard of excellence should be achieved.

*Renewing the Vision* set forth a much more positive approach to establishing goals for the Catholic Church's ministry to youth. However, the challenge is that such a hopeful—and some would say, idealistic—vision does not establish a clear enough line of demarcation between success and failure, or even progress.

What will success or progress look like in the next five or 10 years, or better yet, for the next generation of Catholic youth?

- Will it be an increase of 25 percent in measures of religiosity, which is more in line with the Mormon or Conservative Protestant religious traditions who had the highest number of religiously devoted teenagers?
- Will our goal be to reach 100 percent of Catholic youth? If not, which ones will we choose to set aside as less of a priority?
- Will it be measured by the number of Catholic youth who respond to God's call to serve him and the church through vocations to priestly, religious, or lay vocations?
- Will it be measured by the number of Catholic youth of this generation who remain or become active in their faith as adults?

The first step in developing important measures such as these must be *strategic dialogue among key stakeholders*. If the NSYR study has told Catholic leaders anything, it is that parents should be at the center of such a dialogue, as well

What would it look like to have sufficient human and financial resources, in the church's efforts to engage youth?



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as the leaders in our community who have responsibility for resource allocation. Additionally the dialogue should include both a thorough review of the findings of the NSYR and a clear examination of the church's present paradigm regarding ministry to youth, especially adolescent catechesis.

The NSYR has assisted the Catholic faith community in quantifying and humanizing realities that we have known to be operative. Before this groundbreaking research, church leadership only had hunches, intuition, assumptions and individual interpretation to rely on in measuring the Catholic Church's effectiveness in her ministry to, by, for and with young people. The church now has reliable research that confirms many of the hunches, but also challenges many of our assumptions. Most of all, the NSYR research leaves us with many unanswered questions. The time is now for the Catholic Church to engage in this effort of reflective dialogue and strategic action that affects not only the future of young Catholics but indeed the future of the whole church. ■

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1. Tony Jones. *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (El Cajon, CA:

Zondervan/Youth Specialties. 2001).

2. The National Study of Youth and Religion was conducted by Dr. Christian Smith and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. More information on the study can be found at [www.youthandreligion.com](http://www.youthandreligion.com).

3. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

4. Charlotte McCorquodale. *The Emergence of Lay Ecclesial Youth Ministry as a Profession in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States* (Springfield, MO: Ministry Training Source, 2001), 17.

5. Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster. *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1998), 30.

6. See the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) documents, *A Vision of Youth Ministry*, 1976; and *Renewing the Vision*, 1997

7. This is supported in the conclusions of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) report, "NSYR: Analysis of the Population of Catholic Teenagers and Their Parents," 2004, 57-63. See [www.nfcym.org](http://www.nfcym.org) for a copy of the report.

8. These documents include the *General Directory for Catechesis*, *National Directory of Catechesis*, *Our Hearts Were Burning* and *Renewing the Vision*.

9. See the conclusions of the NFCYM report, "NSYR: Analysis of the Population of Catholic Teenagers and Their Parents."

10. Smith with Denton, *Soul Searching*, 191.

11. USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 2005, 234.

12. USCCB, *Renewing the Vision*, 19.

13. See findings in the NFCYM report.

14. *Ibid*, 60.

15. The NFCYM report provides details on participation rates, including the fact that only 24 percent of youth participate in youth groups; 21 percent participate weekly in parish religious education, and 39 percent attend Mass at least once a week.

16. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 132.

17. *Ibid*, 129. (Smith goes on to say it is like the furniture of their lives.)

18. *Ibid*, 130.

19. *Ibid*, 76.

20. NFCYM report, 54.

21. Christian Smith supports this idea in *Soul Searching*.



Vocation ministers work hard at responding to initial inquiries. Here's a look at how they reply, what they send, how they follow up, and what concerns them about the process.

# How vocation ministers handle initial inquiries

BY CAROL SCHUCK SCHEIBER

**I**NITIAL INQUIRIES INTO RELIGIOUS LIFE may look the same on the surface, but they run a very wide range. An e-mail asking for information might be a faith-filled young woman taking a brave first step toward becoming a sister. Or it could be a bored fifth-grader fulfilling a school assignment to gather information about brothers and priests. Then again, it might be a lonely widow with notions about retiring with a peaceful community.

The anonymity of many initial inquiries is just one factor that makes them tricky. An informal survey of 77 vocation ministers about how they handle initial inquiries revealed that while most vocation ministers have a systematic approach for responding to inquiries, many wonder if they are taking the right approach. They wonder what happens to the large proportion of people who initiate a conversation but then disappear. And they are concerned about inquirers feeling overwhelmed with too much information. In spite of their occasional doubts, vocation ministers work hard at responding to inquiries, and they maintain faith that the Holy Spirit is working through them. Here is an overview of the survey findings and what they tell about this critical aspect of vocation ministry.

## How inquirers make contact

The initial-inquiry survey was e-mailed in June 2007 to 1,218 members of the National Religious Vocation Conference. Seventy-seven people completed and returned the survey, many of them adding their own comments. The first question asked how people contacted

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*Carol Schuck Scheiber is editor of HORIZON and Focus on Vocation Ministry newsletter. She is also content editor of VISION.*



them. E-mail is far and above the preferred method for taking that first step, with 72 percent of inquiries arriving electronically. Many vocation ministers reported that 90 to 98 percent of their first inquiries arrive by e-mail.

Postal mail is a distant second, with just 12 percent of initial inquiries arriving this way. One vocation minister noted that inquiries received through the U.S. mail tend to come from older people. A first contact by phone is relatively rare, with just 9 percent of inquiries being made this way. The least-used method of first contact is face-to-face (including referrals from members of the community), with only 7 percent of first-inquiries happening in person. A few vocation ministers noted, however, that even though not many people inquire in person, those who do are far more committed than people who use other means to make contact.

These figures are averages, and there are a handful of communities that successfully operate against the norm. For instance, a vocation minister for a community of brothers who minister in education reports that 75 percent of his inquiries come from face-to-face requests. "These are almost entirely young men in our schools who respond to various programs of vocation awareness conducted by local brothers and their educational partners.... At this stage I am pretty convinced that if we are to have new brothers, they will be young men who have been recipients of our ministry on some level." Those who contact him by e-mail are generally older men who tend not to adapt well to the community's lifestyle.

Still, for many communities, e-mail contact has successfully put them in touch with serious inquirers, even if they must sift through a large proportion of less-serious inquiries to reach them. A vocation minister for an apostolic women's community wrote: "Just to let you know, my community has received three vocations from the e-mail in this last year and one by regular mail. I really believe that e-mail is the way to go, for that is what people are using now."

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## Speed and form of response

Vocation ministers put a high priority on making a speedy response. Ninety-seven percent of the survey respondents said

### *Divide and prosper*

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur have a national vocation team that processes their initial vocation inquiries. About half of their requests come to them via e-mail, through ads in *VISION* and *Oye* and through their own congregational Web site. Since most of their requests include some information about the person making the inquiry, they divide inquiries into age groups and send different types of replies to each group. Here's how they do it:

**AGES 15 AND UNDER** A simple letter is sent, along with general information about vocations, a prayer card and information about the founders and the congregation. No further contact is initiated by the religious community.

**AGES 16-20** The national office sends a letter highlighting strengths of the congregation, information about the foundresses, a brochure, prayer card, and an article on religious life today. These inquirers stay in the national database and receive seasonal and monthly contact via e-mail from the national office.

**AGES 20-49** This is considered the "active group." These inquirers receive a cover letter, brochure, information about religious life today, and information on the stages of incorporation. Their names are forwarded to a regional vocation minister who makes contact with them. They also stay in the national database and receive seasonal and quarterly e-mails.

**OVER 50** The national office sends these inquirers a cover letter and a brochure with details on being a mission-volunteer or associate with the community. SNDdeN associate-coordinators do follow-up.

they reply within a week, leaving just 3 percent to respond within a month. More than half (54 percent) said they usually respond within 24 hours. Twenty-nine percent respond within a week. And 14 percent get back to inquirers within two days.

One vocation minister provides immediate gratification to some inquirers. "If I get an e-mail message while I'm sitting at my computer and they give me a phone number, I will often, on the spot, call that person because I know she's there and thinking about it. I've had some very interesting conversations with women in these cases."

Another vocation minister varies her response time according to the method of contact: "I respond immediately if the person is personally referred to me; if it's a *VISION* or Vocation Placement Service contact, I wait because I know they get inundated."

Generally vocation ministers respond to inquiries the same way in which they were contacted—that is, e-mails get an e-mail reply; phoners get a phone call, etc. Several respondents, though, said if they receive a phone number, they always attempt to call first to make a more personal impact and to learn more about the inquirer. Calls can go wrong sometimes, though. "I called a young contact only miles from our center house," wrote one respondent, "and was severely chastised by a mother who was being inundated with phone calls for her son from countless communities."

In terms of what vocation ministers send to inquirers, here are the most common forms of response.

- A brief form e-mail with general information, a link to the community Web site and an invitation to reply if inquirers want to receive a packet of materials by post. Other vocation ministers routinely send both a brief e-mail and a packet of information by post.
- An e-mail that follows a basic form but is personalized according to what the vocation minister knows about the inquirer. This communication provides general information about the community and often asks the inquirer questions or comments on his or her interests. Comments are based on information provided by a vocation clearinghouse.
- A long, descriptive e-mail or letter that introduces the vocation minister, perhaps tells his or her vocation story, and gives information about the community.

Many of these first responses include invitations to visit personally and promises to pray for the inquirer. Some vocation ministers send a questionnaire to inquirers to elicit more information about them. This either provides a basis for

future conversations or allows the vocation minister to screen out inappropriate people.

Information packets that go out by mail commonly include brochures; prayer cards; a community magazine or newsletter; information about upcoming retreats, Come and See events or other gatherings; a DVD, and a profile sheet.

## Follow up

Once vocation ministers have replied to an initial inquiry, the level of communication they maintain with the person varies widely from community to community. Most—62 percent—will contact the person again regardless of whether or not the inquirer has been in touch. This group does not automatically consider a lack of response a lack of interest. They state that people are often sorting through a lot of information from a large number of communities. Also, inquirers have busy lives and may not have time to do anything with the information they receive.

### *A sample first-inquiry response*

Angela,

You requested information about our community through *VISION* magazine. Attached is our latest news, and there is more information about both vowed and associate life on our Web site;

[www.ihmsisters.org](http://www.ihmsisters.org).

One of our newest members began a blog to help inform others about religious life, and you may enjoy viewing it at <http://nuns2day.wordpress.com>.

If you would like to receive a discernment journal created from an actual conversation with those who have joined us recently, let me know.

Evelyn Craig, IHM  
Membership Coordinator  
610 W. Elm Ave.  
Monroe, MI 48162  
(734) 240-9820

“I used to drive myself crazy trying to guess who should get another e-mail and who shouldn’t,” wrote one respondent. “I finally realized that there is no way I can know who will feel pressured and who won’t. I don’t think that two or three e-mails is excessive. I try to respond enough to give the Holy Spirit a chance.”

Another vocation minister who likes to follow up by phone wrote: “I find, especially among younger women, that they are busy and don’t always return calls, but if you get them on a second or third attempt, they are quite willing to talk if you put the focus on them and their needs, not on a need of the community to ‘recruit.’”

Some vocation ministers make one or two contacts and then end the correspondence if the person doesn’t reply. Others enter all inquirers into a database and keep sending occasional invitations, newsletters, Christmas cards, etc. One community’s system is to make three attempts to phone the inquirer after initial information has been sent, leaving phone messages each time. If a vocation minister still hasn’t spoken to the inquirer, the community mails a letter letting the woman know the community tried to follow up. The inquirer can then return a prepaid postcard, either indicating when she can be reached by phone or indicating that she’s not interested.

Several respondents said they struggle with knowing how often and in what ways to be in touch with those who are not responding to them. “I struggle with how many times to invite a person to Come and See with no response,” wrote one vocation minister. “Then I hear sisters from other communities tell their vocation stories of how a vocation director kept sending them vocation materials for five years, and finally they responded, and they are now preparing for final vows!”

The other school of thought on follow ups—which accounts for 38 percent of the survey respondents—is that if a person doesn’t reply to the initial communication from the community, that should be the end of it. “I only follow up if they reply. The ball is in their court,” wrote one respondent. Another said: “I feel that an inquirer’s response or lack of response says a great deal about his desire and sense of call. In general, I feel that the next move should be his.” This group interprets a lack of response as a lack of interest. One person wrote: “Many college students are ‘fishing’ for possibilities and don’t want to be bugged.”

One advocate for a low-key approach wrote: “It has become too much of a marketing affair, and the women are turned off many times by the aggressiveness of some vocation

directors. The best thing is to invite them to a retreat or a time to visit and go from there. It is better less than more. Give them a chance to respond, too.”

A vocation minister from Los Angeles noted that cultural norms help guide the level of contact she has with inquirers. “Anglos are different than Filipinos who want to see some encouragement as a sign that they are viable candidates,” she

### ***What one community sends first-time contacts***

Dear Sarah,

Hi! My name is Sr. Colleen Clair. I'm a Salesian Sister. The mission of the Salesians could be summed up as bringing Christ to the young and bringing the young closer to Christ.

I know this is, in many ways, a hard time...and I'm sure tons of orders are writing to you....

I am sending you some more information, including some pamphlets and a DVD. How about this, when you get the DVD, take the 10 minutes to watch it. If you think, “No way...not me,” let me know and I'll stop bugging you. :) If you think, “Yeah, maybe” let me know and you could come for a weekend to see what the Sisters are like in real life. How's that sound? You are welcome to visit at any time....really—just call and we'll see when you and I are both free so you can come and check out the Salesians!

You are brave to look into the question of religious vocations, and I think that you will be happy you did... at least to give an answer to that gnawing feeling that most of us who are called experienced. At least you'll walk away with an answer, instead of that insistent question, “Lord, are you calling me to be a Sister?”!

Our “family spirit” is a spirit of joy. I hope it's contagious enough for you to catch it, as I did!

During this beautiful journey of discovery, be sure of my prayers and the prayers of all the Sisters.

I entrust you to the gentle hands of Our Lady, who guided her Son, and also learned from Him.

In her Hands,  
Sr. Colleen Clair, fma

wrote. “Some other cultures want more independence and autonomy.”

### **Concerns about bombardment, silence**

The survey asked vocation ministers whether they find it a struggle to find the right balance between being prompt and thorough and overdoing it and making an inquirer feel pressured. Most respondents, 65 percent, are not bothered by this concern. Yet about a third (35 percent) do find it a struggle to strike the right balance. (It's worth noting as an aside that only two men were concerned about not pressuring people; most were confident that they were not overdoing it.)

Many vocation ministers stated that they clearly communicate to inquirers that the focus is on helping the person make a good vocational choice—not on filling the ranks of their community. Intuition plays an important role here, as several respondents said that they take their cues from the inquirer. If they sense that the person needs space, these vocation ministers will decrease contact. “Some women seem to pull back if there is too much contact in the beginning. I try to put it on the woman discerning. I make myself available by phone or by e-mail and extend an open invitation to continue the conversation,” wrote one vocation minister.

The survey also gave respondents a chance to state any other comments or concerns regarding inquiries. The most frequently mentioned concern was that inquirers who use VocationMatch.com, *VISION* or Vocation Placement Services end up receiving an overwhelming amount of information. “I hear from inquiring women that they are bombarded by e-mails and regular postal mail and that they often are not sure where to begin,” said one respondent. No respondents offered a solution, but the problem of information overload leading to confusion and paralysis emerged as a genuine concern. This is an issue that could, perhaps, be addressed in the pages of *VISION* magazine. Vocation ministers, too, may want to offer assistance to discerners in sorting through and understanding the many religious communities in touch with them.

Another concern that several respondents brought up is that a large proportion (in many cases, the majority) of inquirers simply disappear after the first contact. “Many inquirers don't get back to us after we contact them, which is puzzling since they originally inquire. Some say they are not interested at this time, or they get inundated with so many responses they need more time.” Another wrote: “Sometimes I feel ‘why are we doing this?’ since there are very few responses to our response. But we keep trying.” Yet another vocation

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minister applied a faith perspective to this frustration: “You get used to sending replies and information out to people you’ll never hear from, but it can be frustrating for vocation directors to deal with that. Each time I hit that send button or pop that letter in the mailbox, I let God know that it is all back in his hands ... as it always was anyway!”

Despite its frustrations, dealing with initial inquiries is a critical part of vocation ministry—one that can consume a fair amount of time and money. Even though most inquirers will never pursue religious life, for those who do, the first contact

with a community matters a great deal. That’s what keeps vocation ministers working hard to respond promptly and appropriately. For many vocation ministers, the initial inquiry symbolizes energy and hope for the future. “I’m usually so excited to see a new inquirer that I get energized and respond immediately,” wrote one respondent. The words of another reflect the satisfaction that can come from this ministry: “I feel blessed to be walking beside such faith-filled women as they discern what God is calling them to do with their lives. It is an energizing ministry!” ■

## *A typical message from one Dominican community*

Dear Emily,

Thank you so much for requesting information about our Dominican religious community. If you like, I will send you some basic information about our community, as well as various newsletters, ministry programs, and information about current happenings within The Dominican Family to help give you a flavor of what we are about. But first, let me tell you a little bit about our history—who and where we are at.

We are Dominican Sisters from St. Mary of the Springs and our “motherhouse” is in Columbus, Ohio. We are part of The Dominican Family which consists of apostolic sisters, nuns, laity, associates, priests and brothers, and we are in all five continents. Our particular congregation hails from St. Catharine’s, Kentucky, but in 1833 we were asked to come to Somerset, Ohio to begin a school. At that point in our history, we became a “separate” congregation, St. Mary of the Springs. You can read more about our history on our Web site (below).

Basically, now we live and minister in many states, but we are concentrated in Ohio, New York, Connecticut, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. Some of our sisters also minister in Chimbote, Peru; Italy and Honduras. We also have sisters in the mountains of Colorado, in New Mexico, Washington, Maryland, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Wisconsin, as well as in the southern state of Florida.

As you will see from our Web site ([columbusdominicans.org](http://columbusdominicans.org)), we also minister in many areas of education and health care and are involved in social work and counseling, as well as pastoral ministries

in parishes, hospitals and colleges. We also have various nurses ministering in local hospitals, Mohun Health Care Center (licensed nursing facility for our older sisters), physical therapists in local hospitals and other health related fields. We have participated in establishing a Spirituality Network and have an ecological center, both of which are here in the Columbus area. We also have two literacy programs, Dominican Learning Center in Columbus, Ohio and in New Haven, Connecticut. We also have a new outreach program for women and children at St. Martin de Porres Center here on the motherhouse grounds.

This computer age makes communication easier, but still the best way to get to know us is by that personal, face-to-face contact. So know that you are also invited to visit here at St. Mary of the Springs in Columbus, Ohio anytime. I would love to show off the hills of Ohio and give you an opportunity to get to know some of our sisters and the many ministries that we are involved in here in Columbus. Please feel free to contact me at (614) 416-1056 or [mdavis@columbusdominicans.org](mailto:mdavis@columbusdominicans.org).

Enjoy our Web site, and we hope to hear from you. Please let me know if you would like me to send you more information. I know that you will be receiving lots of information from many communities, so I don’t want to overwhelm you. Be assured that I will keep you in prayer as you continue to discern where God is leading you.

In Dominic and Catherine,

Sister Margie Davis, OP



Hope is our driving force, our sign of faith, our source of comfort, our cure for despair. It is essential to life.

# Hope begins where hope begins

BY MICHAEL DOWNEY

*Vocation ministers trade in hope. Without hope in the future of their congregations, in the future of religious life, in young adults—they may as well hang up their hats and call it a day. Knowing that there can be days when hanging up the hat is all too tempting, we offer this reflection on hope—the bedrock of Christianity.*

**W**HAT IS THIS “THING” without which we cannot live, without which we have no reason to go on? A story told me by my grandmother may capture something of the meaning of hope. As a very poor farm girl growing up in the hinterlands of Ireland’s northwestern coast, it was quite common for her and the others in the family to go to bed hungry after having worked in the fields from dawn till dusk. Meat was usually in short supply, and potatoes, the staple of the Irish diet, were not always abundant. Milk was often scarce, and butter was sheer luxury.

Year by year, as the days became colder and darker in the drawing near of winter, her father would set a candle in the window in anticipation of Christmas. In the aftermath of one very bad harvest, when nearly everything that had been planted had not yielded fruit, there was hardly anything in the cupboards. But on Christmas Eve, amidst the protests of his family, my great-grandfather took a bit of butter, melted it on a little plate, lit the wick of his makeshift candle, and placed it

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in the window. The family was shocked. His response to them was quite simple: “We know that we can get by on a little food for several weeks. We’ve done it before. A little water and milk can keep us going for several days. That we also know. But, listen to me now and listen to me good, we cannot go on for one day without hope.”

## Hope in Scripture and theology: the middle child

Hope is the very heart and center of a human being. There is simply nothing more central to human life. But, strangely, we human beings who need hope more than anything else in life have written so little about it. In a good deal of Christian theology, hope seems to be something like a proverbial “middle child,” sandwiched in between affirmations about the priority of faith and the excellence of love. Since hope was the original impulse of theology, the relatively meager attention given to hope is particularly striking. It was precisely in anticipating, waiting, hoping for the return of Christ in glory that members of the early Christian communities began to reflect on the meaning and message of Jesus.

In the early Christian communities, as Christ’s coming in glory seemed to be delayed indefinitely, their understanding of hope changed. Christians began to realize that their hope had to include patient waiting. Hope came to be understood more as an immense openness toward the promised future, a future affirmed by faith and realized through God’s saving acts in history in and through the person of Jesus Christ. History—what actually goes on in the world—came to be seen as the place where hope is enacted.

Many Christians appeal to the writings of the apostle Paul in asserting that while in the end three things last—faith, hope and love—the “greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13: 13). Properly understood, faith, hope and love are of a piece. The distinctions we make among the three theological virtues only serve to help us understand different dimensions



of a single reality, the reality of the human person's relationship to God. This relationship is possible because of God's gift to us of faith, hope and love, and our response to this gift.

Indeed there is a great deal of overlap among them. On the one hand there is considerable similarity between hope, confidence and trust, although confidence and trust are most often associated with faith. On the other hand, hope is quite close to desire, waiting and longing, which are most often associated with love. So is there anything distinctive about hope? Is there something about the human person and the relationship between the human person and God that is properly named "hope," in contrast to what we name "faith" and "love"?

Hope is the very condition for the possibility of believing and loving. It is openness to the light of faith and to the action of love. Hope is the capacity in each of us that is open to God's truth and love. It is that quality in the human being that is open to possibility, to new things happening.

## The energy to move forward

Hope is also the driving force of all human initiative, the undercurrent of all human activity. It impels and propels. It looks for the coming of the new; that which has never been before. Hope is the dynamism that carries us from now to then, inclining us to look from the present to the future, from what is to what is still to come, and on to what might yet be. Hope is the great virtue of the human person *in via*, on the way. The betrayal of hope lies in despair as anticipated failure and presumption as anticipated fulfillment. In both betrayals of hope, traditionally known as sins against hope, we try to deny our existence as pilgrims, wanting instead to assure the end results, control what lies beyond us, and have our lives otherwise than from the hand of God.

In trying to understand hope, one of the difficulties we face is the fact that the English language has only one word to

describe a complex reality. "Hope" is a term pregnant with meanings. We might hope it doesn't rain or snow. We might hope to do well in an interview. We might say to the bank teller, "Hope you have a nice day!" We can also hope our health holds, or our children are preserved from illness or an accident, or that a friend's surgery is successful. Here we draw closer to the deeper meanings of hope—hope as a movement within humans that sees the present and all its prospects, or lack thereof, in the light of some other prospect, something good, or even slightly better, that is to come. It recognizes that what is presently possible might not be all that there is. Hope holds out and holds on. It looks in expectation toward some other—a person, a thing, an event, a time or a state—in the realization that if and when it does come, it comes only as a gift.

This kind of hope is rooted in the conviction that there is still more to be said and that there might yet be some good news. Hope waits, and it longs for more. It looks to the next moment and the next. Hope always moves through and beyond the present moment. It is not restlessness but anticipation.

Too often we are inclined to think of hope as an emergency virtue. When things are really bad or when we have nothing else, there is always hope. Hope is something we tend to save up for a crisis. Indeed, it is true that hope is what we have, precisely when we do not have something else. And hope may spring forth at the very moment when we are really at the end of our rope. It is precisely in those times when we are really "on the edge," when we are most prone to despair, that we can lean into hope and rise, moving past darkness and despair in and through hoping. But it is also true that hope is present in each moment of daily, mundane, ordinary life as we look to the next.

Hope is the very condition for the possibility of believing and loving. It is openness to the light of faith and to the action of love. Hope is the capacity in each of us that is open to God's truth and love.

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Hope, in this deep and strong sense, is not the same as the lightheartedness we feel when things are going well for ourselves or for our loved ones. Nor is this deep hope at the root of our willingness to invest energy in tasks that apparently have a good chance to succeed. Hope, rather, is the capacity to work for something, to continually “go for it,” simply because it is good, desirable or “worthy” and *not* because we have a fairly good chance of succeeding, and not necessarily because there may be some juicy reward in it for us. The more desperate the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the more forbidding the circumstances, the greater the odds against things turning out well, the deeper the hope. The more hopeless the present may appear to be, the more ardent our hope for something better.

Hope is most assuredly not the same as happy-go-lucky optimism. And it is not a forced chumminess or a saccharine naivete in the face of incontrovertible facts. Hope is not the dogged defiance that everything will turn out well—“By damn, I will make it so!” Rather, hope is the serene conviction that something makes sense, that it’s worth it, regardless of how it might turn out.

Even though hope lies at the core of every human life, it is first and finally a gift, like life itself. Though hope is a gift, it demands we recognize it as such, accept, cooperate with it, make it our own. Hope is a virtue, a theological virtue explicitly and directly concerned with our relationship to God. It is at once a gift and our activity. We grow in hope precisely by being hopeful, by acting hopefully. Hope must be exercised, even in the face of what seems to be hopeless, and especially in the face of our own feelings of hopelessness. Now, how do we grow in hope?

There are three elements in the act of hope. Or, said another way, hope moves through three steps. The first is the recognition that what I hope for I do not yet possess or see with any clarity. Second, I recognize that what I hope for may be difficult to achieve. Third, I see that even though what I hope for may be difficult, seemingly beyond my grasp, I do stand some chance of having it. It just might be possible. Hope is always directed to a future good that is hard but not absolutely impossible to attain.

Hope strains ahead, rooted in the conviction that there may be a way out of whatever difficulty is at hand, that things can work out even though it may appear to the contrary. Hope is that inextricable sense of the possible, of what might be. Without guarantees, hope struggles to find a way over each hurdle, one by one, and to find or make a path past every dead end. Hope emerges as our own resources seem to fail

us, when we come undone in the presence of a paralyzing situation that seems without possibility. What brings us to despair is the feeling that we are at an impasse from which there is no escape. Yet, even if we are stopped in our tracks, hope finds a way.

In an explicitly Christian sense, hope rests on what has already been affirmed by faith. Faith makes the first move. I say, “Yes, I do believe,” and put my hope in what I have affirmed. But what happens when what I have affirmed in faith is no longer believable? What happens to hope when faith is shattered, when one’s beliefs crumble? Without faith, how can hope be anchored? If the all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God is beyond belief in light of the enormity of human suffering and pain, is hope in God to be jettisoned along with the tattered and shattered belief in such a God?

It is precisely in the weakness of faith, even in the loss of faith, that we uncover the deepest meaning of hope. The deepest kind of hope goes on hoping precisely when there is no consolation to be drawn from it. Real hope does not constantly look for assurances of God’s nearness, nor does hope try to determine how God’s providential plan is being manifested in one’s life, in the lives of others, or in the world at large. Hope may even take the form of challenging traditional explanations of God’s will. By hope we navigate through the mistake of taking the hiddenness and silence of God for the non-existence of God. Hope remains open to all new and often astonishing manifestations of the divine life, even the presence of God that may be known in the experience of absence or utter darkness.

Karl Rahner, arguably the most significant Roman Catholic theologian of the 20th century, has written on the nature of hope. Rahner’s insight, put in very simple terms, is that our *faith* in God is expressed in the affirmation of certain truths about God, and our *love* of God is expressed in and through our love of neighbor. But the nature of *hope* is different, says Rahner. Hope is more immediate, more direct in the human person’s relationship with God. It is more basic, more fundamental. Hope does not hope in God, but “Hope hopes God.” Nothing more, nothing less.

Taking a cue from Rahner, we can conclude that hope remains even when the “what” or “whom” of our belief is no longer believed, or even when we no longer love the object or recipient of our love. But hope does remain. And it hopes no less than God—beyond belief and beyond our loving God or neighbor. ■

Housing can be set up deliberately in ways that promote friendships, communal gatherings and positive relationships.

# Architecture and design can enhance your community life

By JACK KELLEY

**C**OMMUNITY RE-CONFIGURATION is a major reality these days among U.S. religious congregations. We're seeing provinces merge, two unaffiliated congregations joining together, consolidation of various sectors of a larger community, and other variations on this theme. Many of these changes require an architectural reassessment of living-quarters in order to promote contemporary community life.

Since community life is one of the main attractions for those entering a religious community, the design of the communal environment takes on special importance. Previous 20th century generations of religious were part of a more rigid, structured culture, and their religious institutional residences reflected that thinking. Many buildings from that era were designed to be functional shells for large groups, with little attention given to individual human scale or interaction. The modernist architectural aesthetic of simple and clean design fit the religious community's institutional requirement.

Today's architectural model is different than its predecessors. Religious community common life is not the tightly controlled, authoritarian style of the 1950s and earlier generations. This newer model requires considerate and human-scaled design that can intentionally help foster friendships and supportive relationships, as well as provide a realm of privacy. Considerate design refers to the idea of being respectful and welcoming to all community residents and guests by providing appropriately sized spaces, ample natural

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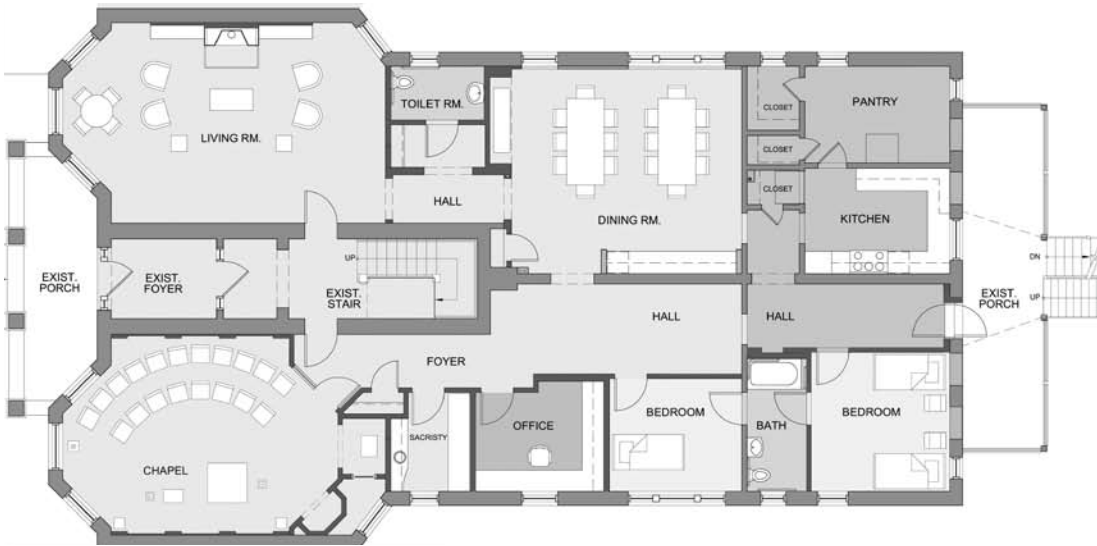
light and spaces that are accessible for the more senior and physically challenged members. What impression is being made about a community where a resident or guest cannot even access or use its facilities? The design of a religious community should exude a spirit of inclusiveness.

The design of a religious community residence should also address the issue of sustainable (or green) design. All the attributes of sustainable design, including minimizing our impact on God's environment, fit perfectly with the teachings and ministry of the religious. From a pragmatic perspective, this design approach saves energy usage, which helps stretch a community's financial resources.

## Renovation versus new construction

Most communities, at least in urban locations like Chicago, are located in existing buildings. These structures are typically 80 to 120 years-old and need extensive renovation to meet the requirements of a contemporary community. Depending on the size of the community, most apartments' public spaces are too small to accommodate all the residents at one time. The stress of daily living in an under-sized environment negates the positive aspects of living in community. To address this issue, communities either have to plan on placing small numbers of residents in existing units, or enlarge existing space by combining apartments and possibly building additions.

A building renovation requires the moving and the relocation of existing walls and usually some replacement of existing building systems, including plumbing, mechanical and electrical, and the rehabilitation of the building exterior. A complete building renovation can cost nearly as much as new construction, depending on a number of factors. One positive environmental aspect of a renovation project is the idea of reusing existing materials and minimizing demolition debris and landfill.



A U-shaped seating design in the living room lets community members face each other for easy conversation. The focal point could be artwork that celebrates the community's history or charisma.

Constructing a new building may be a more likely option in a suburban or rural location where site costs are less expensive. The idea of starting with new construction is positive in terms of designing the ideal floor plan that is unencumbered by existing walls and living in a new, low maintenance building. However, in large urban areas like Chicago, commuting from a distant suburb to minister in the central city would be impractical. In addition there is the negative environmental impact of adding to suburban sprawl.

## Design basics for positive community

Some basic architectural concepts and residential design guidelines apply to the layout of a community residence. These ideas include providing a barrier-free transition from exterior to the interior, clearly separating the public and private realms, placing related functions adjacent to one another, and creating efficient circulation between spaces.

The transition into the building must be accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities. The community's sense of welcome and inclusion starts here. Many existing buildings have a level change from grade and require a lift or ramp. These elements can be sensitively integrated into the existing architecture.

The living room is the main gathering space of the residence. This space should not only be able to address basic functions, but also contain an intangible sense of welcome and warmth of the community. This space establishes an

important first impression since it is typically adjacent to an entry foyer or vestibule. Because community meetings take place here, the furniture arrangement should allow the residents to easily see one another. A "U" shaped arrangement can meet this requirement. This plan suggests a focus at its open end which is often a fireplace and/or millwork.

Allowing this space to simultaneously accommodate three or four people in a discussion, as well as a person reading,

is critical to promoting communal life. The person reading could be at a smaller table and chair adjacent to the main seating group. By designing a space large enough to provide this variety of seating options, the reader did not have to retreat from the communal space to his or her bedroom. A vibrant and successful communal life depends on allowing these types of passive and active forms of interaction.

Promoting a sense of community can be achieved by displaying the community's historical artwork and photographs. The community's library can also be housed here. This creates a natural setting for the older generation to share the community's collective stories with prospective members and guests.

The dining room is the other major public space whose design can influence the quality of community life. Sharing a daily meal is one of the most important communal experiences. An efficient flow of setting, serving and clearing allows the community to focus on interaction around the table. Providing a side table for serving and/or a buffet line keeps the traffic inside the kitchen to a minimum.

The size of the kitchen depends on whether the community members or a cook prepares the meals. Obviously, the kitchen will be larger and possibly contain an island in the former option. This option may also use an open plan where the kitchen is open to the dining room. This more informal layout allows people to converse and interact while the meal is being prepared. A larger community will possibly require a separate pantry for storage of bulk food items.

Typically the bedrooms are on a separate floor or area for privacy and acoustic concerns. Most religious community projects include ensuite bedrooms, which give greater privacy than the shared bathrooms of their more institutional predecessors. This privacy, however, comes at a higher construction cost, and it uses more space. Bedrooms should be large enough to accommodate a desk and/or reading chair in addition to the bed, dresser and closet. This provides the resident with a private retreat from the communal realm.

There are minimal opportunities for seeing and conversing with community members on a floor containing only private bedrooms and a narrow corridor. Providing a small reading/seating area in a niche along the corridor allows such interaction outside of the more public spaces of the main level and the private bedrooms. One-on-one conversations are an important aspect in building relationships.

The chapel is the sacred space that distinguishes the religious community residence from typical single family homes. Its placement is influenced by guest and member access, availability of natural light and adjacency to other spaces. Some religious communities have their chapel near the front foyer so guests have easy access. This front location can link the chapel to the living room through a transitional space, such as a foyer or vestibule and allow the opportunity for gathering and hospitality after Mass. A small font can be placed in this vestibule.

The chapel windows can reveal the special function of the space to the public through the use of art glass. This specialty glass will also manipulate and transform the natural

light into one of the most important architectural features of the chapel design. The glass design and artwork can also be an opportunity to tell the story of the community.

While sacred space is critically important, practical matters also need attention. Providing on-site personal closets or lockers for inactive storage is important for keeping bedroom sizes to a minimum. This usually can be placed in an unfinished basement where space is less costly. Laundry facilities can also be located here.

## Work effectively with an architect

Architects, especially those experienced in working with religious communities, can assist a community in assessing their building requirements. It is obviously easier to study different options and potential costs before purchasing a building or embarking on renovation of an existing facility. Since the legacy of building decisions will affect a community for years and decades into the future, a community should retain an architect early in the process. Evaluation of prospective buildings, zoning and building code analysis, establishment of program and space requirements, and long-term master planning are examples of preliminary or pre-design architectural services.

After the decision is made to move forward on a project, the architect develops more detailed design documents.

The architect also retains consultants such as electrical and mechanical engineers and assists the community in selecting a general contractor. After the community approves a final

design plan and preliminary construction budget, technical construction documents are prepared for the final pricing, building permit and construction.

All of these concepts and guidelines are the framework for a model on how living spaces can positively shape contemporary communal life. While each community and existing situation is unique, one constant is that design matters, good or bad. It matters in terms of the quality of everyday communal life and it reflects the soul of the religious community. ■



Extra space near the bedrooms allows a semi-private reading area. Such an area encourages one-on-one conversations, helping build the relationships from which a strong communal life is forged.



Vocation ministry cannot succeed without involvement from the full community. The leaders of a program that inspired membership action tell how they did it.

# Vocation Visioning Weekend: a process for involving membership

BY PATRICIA DONLIN, RSM

**O**NE IMPORTANT GOAL of vocation ministry is to involve membership in the process of inviting, welcoming and sustaining new members. In this article I will outline the process used by the Institute New Membership Office (INMO) of the Sisters of Mercy to animate our sisters in the St. Louis Region to be involved in vocation ministry. Our weekend-long process was successful, and the process, with revisions, is going to be used across the Institute. I believe the weekend tapped into some criteria necessary for encouraging involvement in vocation ministry: leadership involvement, reflection on personal experiences, recognition of the need to either invite or die, and reasons to hope in the future of religious life. In outlining the process here, I hope to show how each of these criteria worked within the program.

A primary reason our “Vocation Visioning Weekend” succeeded was the collaboration between leadership and the INMO. Leadership had received a request from the St. Louis Regional Community Assembly held in July 2006 to make vocations a priority for the community. Mercy leaders contacted the INMO, and we vocation ministers developed plans for a weekend that would animate community involvement. We envisioned using a contemplative process, allowing time for input such as sharing of experiences, as well as time for sharing the needs and resources of the local vocation minister. Presentations and reflections would be done by the INMO ministers, a member of the Institute leadership team, and the local vocation minister.

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*Patricia Donlin, RSM is a Sister of Mercy of the Mid-Atlantic Community. She has been in New Membership Ministry for 8 years. Currently Sister Patti is a co-minister in the Institute New Membership Office in St. Louis, MO.*



We brought the proposed process back to leadership for a review prior to the weekend. Leadership invited the St. Louis Region to participate in the weekend and arranged for a place to hold the event. Leadership was also present during the weekend—a visible sign of our leaders’ commitment to work with the community in encouraging new members.

## Friday

A total of 34 members attended the Vocation Visioning Weekend. The process began by tapping into the lived experience of each sister’s call. We used the song, “In the Name of Love,” by Jennifer Corlett, OSU since it focuses on calling and how we move through the seasons of our lives. Following the song each sister was asked to reflect on and then tell the story of her vocation to the others in her small group. The sharing energized participants, many of whom had lived with one another and yet had never shared the story of their call to Mercy. A large-group sharing followed on the common elements of the stories. We then invited sisters to share their individual stories with everyone. This reflection and sharing set the stage for the weekend and was an instrumental part of the process that animated participants.

## Saturday

Our Saturday morning prayer focused on the question: “Why do we want new members?” Table sharing was a part of the prayer, and each sister present was invited to use one of her answers in a litany. Some of those responses were: “The world needs women committed to working for peace,” and “I love being a sister and want others to be able to experience the joys in this life.” Table by table the reasons for inviting women were read, and the sisters responded, “Help us, oh God, to welcome, invite and sustain new members.”

Prayer continued with a Scripture reading from the



book of Ruth. We reflected on Naomi and the challenges of inviting new members, such as losses of community members, ministries and institutions that don't lend themselves to such invitations, changes in our way of life and what had shaped our identity, and a lack of enthusiasm for newer members because of the changes members need to make. Having the challenges out in the open allowed sisters the opportunity to acknowledge them and choose to move forward. Challenges may be overcome if there is a willingness to work through them. Our reflection and table conversation allowed participants time to discuss which challenges resonated with them and name any other challenges they were experiencing.

The second reflection of the morning was based on Ruth and hope. The story of Ruth choosing to stay with Naomi and journey with her is the story of women choosing to stay and journey with us. Presenters named some signs of hope, including the openness of young people to church vocations, young people hungering for spirituality, religious being invited into the lives of young people, the awareness and acceptance of diversity, and increased involvement of religious in sharing their stories with young people. Women in the process of incorporation also added their reflections to this presentation.

Sisters who have not interacted with young people were surprised that there were young people looking for direction in their lives and open to the call to religious life. Participants reflected on the hope they see for new members and what hopes resonated with them. It was affirming to reflect on a younger sister in community, looking at why she is willing to stay. Yet it was also challenging to the sisters to ask themselves how they could be supportive. In using the process of challenges and hopes, the sisters had the opportunity to choose how they wished to live and respond.

In the afternoon we tackled some substantive topics. Our topic was "Identity, Vocations and the Critical Concerns

of the Sisters of Mercy from the Fourth Institute Chapter." Our questions were foundational: "Who are we?" and, "Who do we stand with?" The question of who we are led to a sharing on the hospitality of Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy. Her unhesitating hospitality calls us to open our doors, set aside our suspicions of why someone wants to enter, offer comfort, and create space for each woman to fulfill her true calling. The question, "Who do we stand with?" elicited reflections on the need to stand in solidarity with those in need, engage in the transformation of structures that cause social ills, recognize God in the face of people who are poor and be evangelized by those who hope. Reflection and table sharing added a richness to the afternoon as sisters recognized their belief in Mercy life and mission.

We finished the afternoon with a new membership presentation on the messages our community wants to convey to women who are inquiring or discerning religious life. These include messages such as, "The Sisters of Mercy want to walk with you as you explore, inquire and discern," and, "We acknowledge the importance of faith in your life," and, "Connecting with Mercy helps you use your gifts for God and others." These messages were created by professional communicators and approved by Mercy vocation ministers as the crux of what they hope to share with prospective members. A PowerPoint presentation, including pictures of women who are in the process of discerning, brought the reality of faces and names to participants. The membership's responsibility to take these messages out to others was a key point in the presentation.

## Sunday

Sunday morning prayer connected the themes of the day

A primary reason our "Vocation Visioning Weekend" succeeded was the collaboration between leadership and vocation ministers.

before. We played the song “In the Name of Love” and read from John’s Gospel (John 1:38-40). We reflected on the questions, “Who am I in Mercy, and how does that affect those who want to come and see our community?”

We followed prayer with necessary practical information. Now that sisters were energized to reach out and invite women, the question of *how* needed to be answered. We discussed resources available to sisters in the various ministries of school, hospital, social services and parish work, including resources from both the local and Institute level. The vocation minister for the St. Louis Regional Community talked about how sisters could assist her. We allotted time to discuss how the sisters would use the resources and time to brainstorm ideas for getting involved in vocation ministry. This was done in the large group in order to help all participants get ideas and energy from others.

Some ideas included: having the new-employee orientation for the local Mercy-sponsored hospital take place in the convent, inviting young women from a parish young-

adult group to come to the convent for evenings of prayer, putting on a full week of vocation promotion in a parish setting, sisters wearing their Mercy crosses and identifying themselves as sisters in various gatherings, creating opportunities for students to visit the convent and interact with the sisters, and including vocation ads in materials the Mercy Sisters publish.

The closing prayer began with a story of how Catherine McAuley, as she was dying, wrapped her shoes in paper and gave them to a sister with instructions that they be burned. The responsibility to follow her footsteps and to invite others to join us is that of every sister. Therefore we ended with each participant making a concrete commitment. Participants wrote on a two-part card a concrete step they would take for vocation promotion. Each sister kept one half of the commitment card, and the other half was presented to leadership during a missioning service. Each sister was blessed with the words, “May you continue to be a joyful witness to Mercy.”

## *Schedule for Vocation Visioning Weekend*

### **Friday evening**

- 5:30 Dinner
- 7:00 Introductions
- 7:15 Prayer, reflection, and sharing. How did you come to be Mercy?
- 8:15 Closing blessing

### **Saturday**

- 8:00 Breakfast
- 9:00 Prayer, sharing. Why do we want new members?  
Reading, Ruth 1: 11-18  
Naomi, Challenges of Today  
Reflection and table sharing
- 10:15 Break
- 10:45 Ruth, Hope for Today  
Reflection and table sharing  
Large-group sharing
- 12:00 Lunch
- 1:00 Identity and our Critical Concerns  
Who are we? Who do we stand with?  
Hospitality and the Charism of Mercy

- 2:15 Break
- 2:30 Process, walk around, large- and small-group sharing
- 3:30 Break
- 3:45 Who do we invite? Inquirers, discerners?  
What messages do we wish to convey?  
Large-group sharing of ideas  
Closing prayer
- 5:00 Liturgy
- 6:00 Dinner
- 7:30 Social

### **Sunday**

- 8:00 Breakfast
- 9:00 Prayer. Who am I in Mercy and how does that affect those who want to come and see?
- 9:30 Strategies for vocation promotion  
Resources available
- 10:30 Break. Distribution of materials
- 11:00 Large group sharing of ideas for the use of resources
- 11:30 Closing prayer, commitment, missioning

# Prayer and ritual

## Friday evening

**Song** “In the Name of Love” by Jennifer Corlett, OSU, PowerPoint of lyrics

**Psalm** 139, Nan Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*

**Reflection questions** How did you come to be Mercy? Why did you come to this meeting?

**Large group sharing** What are the commonalities that have been heard? Is there a vocation story that the whole group needs to hear?

**Blessing** May the Blessing of God rest gently but firmly upon us; may it stir us to passion and new life. Amen.

May the wisdom of God lead us to solidarity and cooperation, illuminating our minds and beckoning our hearts to a generous response. Amen.

May the gifts of God encourage us to truth telling, tenacity, faith and vision for what is unknown to us, and is yet to be. Amen

May the grace of God penetrate the depths of our being, leading us to listen and speak in unity and diversity as the Spirit prompts and challenges. Amen.

May our individual and collective yes bring praise and honor to our God who has called us to this journey in Mercy. Amen.

## Saturday morning

**Song** “Gather us O God” by Monica Brown

**Reflection question** Why do you want new members?

**Litany** Table by table, each person gives one response After each table, all respond, “Help us, oh God, to welcome, invite and sustain new members.”

**Scripture** Ruth 1: 11-18, Morning presentation and sharing all done in context of prayer

## Saturday afternoon

**Song** Psalm 85: “I will Listen to the Voice of the Lord,”

and “Candled Seasons” by Notre Dame and Gethsemane Abbey Choirs. Ending with Liturgy for Sunday.

## Sunday morning prayer

**Song** “In the Name of Love” by Jennifer Corlett, OSU

**Psalm** 1, Nan Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*

**Scripture** John 1: 35-39

**Reflection question** Who am I in Mercy and how does that affect those who want to come and see? Sharing in dyads.

**Petitions**

Light of the World, we celebrate this Advent with hearts full of longing for your coming. (Response: Come and do not delay.)

In the darkness of our world, give us courage to search for the truth.

In the darkness of our world, give us insight to recognize the needs of our neighbors

In the darkness of our world, give us passion to create a more just society.

In the darkness of our world, help us to bring hope to those in despair.

In the darkness of our world, send us women to minister with us in Mercy.

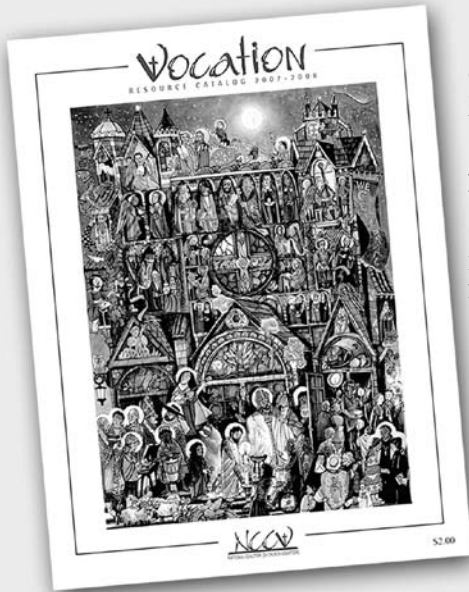
Jesus, it is the hour for us to wake from the sleep of selfishness and doubt. Help us greet this new day with eager longing for your message and confident hope of your future coming. This we ask with confidence in your promises. Amen.

## Closing ritual

**Reading** “Catherine’s Shoes” Distribution of Commitment Cards. Sisters fill out cards and bring them to leadership for missioning.

**Blessing** “May you continue to be a joyful witness to Mercy.” Followed by closing prayer

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we share her clearest conviction, ‘Mercy, the principal path marked out by Jesus Christ, for those who are desirous of following Him.’”

Other evaluations also gave positive feedback on the weekend. The process worked well, and we vocation ministers were encouraged by an invitation to repeat the weekend for those who missed the first one. We were also invited to pilot the weekend to a group of sisters who could take the process back to different regions and communities.

The sharing among the sisters was a significant part of this process. In sharing their stories, challenges and hope, as well as their ideas for new membership involvement, each sister present was energized to bring the vision of the weekend to reality.

Since the weekend, the St. Louis Region membership’s involvement in vocation ministry has noticeably increased. Members have asked women about becoming sisters and referred them to the vocation minister. The sisters in a Mississippi parish had a vocation week that included programs for the youth group, parents, and for students in both the school and in the religious education classes. The parish also held a holy hour for vocations, and liturgies for the weekend focused on vocations. A school in Arkansas at which our sisters minister included a visit to the retired sisters’ residence during the senior class trip to St. Louis. Sisters also have followed through on many other commitments made that weekend.

Clearly the weekend inspired our membership to get involved in vocation ministry in new ways. We’re excited at the possibilities for even more membership involvement as we introduce this weekend to other regions. We hope that around the country both Mercy Sisters and young women of faith will experience—like participant Debbie Troillet, RSM—a “renewed confidence in the power of the Spirit to move boldly in our hearts.” ■

## Good reviews, plans for follow up

Following the weekend Sister Debbie Troillet, RSM wrote a reflection on the weekend that we sent to all community members. She wrote, “After the weekend, I came home more deeply committed to Mercy. I realized that the vibrancy, vulnerability and community that characterized the weekend are the very gifts we must be willing to share if we are to be true and authentic witnesses to the Gospel. As a gathered community, we experienced renewed confidence in the power of the Spirit to move boldly in our own hearts as She is already moving in the hearts of many young people.

“When we concluded on Sunday morning, I sensed that we left better informed and more energized to commit to practical actions in support of the work of new membership. The willingness to do this work was clearly ‘not for ourselves alone’ but for the sake of mission. We do this work to be faithful to Catherine’s deepest desire for us and because

Through a five-day international conference, two connected congregations of brothers stirred enthusiasm for inviting new members and began forming strategic plans for promoting vocations.

# An international conference to encourage vocations

By KEVIN GRIFFITH, CFC

**W**HEN THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS and Presentation Brothers held the Edmund Rice Vocation Symposium April 11-17, 2007 in New Zealand, the event was the culmination of nearly 15 months of planning. The gathering, entitled “Called to a Deeper Journey—From Vision to Action,” brought together 65 delegates representing the Christian Brothers’ Edmund Rice Network from Europe, North America and Oceania and the Presentation Family worldwide. (The Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers share a common founder: Blessed Edmund Rice.) Participants reflected on presentations that examined the current vocational reality in the developed world. They prayed and broke bread together. They discussed their own experiences of being called and explored marketing strategies. By the end of the conference, each geographic region had formed a preliminary strategic plan for vocation ministry in its part of the world. Symposium participants left the event with both concrete plans for vocation promotion and a reinvigorated desire to invite others to consider life as a brother.

In order to share with other communities a process that worked well for us, this article attempts to document what we did and how we did it. I hope this program overview might

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*Kevin Griffith, CFC has been involved in formation ministry for the past 12 years and currently serves on the province leadership team for the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers North America.*



help other communities to inspire their members to invite a new generation of young people into religious life.

## Envisioning the symposium

The seeds of the 2007 vocation symposium were planted in January 2006 in Manila, Philippines. The Edmund Rice Christian Brothers sponsored a meeting of provincial leadership from around the world. One important topic for discussion was vocation promotion and the congregation’s efforts to seek new brothers. It quickly became apparent that these efforts in the developing world were doing extraordinarily well, as novitiates in Africa, India and Latin America were filled with young men exploring the charism of Blessed Edmund Rice. When the focus shifted to the present vocation situation in the developed world, it became equally apparent that the lack of new vowed members in Europe, North America and Oceania was a major cause for concern.

Following these discussions about vocation ministry, Dominic Sassi, CFC, a member of the Christian Brothers Congregation Leadership Team, decided it was time to be proactive in challenging the malaise surrounding vocation promotion in the developed world. Thus, Sassi approached four of the Manila meeting’s participants to discuss the possibility of sponsoring a developed-world vocation symposium for the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers. All four men enthusiastically endorsed Sassi’s proposed vision and agreed to serve with him as the planning committee for the gathering. In time the planning committee would come to represent the Christian Brothers in Europe, North America, and Oceania and the Presentation Brothers worldwide.



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Before leaving Manila in January 2006, the newly formed planning committee agreed to the following initiatives:

- The conference would be co-sponsored by the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers and would take place in Auckland, New Zealand from April 11-17, 2007.

It was Brother Dominic Sassi's wisdom and courage in envisioning a conference aimed at seeking new brothers in the developed world which lit the fire and fanned the flame that would become "Called to a Deeper Journey—From Vision to Action."

- The Christian Brothers would send 30 representatives, 10 each from Europe, North America and Oceania.
- The Presentation Brothers would send 10 representatives from their worldwide Presentation Family.
- Someone was assigned the task of locating a suitable facility in Auckland for the conference.

Two men took charge of seeking both a facilitator and a keynote speaker for the conference.

- The planning committee would meet in July 2006 at the Christian Brothers' Congregation Center in Rome, Italy to plan the details of the conference.

It was Brother Dominic Sassi's wisdom and courage in envisioning a conference aimed at seeking new brothers in the developed world which lit the fire and fanned the flame that would become "Called to a Deeper Journey—From Vision to Action."

The members of the planning committee left Manila with the task of returning home and convincing the other members of their respective leadership teams of the need to support and finance the monumental undertaking of sending 10 representatives to New Zealand for a developed-world vocation symposium.

## Planning the event

Between January 2006 and July 2006, the planning committee

kept in contact via e-mail to report on efforts at promoting the conference and to finalize the choice of a facilitator and a keynote speaker. It was quickly reported that the congregation leadership teams for both the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers, as well as individual provinces from throughout the developed world were fully behind the conference and would give it complete support.

In July 2006 the planning committee came together in Rome for two full days of meetings to organize the substance of the conference. Anne O'Leary, PVBM, the conference facilitator, and Gemma Simmonds, CJ the keynote speaker, joined the planning committee for its deliberations. The group agreed on many details and assigned follow-up tasks. The committee made the following decisions.

- The conference theme would be Called to a Deeper Journey—From Vision to Action.
- Participants would be male, female lay, and consecrated religious.
- Special efforts would be made to invite a significant number of young people to the conference.
- Each of the four represented groups (Christian Brothers in Europe, Christian Brothers in North America, Christian Brothers in Oceania and the worldwide Presentation Brothers' Family) would prepare a 20-minute presentation on the current reality of their geographic area, particularly in relationship to vocation promotion. The "Current Reality" presentation would include a five-minute video featuring young people speaking about their view of the brothers' vocation. Some of these young adults were to be familiar with the Christian Brothers or the Presentation Brothers and others would not.
- A Web site would be established to promote the conference and to provide pre-conference reading materials and tasks for conference delegates.
- The keynote speaker would deliver three distinct presentations: "Seeking New Brothers in a Changing Global Context," "Seeking New Brothers from a Theological Perspective," "Seeking New Brothers and the Journey toward Human Wholeness.
- Three members of the planning committee would present 20 minute talks on their personal journeys toward human wholeness.

- A presentation focused on marketing strategies would be part of the conference.
- Significant time would be given to each of the four represented groups to develop strategies for promoting vocations in their part of the world.

The rationale behind beginning the conference with the current-reality presentations was to aid the participants in gaining an understanding of the efforts being made throughout the developed world in promoting vocations in the Edmund Rice charism.

We had hoped that our keynote speaker would shed light on the global realities of our world from a theological perspective, particularly with regard to seeking new brothers in the tradition of Edmund Rice. This would lead to an exploration of each participant's personal journey toward human wholeness. In moving from the global to the theological to the personal, we envisioned a process that would engage each participant in the task at hand. We wanted to be very clear that our goal was to generate enthusiasm for seeking new brothers. Thus we called upon all participants to journey deeper into themselves and to summon their energies for promoting vocations to vowed membership with the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers.

Once the participants were able to deepen their own commitment to seeking new brothers, it was felt that we could begin to envision how this might be done. It was here that the presentation on marketing strategies was most valuable, as it led to a vibrant discussion on possibilities for the future.

It was following the discussion on marketing that we felt it was time to move from vision to action. Thus significant time was given to each of the four represented groups for the purpose of developing an action plan to promote vocations in the different geographical regions present.

Each day's theme was deliberately chosen with the hope of moving the participants toward enthusiastically committing themselves to seeking new brothers by following a process that would lead from vision to action.

In addition to settling the content and structure of the conference, we also made several other decisions at our planning meeting in Rome, including the following.

- A presentation would be made by the New Zealand Edmund Rice Network (young people who commit themselves to living and/or ministering with the Christian Brothers) to discuss the network's role in promoting vocations.

- Base Groups would be established by each of the four represented groups for the purpose of generating enthusiasm for the conference and to assist in pre-conference preparation, as well as post-conference follow up. The Base Groups would consist of vocation and formation personnel, Province Leadership Team members, conference delegates and others with energy for promoting vocations.

Once the participants were able to deepen their own commitment to seeking new brothers, it was felt that we could begin to envision how this might be done.

- The pre-conference planning would include an element of applied theology whereby each conference participant would engage in some kind of spiritual activity with young people.
- A conference secretary would be hired to assist with daily tasks once the conference had begun.
- The conference delegates would be officially welcomed to New Zealand in a Maori (Native New Zealander) Powhiri ritual.
- Each of the four represented areas would finance the transportation and conference costs for its delegates.
- The four organizers of the four represented groups would be responsible for identifying and inviting conference delegates. They would also organize all local details in preparation for the conference, including travel arrangements to and from New Zealand. With much of the conference content and details agreed upon, each member of the planning committee was given specific tasks to complete. They included the following.
  - The New Zealand representative to the committee would: 1) coordinate conference details with Kings College, the conference site, 2) coordinate registration via e-mail for all conference delegates, 3) coordinate the arrival of conference delegates (airport pick ups, etc), 4) develop the conference Web site and serve as its webmaster, 5) invite an expert to present a session on

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marketing strategies and 6) procure the services of a priest to preside at liturgy.

- Another member agreed to write the following for the conference Web site: 1) an introductory welcome to the conference, 2) guidelines for the “Current Reality” presentations, 3) a rationale for the role of the Base Groups, 4) an explanation of the applied theology element.

The first full day of the symposium centered on the question “Can you hear the call of God in what your brothers and sisters are saying to you?”

- The keynote speaker agreed to write three distinct abstracts with reflection questions for each

of her conference presentations to be posted on the conference Web site.

- Brother Dominic Sassi, CFC of the Christian Brothers Leadership Team agreed to write a letter to all Province Leadership Teams announcing the conference and to prepare a welcoming address to be given at the conference’s opening gathering.
- Brother Martin Kenneally, FPM, the Presentation Brothers Congregation leader, agreed to prepare remarks introducing the planning committee, facilitator, keynote speaker and liturgists for the conference.
- The facilitator agreed to develop a conference schedule based on the agreed-upon tasks for the conference and to procure the services of a liturgist to plan conference prayer experiences and rituals.

By the end of this meeting the planning committee was confident it had put together a formidable program focused on seeking and inviting new brothers in the developed world. All agreed to gather in Auckland two days prior to the start of the conference to coordinate last minute details for the gathering.

The next several months, from late July 2006 through early April 2007, again saw the planning committee keeping in contact via e-mail to report on the

progress in the preparations. Slowly things began to fall into place, and what had been a thought in the mind of Brother Dominic Sassi, CFC in January of 2006 was beginning to take shape as April 2007 quickly approached.

## Arriving in New Zealand

On Monday, April 9, 2007 each member of the planning committee, the facilitator, the keynote speaker, and the liturgists for the conference arrived in Auckland to put the finishing touches on the pre-conference preparation. The facilitator presented a working copy of a proposed conference schedule. After much discussion and a few minor alterations, the schedule was agreed upon and finalized. However, as one might imagine, unforeseen realities often dictate changes in an original plan and a large degree of flexibility in moving things around becomes necessary. Thus the paragraphs that follow reflect the actuality of how activities and events unfolded during the conference.

## The conference takes place

The conference began on the evening of April 11, 2007 at Kings College in Auckland, New Zealand with an opening address by Brother Dominic Sassi, CFC and a prayer ritual. Sassi remarked, “The aim of this conference, ‘Called to a Deeper Journey—From Vision to Action,’ is to deepen our appreciation of the vocation of a brother so that we may more confidently engage in vocation ministry in concrete and active ways. This calls for faith, imagination, and a prophetic engagement with the key issues of our day. We have invited each of you here especially to participate in this conference because we believe you have a passion for seeking new brothers in the spirit of Edmund Rice.”

Prior to his prepared remarks, Dominic read a brief statement from Bro. Philip Pinto, CFC (the Christian Brothers Congregation Leader). Philip’s message stated: “I pray that every participant will have a good experience and leave with a deep desire to live out their calling more fully. May the conference ignite the fire that is inside us and that has to be shared. That is what will influence others to come and see—and for some—to remain.”

The first full day of the symposium centered on the question “Can you hear the call of God in what your brothers and sisters are saying to you?” The format for exploring this question was four 20-minute presentations on the “Current Reality” in each of the four regions (Christian

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Brothers in Europe, Christian Brothers in North America, etc.). We allowed time for dialogue on these presentations. Each “Current Reality” presentation included a five minute video segment featuring young people speaking on their view of religious life today. Perhaps the events of the day were summed up in the following statement from Mr. Simon Purcell, a 19-year-old delegate to the conference from Perth, Australia, who had spent a year living in a Christian Brother community while doing volunteer ministry. Purcell commented: “Living with the Christian Brothers gave me a close up look at the life of a brother. The Christian Brothers are good men and live a life worth considering. Through my experience in community, I was able to recognize that living life as a Christian Brother is a real option for young people.”

The day concluded with a spirited gathering liturgy that included the official lighting of the conference candle. The next two days of the conference were given to Gemma Simmonds, CJ the keynote speaker, who presented three sessions focused on: “Seeking New Brothers in a Changing Global Context,” “Seeking New Brothers from a Theological Perspective,” “Seeking New Brothers and the Journey toward Human Wholeness.”

In her presentation, “Seeking New Brothers in a Changing Global Context,” Simmonds challenged the conference delegates to develop a culture in which the option of becoming a religious brother is readily available to young people. She stated that “religious life is a public statement of commitment to the Gospel which needs to be made visible.” Simmonds exclaimed that in seeking new brothers, we must “offer something significantly different from what the secular world offers—otherwise, why would someone come to us?”

With regard to the theme “Seeking New Brothers from a Theological Perspective,” Simmonds used several Scripture passages and personal stories in encouraging all to “cherish God’s vocation within—and to make it transparent and transmittable to others.” She stated that “our task is to become people of desire in order to transmit this to others and to help them discover the deep desire within themselves.” In speaking of the Body of Christ, Simmonds noted that the task for vocation promotion is to recognize that “the Body of Christ is me, and if I can believe and live this myself, I will transmit it to others.”

On the topic of “Seeking New Brothers and the Journey toward Human Wholeness,” Simmonds challenged us in our vocation ministry to help young people come to an understanding of how God sees them. She stated: “Do I ask Jesus, ‘Who do you say I am?’ In vocation ministry, this is

what we can offer people—the opportunity to stand before Jesus and ask, ‘Who do you say I am?’ In finding this out, I will find my deepest, fullest self.... I am a sinner, sure, but I am a loved and forgiven sinner.”

In concluding, Simmonds remarked, “The gift of the Edmund Rice charism is that of holding a vision of a redeemed society, communicating that to others, and inviting them into it.” In addition, feedback from small group conversations on Simmonds’ presentations revealed that “young people are yearning for experiences of spirituality and community, and that we, as religious brothers, can offer this.”

On Saturday, following Simmonds’ final presentation, three brothers from the planning committee shared their personal experiences of journeying toward human wholeness in their lives. The three presentations focused on brokenness, sexuality, celibacy, spirituality, reconciliation, joy and wholeness. As one of those three presenters, I remarked:

When I graduated from Blessed Sacrament High School [New Rochelle, NY], I joined the Christian Brothers because of the interest they took in me. I joined to be for others what the Christian Brothers were for me. The Christian Brothers provided me with a wellspring of acceptance. Today, I realize more and more that the call—the journey—is to union with God. In my broken journey toward human wholeness, that is what I seek, union with God through a personal relationship with Jesus and Edmund.

In response to the three presentations, conference participants embarked on an Emmaus walk in groups of two or three to share their own journey toward human wholeness with one another.

At this point in the conference, several younger

Several younger participants approached the planning committee with a concern that there was no specific spot in the schedule for their voice to be heard collectively. After some discussion and clarification, we agreed that a time slot would be given for a panel of younger delegates to tell their stories.

# Edmund Rice Christian Brothers North America Strategies for Promoting Vocations to Our Brotherhood

as formulated in Auckland, New Zealand, April 2007

## Deepening spirituality/evangelizing youth and young adults

- ✓ Encourage our brothers and others in the Edmund Rice Network to INVITE young people to our brotherhood and to serve as MENTORS for them.
- ✓ Provide retreat experiences/gatherings for young people—particularly young alumni and those who have attended/participated in mission trips, Kairos, Encounter, and similar experiences.
- ✓ Organize participation in World Youth Day (July 2008 in Sydney, Australia) and/or the Eucharistic Congress (June 2008 in Quebec City).
- ✓ Provide daily opportunities for the brothers to pray for vocations.
- ✓ Deepen our own (each brother's) spirituality of brotherhood.
- ✓ Explore the possibility of conducting summer camps in North America modeled after the Chicago Brother Rice High School Edmund Rice Camp. [This camp offers high school students and young adults an opportunity to minister with the brothers while serving disadvantaged inner city children in Chicago.]
- ✓ Investigate the possibility of establishing Christian Brother communities near college campuses for young men and women seeking an alternative to dormitory living. Such communities could assist young people in exploring their spirituality in a community setting.

- ✓ Seek assistance from associates and Edmundians (former brothers) in promoting vocations.
- ✓ Develop a “young associates” program in North America.

## Marketing, ads, communications

- ✓ Revise our present marketing strategy to make better use of the Internet in our advertising.
- ✓ Investigate ways of driving young people to our Web site.
- ✓ Insure that all schools and ministry sites are linked to our vocation Web site [www.cfcvocations.org](http://www.cfcvocations.org).
- ✓ Insure that our vocation materials are prominently displayed in schools, ministry sites, Newman Centers, college campuses, etc.
- ✓ Work with Christian Brothers advancement, development, and communications personnel to insure that the good works of the brothers are proclaimed in the media.
- ✓ Seek exposure for the vocation symposium in the NRVC newsletter and *HORIZON*.



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participants approached the planning committee with a concern that there was no specific spot in the schedule for their voice to be heard collectively. After some discussion and clarification, we agreed that a time slot would be given for a panel of younger delegates to tell their stories. Thus several young brothers and lay participants shared their personal journeys as men and women committed to the charism of Edmund Rice. This session pointed to the need to specifically invite young people to voice their concerns and opinions as we move forward in seeking new brothers.

On Monday, following a free day, the conference reconvened. The theme for the day centered on “Toward Seeking New Brothers—From Vision to Action.” The presenter, Kevin Malloy, a marketing strategist from Auckland, offered insight into the world of marketing, challenging the conference delegates “to devise new strategies for getting the message of our brotherhood out to young people.” Malloy encouraged us “to embrace the digital world and to use it to our advantage in promoting vocations,” and he asked that we find “connections that captivate” in identifying and communicating with our target audience as we seek new brothers. In relating marketing strategies to vocation ministry, he spoke to the importance of having a focused plan that makes use of the Internet—the place where many young people spend much of their time. Malloy identified establishing a Web site for vocations with appropriate hyperlinks as the most important component for getting our message across to young people today.

After the marketing presentation, for the next day and a half, each of the four groups at the conference convened and developed strategies for promoting vocations in their part of the world. The closing liturgy for the conference took place in a spirit of sending forth. Brother Martin Kenneally FPM delivered a stimulating reflection that challenged all “to seek Christ through Edmund.”

## Going home

As the conference unfolded, it became apparent that there is a great deal of energy and enthusiasm for promoting vocations to brotherhood. We concluded that two major aspects of seeking new brothers remain:

- Living lives characterized by joy and happiness and transmitting this to others, especially young people.
- Taking the necessary steps to INVITE, INVITE, INVITE young people to our brotherhood.

Each of the four groups that took part in the conference returned home with a newly devised action plan for promoting vocations (page 34). Now it is up to all of us who have returned home with renewed enthusiasm and new ideas to implement our strategies and encourage our brothers and colleagues to INVITE, INVITE, INVITE young men to join our brotherhood. ■

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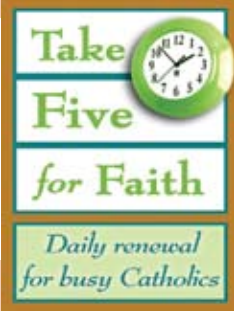
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SUNDAY, APRIL 29, 2007

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER; GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY; WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

**OF SHEEP AND SHEPHERDS**

The parable of the Good Shepherd is one of the most comforting in the Bible—God will find us when we're lost—and also one of the most challenging—God will not allow one of us to be lost. "To leave the 99 in favor of the one," writes Sister Helene Hayes on the Sisters of the Good Shepherd website, "is to understand our universal kinship with all human beings. It is to understand that our salvation and liberation are intertwined in a profound way with the salvation and liberation of the 'stray ones,' the poor, the ostracized." Listen to the Good Shepherd's voice and you will know unconditional love; follow in the Good Shepherd's footsteps and you will share that unconditional love with others. That is the vocation of every Christian: to listen and follow.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Acts of the Apostles 13:14, 43-52; Revelation 7:9, 14b-17; John 10:27-30*  
"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

MONDAY, APRIL 30 FEAST OF PIUS V, POPE

**POOR IN SPIRIT**

Even though the man who was to be Pope Pius V (1504-1572) would become a university professor, head of several houses of the Dominican order, a bishop and cardinal, a grand inquisitor, and eventually pope who had to implement the reforms of the Council of Trent, it seems he never forget where he came from. Born of impoverished Italian nobility, as a boy he worked as a shepherd. After becoming pope he lived a simple and prayerful lifestyle, built hospitals, and opened the papal treasury to care for the poor, with whom he was personally involved. He kept wearing his Dominican habit, establishing the custom of popes wearing white. Prayer and service, worship and works of mercy will keep you close to God and the gospel, whatever else you do.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Acts of the Apostles 11:1-18; John 10:1-10*  
"The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us."

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