

HORIZON



JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

VOLUME 32, NUMBER 1

FALL 2006

HOPE

| | |
|---|----|
| God has shouted, "Yes, yes, yes!" Creating communities of hope BY MARIA CIMPERMAN, OSU | 4 |
| Hope and security: new foundations BY DAVID COUTURIER, OFM, CAP..... | 11 |
| What gives me hope: three young voices BY MARY CATHARINE PERRY, OP; JESÚS ALONSO, CSC; AND JENNIFER GORDON, SCL..... | 17 |
| New membership and the paschal mystery BY JOEL RIPPINGER, OSB..... | 22 |
| How I stay healthy and hopeful as a vocation minister BY RENÉE DAIGLE, MSC..... | 26 |
| Hope from the trenches BY JIM KENT, OFM, CONV..... | 30 |
| Would life on this planet be any different without religious life? BY ANNMARIE SANDERS, IHM..... | 33 |
| HORIZON Index 2005-2006..... | 36 |

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JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS VOCATION CONFERENCE

HORIZON is published quarterly by the National Religious Vocation Conference,
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\$20 each for one to five (\$24 Canada; \$26 international)

\$18 each for six or more (\$22 Canada; \$24 international)

Single copies are available for \$6 each. Please direct subscriptions, renewals and changes to the NRVC office.

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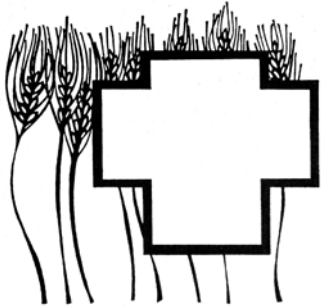
ADVERTISING

For advertising rates and deadlines, contact Deborah Suddarth, OSF at srdeborah@nrvc.net.

POSTMASTER

Send address changes to HORIZON, 5420 S. Cornell Ave., Suite 105, Chicago, IL. 60615-5604.

Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL, ISSN 1042-8461.



HORIZON

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

HORIZON serves as a resource:

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

HORIZON has a threefold purpose:

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

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HORIZON is published by the National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC). The NRVC is an organization of men and women committed to the fostering and discernment of vocations. It provides services for professional vocation directors and others who are interested and involved in vocation ministry. It proclaims the viability of religious life and serves as a prophetic, creative, live-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. Web: www.nrvc.net.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Tending your foundation of hope

HOPE IS A MAJOR FACTOR in family life, and it comes in all shapes and sizes. You hope that your kids will choose positive friends, that their schools will help them thrive. You hope that your teens will drive safely and arrive home safe and sound.

Parents also manage expectations—or hope—all the time. Recently a friend of mine told me that when her husband took a look at the shoebox-size graduate housing that the family would be living in for a year, he pulled their teenage sons aside and told them, “Boys, it’s going to be like spending a year in a hotel.” (In retrospect, that may have raised some unrealistic hopes about who would be making the beds....)

Then there’s the sweetly naïve hope of my 8-year-old who wished upon a star that he’d get a much-desired toy. When it wasn’t sitting in his bedroom the next morning, he was crushed. And finally, there’s the foundational hope that keeps you going when you feel you’re drowning in irritations, frustrations or grief. “He’ll surprise you!” was my grandparents’ constant refrain to my parents who would wring their hands over a perpetually underachieving son. My father would mutter it sarcastically from time to time. Behind his cynical front, however, I think he harbored a grain of hope when he’d repeat their conviction. Being a good Catholic, he grasped the concept of the paschal mystery even if it wasn’t something he talked about. Today my brother, the former underachiever, is an accomplished businessman and devoted husband.

Hope in the person of Jesus Christ and the paschal mystery is the foundation of our faith. Hope requires

imagination, an ability to see possibilities that may not be apparent. It requires a willingness to be disappointed sometimes. It requires a willingness to be satisfied with slow, incremental or unexpected fulfillment.

Every single vocation minister banks heavily on hope. It’s a job requirement. You have to hope in the future of your community, in the viability of religious life, in the possibilities of the candidates who step forward. Yet hope can be elusive, and on bad days it can slip out of your grasp like water through fingers. Sometimes you need to step out of the fray to regain perspective and rebuild hope. That is our desire for this edition of *HORIZON*.

Our hope is that this first edition in our new design allows you to take a moment to tend to your own foundation of hope. In whatever form you find your own sense of hope, whether that foundation is like an old spider web in the breeze—battered, tattered and thin—or more like a stone cathedral—solid and beautiful—may this edition give it strength. May our writers uplift and inspire. May you renew a hope that is not so much my son’s “wish upon a star” as it is my grandparents’ sustaining hope in the possibilities of a wayward grandson.

Finally, this edition would not be complete without a note of thanks to Patrice Tuohy of TrueQuest Communications for her abundant and gracious help in creating and launching our new design. We also appreciate our advertisers who have helped make this step forward possible. Both groups are committed to building hope in religious life, and it is most appropriate that they are part of this edition.

—Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor

Hope is deeply rooted in the Christian vision. If religious communities are going to offer this virtue to the world, a closer look at its many dimensions can help.

God has shouted, “Yes, yes, yes!” Creating communities of hope

By MARIA CIMPERMAN, OSU

GOD HAS SHOUTED, ‘Yes, yes, yes!’ to every luminous movement,” —words of Hafiz, Persian poet and mystic.

Since September 11, 2001 religious communities have been offered an abundance of presentations on hope. Those who have reflected on hope include Cardinal Daneels of Belgium, Donald Georgen, OP and a recent edition of the publication for sisters under age 50, *Giving Voice*. The November 2004 Congress on Consecrated Life—attended by almost 900 women and men religious from across the world, including leaders, theologians, younger and newer members alike—pointedly engaged the suffering of humanity, yet still ended with references to hope.

Why are we so in need of—so in search of—hope right now? Is the hope we are looking for related to terrorism? to world peace? to our government? Is it related to the church? And what do we hear of hope outside this nation—in the midst of AIDS, human trafficking, increasing mortality under age 40 in sub-Saharan countries?

Why do we, as members of religious communities, search for hope now? I think that while many of us see the wars and destruction, the rampant materialism, poverty and violence, AIDS and disease, what we hear is the world’s cry and the cry of those in our cities and rural areas. We hear it as a cry for hope, a relentless search for a real hope that engages real lives. And there is something within us that measures our world and our work in light of the Gospel call to respond to that cry.

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Is there a hope we as women and men religious can offer the world today? Yes. In the midst of our numbers and our disparate ministries, in spite of internal and external difficulties of our own, yes. There is a hope to offer—a hope that both permeates and transcends the current situations. There is a hope we can and must offer; indeed, offering hope is our heritage, our inheritance, our legacy. I suggest it is a requirement of the apostolic and monastic life.

What is this hope we religious, women and men of the Gospel, name, seek and offer? I’d like to put forth a description of hope and then consider characteristics which impact religious life and the church and world in which we live.

Hope is a virtue, and as such it fits under the greatest virtue, which is love. A virtue is a disposition and habit, which flows out of who we are and who we want to become, and it offers a vision of how to get there. Virtues are teleological; that is, there is a goal or end toward which they strive. In Christianity, the ultimate end is union with God, and we live out this desire on a daily basis through our love of God, neighbor and self. Throughout our lives we strive toward this telos or end, and as long as we live our task is not complete. Virtues, like our human nature, are also dynamic; therefore, as we continue to learn, grow and mature, so our level of understanding and depth of living the virtues evolve.

Hope gives us a particular, sustained moral and spiritual vision. In addition, it is the transcendent virtue that animates and informs the virtues which follow. Hope not only gives us the vision, it sanctions and sustains the vision. Christian hope tells us what type of vision we have. Hope is also a prime Christian resource of the imagination.¹ Hope offers a horizon for our expectations in both tangible and nontangible ways. Hope allows us to reshape our reality in a particular way. Hope imagines the real and animates the other virtues to enliven the real that is imagined.

In addition to providing a horizon for our expectations, five

Hope offers a horizon for our expectations in both tangible and nontangible ways. Hope allows us to reshape our reality in a particular way.

other points underlie the virtue of Christian hope:

1. hope is communal;
2. it includes the dead as well as the living;
3. hope is connected to help;
4. it is linked to the paschal imagination; and
5. hope has a fundamentally eschatological dimension.

The communal nature of hope is such that it not only imagines, but *imagines with*; it is inherently collaborative and promotes mutuality.² Hope is an act of the community, whether the community is large or small, global or local. The community may consist of those with whom we live, minister, pray, and more. The communal nature of hope crosses congregations, life commitments, religious traditions and more. In the Visitation Mary and Elizabeth offered hope to one another and Mary's Magnificat magnified the light of that manifold hope.

Years after I entered religious life, I learned that Dorothy Kazel, OSU, while in El Salvador, found hope from other religious, most notably Theresa Kane, RSM. Dorothy read Theresa's 1980 presidential address to Leadership Conference of Women Religious in which Theresa spoke of religious life and ministry needing to be at the margins, including in the U.S. Less than two months before she was murdered, Dorothy wrote Theresa a letter of thanks, and concluded with the following remarks: "Within this past year I had been fortunate to meet women theologians like Barbara Doherty (CDP) and Sandra Schneiders (IHM). They—along with the little I've actually read about you—do give me the hope that the Reign of God is making headway. And for this I am grateful. Do continue to be Spirit-filled and challenging. Please keep the people of Salvador before the Lord, as we are literally living in a time of persecution. We need His strength."³ I invite vocation ministers and all religious to consider what an impact your words and vision can offer—well beyond your expectations.

Theologian Johann Baptist Metz writes of solidaristic hope, a hope that includes those who have gone before us.⁴ We act

out of a horizon of expectation that the sisters and others who have gone before us are not only part of our legacy but also part of our energy and drive in seeking to respond to God's call to love and serve. Even as the call to respond and live may differ in detail, hope remembers all and leaves none behind. We are part of this communion of saints.

Help and imagination required

Hope is also connected to help. While hope is within us, hope is also the sense within us that there is help outside of us.⁵ Scholar William F. Lynch writes: "There are times when we are especially aware that our own purely *inward resources* are not enough, that they have to be added to from the outside. But this need of help is a permanent, abiding, continuing fact for each human being; therefore we can repeat that in severe difficulties we only become more especially aware of it."⁶

An example of this need for hope and help can illuminate. One of the articles in our *Giving Voice* issue on internationality is from a woman religious who wrote of gratitude for the participation of nuns and sisters in protests in the U.S. in order to raise public concerns regarding human rights abuses in her South American country. She said that while a public act of protest could easily result in violence to her, our protesting is doing what she alone cannot.⁷ Hope is connected to help.

Fourth, hope is integrally connected to our paschal imagination. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a message of hope that does not evade or deny suffering or dying. As religious we must be in the midst of the people in need, and those include the suffering, the marginalized, the afflicted. Yet the crucial and incarnated hope is that the end of the story is not death but new life that may take a variety of forms. Imaginative hope does not evade reality but sees and transforms it.

Everyone has a moral imagination through which we work out our vision of human flourishing.⁸ The Christian moral imagination refers to some of the resources our Christian faith experience and tradition offer us as we strive to live so that all humans flourish. This is the imagination we engage in the situations we come upon.⁹

In light of the pandemic of AIDS, global poverty, human trafficking and lack of sufficient health care in our nation, full human flourishing requires that we see beyond the surface of facts around us to possibilities that can be realized around us. To see women's religious life with only 78,000 members in 2,000 instead of 180,000 in the U.S. in 1965 could be to say the writing is on the wall for the end of religious life in the United States.¹⁰ However, Christianity and the moral imagination

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flowing out of that lens offer a different horizon of expectations and, I contend, ensuing actions. The Christian imagination is rooted in the real but imagines more than what is seen because, as mentioned earlier, for Christians the horizon of expectations is rooted in hope. We have only this, our time in religious life today. This is our time, the time for which we are created, and reading the signs of the times offers us a sense of what the

call around us is. At the same time, our hope in God and our sense of being called as religious means that this time and these numbers in the U.S. are calling us to imagine something with new eyes.

Theologian Philip Keane describes imagination as "the basic process by which we draw together the concrete and the universal elements of our human experience... a playful suspension of judgment leading us toward a more appropriate grasp of reality."¹¹ This "playful suspension" is not of reality but of judgment on the reality. Imagination here is not fantasy, which makes up or creates an image to avoid or escape reality. Imagination instead takes various experiences and realities and places them into a context, an "intelligible landscape."¹² Lynch sees imagination as remaking reality, and connects imagination quite directly with hope. Lynch reminds us.

One of the permanent meanings of imagination has been that it is the gift that envisions what cannot yet be seen, the gift that constantly proposes to itself that the boundaries of the possible are wider than they seem. Imagination, if it is in prison and has tried every exit, does not panic or move into apathy but sits down to try to envision another way out. It is always slow to admit that all the facts are in, that all the doors have been tried and that it is defeated. It is not so much that it has vision as that it is able to wait, to wait for a moment of vision which is not yet there, for a door that is not yet locked. It is not overcome by the absoluteness of the present moment.¹³

Poet and human rights activist Vaclav Havel describes this hope in a similar fashion:

The kind of hope I often think about ... I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world... It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.¹⁴

Scripture and tradition give us a sense of the horizon of our expectations, and with the analogical imagination we are not held to "what would Jesus do" in a situation, but we are invited to live "what is Jesus doing now through me" as an incarnation.¹⁵ The imagination is helpful, for we are able to move analogically from Jesus' story to discovering how to daily live toward a reality reflective of the Reign of God.¹⁶

Beyond the here and now

Finally, hope is centered on the eschatological nature of our lives as Christians. Our living includes doing all we can to promote the Reign of God in the world. At the same time, our faith tells us that ours is a "here-and-not-yet" reality and that this reign will not be completed in our lifetime. This is not a reason for inactivity, but it once again places our activity in a wider context. Christian hope here is time-attentive and responsible, but not

time-bound. This allows us to work toward the Reign of God and yet rely on God in the midst of it all.¹⁷ Hope ultimately reaches out to all that is good, all that is God.¹⁸ This is the hope that allows us to risk boldly!

I particularly ask you to invite your wisdom figures, your members who have sought to live fully, to speak their word of hope. This is necessary for religious life and for the entire people of God. We have more religious life Elizabeths than ever before in the U.S.—their lives of love and reflection bear the fruit of wisdom which our world and church desperately need. And do invite your Marys to also speak—they too have a hope that burns within them.

Community and communion

With God as our ultimate hope and one another as companions on this journey of hope, what might be necessary for creating *communities* of hope in our 21st century? Well, the topic of community life is anything but non-controversial these days! And this is where we have seen some generational differences and nuances and some stretching realities in religious life today. I offer one observation and two suggestions.

Observation: I read with great interest the papers coming from the November 2004 Congress on Consecrated Life, “Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity,” particularly the synthesis paper. In it there are references to communion and community, and the necessary connection between them. This is quite significant:

“We seek our place in the Church, the People of God, home and school of communion.” (“Novo Millennio Ineunte,” 43).

The congress furthermore noted there is “the search for communion and community, based on deep and inclusive relationships; the progressive extension of community living to the parish, diocese, and city, to society and to humanity.”

Under the heading “Convictions for Deciding to go Forward” the congress declared: “It is necessary to develop the ecclesiology of communion and the theological foundations of relationships between religious and laypersons in order to intensify common formation, religious and lay; to favor a shared mission and bond with the local church; and to have flexible structures to share experiences among congregations” (13). We also hear that “consecrated life has to be an experience of communion. This implies a strong call to community life” (15).¹⁹

In brief, our call as religious men and women is a call to community, and as such it is a call to communion. If we live this, even strive to live this, the benefits will be local and global.

While it is not possible here to delve into either term deeply, what elements of community and communion are necessary for creating communities of hope?

Rooted in contemplation

Community life and communion both require a contemplative spirit; this spirit permeates our interactions as we engage a mission beyond ourselves and for which we are willing to sacrifice. I offer a few words on contemplation and interactions.

First, creating communities of hope on a global scale requires that we be contemplatives, that is, that we attend to our passion for Christ.

Elizabeth Dreyer, in concert with Sandra Schneiders, IHM, reminds us that “God is the source and wellspring of prophetic life and mission, and only contemplation keeps us intimately attuned to God’s voice.”²⁰

Our primary call as religious is to the relationship we have with Christ. We seek God. There is no substitute for contemplation. Time and space so that we may experience God’s invitation not only in the interactions and activities of our days, but also in the quiet depths of our hearts, is necessary. And we know this is not easy. The frenetic nature of society around us has found its way into religious life. Janet Ruffing, RSM rightly calls us to acknowledge our demons of busyness.²¹ We are busy as women and men religious, but we must continually water this essential root.

First, creating communities of hope on a global scale requires that we be contemplatives, that is, that we attend to our passion for Christ.

We know the grace that comes from contemplation. We contemplate because we seek our “Beloved,” yet as we do, our awareness of the other also increases. We bring this to our activity and to our prayer, and the spiral continues.

This contemplative spirit must permeate our interactions. A community is defined by human interaction. Our level of interaction with one another, our depth of sharing of our lives, indicates our communion. For example, it is not that we live together but how we live together that determines our community. Community life depends upon the sharing of our lives, including the sharing of our spiritual lives, and we are as deeply connected as the depth of our sharing. This does mean

risk taking and some adaptability on everyone's part. There is a give and take in community as we seek communion.

I'm aware that communal living versus living singly (or even with one other sister) is a huge debate in a number of congregations, and congregations must find ways to truly dialogue on these topics while living in an individualistically oriented U.S. culture and an increasingly interdependent world. The witness we offer in creating healthy, adult faith communities is significant. We must find new, creative ways to live, as the structures and even the housing that was once available is no longer. Adult living space is an issue. We seek a way to create quiet spaces, conversational or reading spaces, and entertainment gathering spaces.

Here I must also add that even as you build relationships among members in your congregational families (Dominican,

Ursuline, Mercy, etc.), in particular among your younger members, please be attentive to the need to also build across congregations. Women religious are, rightly, spread across lands where there are unmet needs, so the call is to create and engage community for the mission wherever we can. This will only strengthen each congregation, each member and the mission. The blessing of *Giving Voice*—both the

Perhaps the biggest task in our lifetime is to be properly prepared to engage in dialogue. We are in an increasingly polarized nation, world and church, and there is no sign of abatement.

publication and the gatherings of younger women religious—is that we find ourselves with women around the country, and increasingly in conversations with women around the world, sharing our passion for God and passion for humanity. It is as contemplatives and as persons in relationship that we can engage the *global* and create communities of hope on a *global scale*. It is to a global public consciousness that we now turn.

Dialogue and global public consciousness

Religious life must be lived with a public global consciousness. I was truly intrigued by the phrase in the 2004 Congress on Consecrated Life about the movement from passion to compassion. Passion for Christ does lead us to passion for humanity, as the Congress theme declares. This passion for Christ is a movement to compassion for humanity, which moves

us again to the lives of the people of God. In particular, it moves us with compassion to the suffering and struggling people of God. It is worth noting that Scripture and our social tradition tell us that a community will be marked by its justice.²² In *Economic Justice for All*, we again hear that the community is to be judged by how the poorest among us fare.²³

Now a few words about dialogue and then analysis and action as they relate to creating communities of hope.

Dialogue. Perhaps the biggest task in our lifetime is to be properly prepared to engage in dialogue. We are in an increasingly polarized nation, world and church, and there is no sign of abatement. Oblate School of Theology, where I minister, has a sabbatical program connected to it and in which faculty teach. During the spring semester before our most recent national elections, I offered input on ethical issues in an election year; a lively discussion ensued. I urged the participants to have these discussions in their congregations, among other places, and I offered some Web sites that assist in organizing a discussion. There was a moment of silence, and then one sister said, "I can't even imagine a discussion on some of these topics among our members." A few others sadly shook their heads in agreement. This must not be! If we, well-educated members of religious communities, cannot discuss a topic that will evoke a variety of positions, how do we hope or expect that others will—locally, nationally or internationally? At the same time, who can blame her reticence? We can all remember tense discussions during which we would have gratefully accepted a request to take an important phone call in another room!

Our challenge is to dialogue beyond ideologies. Religion commentator John Allen offered the 2004 Catholic Common Ground Annual lecture, and he spoke about the divisiveness and polarization characterizing both church and nation. He asserted a need for a spirituality of dialogue and suggested five elements that seem to be at the core of such a spirituality of dialogue: 1) epistemological humility; 2) solid formation in the Catholic tradition, as a means of creating a common language; 3) patience; 4) perspective, the capacity to see issues through the eyes of others; 5) maintenance of a full-bodied expression of Catholic identity.²⁴ The Catholic Common Ground Project also offers principles for dialogue for use by individuals and groups. However, we cannot go into this lightly. Dialogue beyond ideologies or efforts toward any post-ideological ethos requires openness to conversion on each person's part, for we generally come with some educated opinions on topics of importance to us, as well as biases and experiences. Our efforts must be theologically grounded, and this will require on-going

theological renewal. (This in turn offers further opportunity to engage the moral imagination.)

The call to dialogue was voiced in Vatican II, and we responded to the call, through congregational and theological renewal of immense proportions—and the results are far more light than shadow. This challenge to dialogue is ours now too, and it will be so for at least the next 50 years. Our efforts will serve not only us but also the next generation of women religious here, around the globe; indeed the whole church.

A practical note: dialogue of this type is challenging, and though we cannot speak of peace without dialogue, even with our best efforts we may still find ourselves at the cross. Contemplation and the support of one another is sometimes the only thing that will keep us at the tables—including at some where we are merely or barely tolerated—so that we can speak Gospel truth and bring to the table all those on the margins. This path is fraught with shadow and light, but communities of hope help us engage even the impasses.²⁵

Think big

Creating communities of hope on a global scale requires vision that is both expansive and particular. Global is not in opposition to the local, but actually serves both the local and global context. At the 2003 Amor XIII Asia-Oceania Meeting of Religious in Taiwan, Filo Hirota Shizue, MMB, said that:

The local is where people are and life is. . . . At the same time, localization needs to be connected so that we can develop a global network of people, groups and communities that continue creating concrete ways and forms in favor of fuller life. The Catholic Church (as well as religious congregations) is a transnational, multinational global system. We are well over one million religious in the world. With each one of us, there are students, parents, clients, patients, colleagues, who are with us. We are capable of enabling a globalization from below that prioritizes *life*. We used to talk about “think globally and act locally.” Today we have to think and act globally and locally. . . . *glocally*.²⁶

As men and women religious we are connected across the globe. These relationships are crucial, for through them we hear the Gospel calling us to place our citizenship in a country with unparalleled power for good and destruction toward the service of those who have little—and their “little” is often due to the unequal advantages that globalization gives the world’s already powerful. We must continue to ask the people concerned how

we might best be able to serve one another toward fullness of life. Many congregations are already doing this, and the invitation is to participation among all with whom we minister and engage. Dorothy Stang, SNDdeN, recent martyr in Brazil, made the connection between human rights and environmental rights, and lest our moral outrage become mute without action, we must find ways to respond to the greed and unnecessary consumption driving our own lives and the culture in which we live. The global community of hope thus expands. Movement is happening—among religious congregations as well as organizations such as Center for Concern, NETWORK and others. My recent work has been particularly in HIV/AIDS on a global and local scale, and I find that the underlying causes are connected to so many other social issues, such as poverty and violence.²⁷ This invites further collaboration with many other groups, lay, religious, ecumenical and international.

As I conclude, I want to say that we younger religious are engaged and seek deeper engagement. We are not as many as the generation before us, but *we are here* in religious life. While this life will look different in each generation, we too have heard a call to seek God through vowed life, and we too seek to hear and follow a God who calls us to love and serve. We do not know what religious life will look like in the future, but we choose to be disciples of the One who calls us to love in this church and world.

To all our efforts to create communities of hope on a global scale, I do believe God says, Yes! Yes! Yes! ■

As men and women religious, we are connected across the globe. These relationships are crucial, for through them we hear the Gospel calling us to place our citizenship in a country with unparalleled power for good and destruction toward the service of those who have little.

1. I distinguish Christian hope here from existential or humanistic hope.

2. William F. Lynch. *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1965), 23. Lynch powerfully explains that despair occurs because one imagines

alone and cannot see outside the situation.

3. Cynthia Glavac. *In the Fullness of Life: A Biography of Dorothy Kazel, O.S.U.* (New Jersey: Dimension, 1996), 173-174.

4. See Johann Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980), 73.

5. Lynch, *Images*, 40.

6. Lynch, *Images*, 40.

7. Maria Carolina Pardo, OSF. "Rochester Franciscans: A Colombian Perspective," *Giving Voice*, Vol. III, 2001. We know the truths of these words from the February murder of Dorothy Stang, SNDde Namur. We've come to realize that this time of violence is not senseless, but very thought-full.

8. I add the term "moral" to imagination to further focus our attention on the way we live our life as Christians.

9. Here I use the terms imagination, moral imagination and Christian imagination interchangeably.

10. See Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Web site at <http://cara.georgetown.edu>.

11. Philip S. Keane, SS. *Christian Ethics and Imagination: A Theological Inquiry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 81.

12. William C. Spohn uses this term and description in *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 56 when commenting on William F. Lynch's work on the imagination, *Images of Hope*.

13. Lynch, *Images of Hope*, 35.

14. Vaclav Havel in "An Orientation of the Heart," in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, ed. Paul Rogat Loeb (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 82-83.

15. We here also encounter the analogical imagination which helps us connect and integrate elements of our tradition with our experiences and information about our contemporary world. A key text on the analogical imagination is David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

16. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 4.

17. On hope and eschatology, see also Vincent J. Genovesi, SJ, *Expectant Creativity: The Action of Hope in Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982).

18. For an overview of Aquinas's discussion of hope, see Romanus Cessario, "The Theological Virtue of Hope" (IIa IIai), 17-22 in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 232-243.

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20. Elizabeth A. Dreyer. "Prophetic Voice in Religious Life," *Review for Religion*: 62.3 (2003): 259.

21. Janet Ruffing, RSM. "Resisting the Demon of Busyness" *Spiritual Life* (Summer 1995); http://www.worship.ca/docs/p_31_jr.html (accessed August 14, 2005).

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Religious communities can tap into a rich source of hope by clinging to their faith foundations and consciously embracing a God of abundance—rejecting the culture’s philosophy of scarcity and competition.

Hope and security: new foundations

By DAVID COUTURIER, OFM CAP

THERE IS PLENTY TO DISCOURAGE and much to test the hopefulness of vocation directors about religious life today: a multi-generational vocational shortage that cuts across traditional and progressive lines, an unabated polarization that defines ecclesial discourse, the eruption of sexual and administrative scandals, isolation and the lack of peer support for younger members, the structural intransigence of some provinces and the continuous reconfiguration of others, a return to crisis management strategies on the part of some provincial/congregational administrations (maintenance over mission), and a growing apathy and lack of passion for traditional forms of religious life exhibited by some bishops, laity and members of our own congregations.

Problems in religious life are nothing new in the history of the church. Nor is the struggle for hope. Jurgen Moltmann writes about the foundations for hope and the pathway out of despair, “For in the present, where we always are, the powers of the past wrestle with the powers of the future, and fear and hope struggle for domination. By changing ourselves and the circumstances around us, by anticipating the future God, we emigrate out of the past into the future.”¹ The beauty of hope, in the Christian life, is that as a theological virtue, it engages us, no matter the odds, in the incalculable freedom of God and the limitless mystery of God’s graciousness in history. St. Thomas Aquinas succinctly expresses the orientation we should have toward this fundamental ecstasy of hope: “The good we should chiefly and rightly hope for from God is an unlimited one, matching the

power of God who helps us. For it belongs to God’s limitless power to bring us to a limitless good.” (Summa Theologica 2-2, 17,2). St. Thérèse of Liseux says much the same, in her elegant phrase, “My hopes touch upon the Infinite.”²

This article will describe how easy it is for religious men and women to lose hope in an increasingly secularized culture and some new ways for our hopes to “touch upon the infinite.”

Hope’s reduction to the finite

For some time now, our problems in religious life have been interpreted under the rubric of an “identity crisis.” Under this theory, traditional forms of religious life (i.e. Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, Sisters of Mercy, etc.) are struggling because they have forgotten their essential mission and vision, a phenomenon that somehow cuts across geographic, economic, spiritual, cultural, social and ecclesial lines. There are even “conspiracy” theorists who hold that some traditional communities were hijacked and hoodwinked soon after the Second Vatican Council by liberal superiors and their sympathetic episcopal allies.³ They maintain that the vocation shortage, polarization and supposed anemia experienced by religious congregations in the West are the natural and well-deserved outcomes of infidelity and confusion. This theory while unproven remains popular nonetheless.

What is troubling is that the theory of identity crisis obscures a whole set of other critical questions. For example, how did “competition” arise as a feature of religious life in the late 20th and early 21st century? Why has the rhetoric of scarcity trumped theologies of abundance in both traditional and new forms of religious life? Why have the politics and polemics of aggressive persuasion become a defining sign of acceptable discourse in some quarters of religious orthodoxy?

Vocation directors are on the front lines of these theological contests and cultural issues. In this article, I would like to test an alternative hypothesis—that the problems of vocational life

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have been largely misdiagnosed. They are not so much the result of a massive crisis of identity, as they are the consequence of a culture-wide shift in the horizon of economic and cultural expectations (the limiting or reduction of our transcendent desire) that has impacted every major organism of contemporary society. Religious life is acting out its part in the theological drama of a culture captivated by aggressive consumer capitalism. Our religious life culture, once informed almost exclusively by the sacramental discourse of Christendom and populated

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by the grand desires for the transcendent, has been re-invested and limited in the secular (and material) discourse of the Enlightenment, in ways similar to or parallel with every other major institution of contemporary society.⁴ Our prophetic reputation and social history simply make us more visible than other institutions. We are at a point, however, where religious can begin to question and opt out of the defining theological and philosophical drama of our age—that of reconciling

Christianity with aggressive consumer capitalism—in order to choose a more relational, less competitive, and more hopeful economy.

Sources of despair for vocation ministers

There are six immediate sources of despair for vocation ministers today: a) the incessant competition for “scarce goods,” (people interested in religious life); b) the unspoken and unacknowledged competition with other religious orders; c) the pressure to portray vocational life, especially community dynamics, and the church in ideal terms; d) the burden of community expectations to “achieve” plenty of new members; e) the burden of spending a lot of money for staff and expenses in return for limited results (few or no entrants); f) the lack of support or understanding from the community or leadership and the fear of “not doing enough” to provide for the community’s needs.

There are two fundamental rubrics by which to understand and work through our vocational concerns. The first is a theology of scarcity and the second is a theology of abundance. It is the first that characterizes much of the formal structures and informal strategies of many congregations. Scarcity is the philosophical formula of contemporary management. Given the popularity of management techniques based on scarcity in profit and not-for-profit institutions, it’s hard for responsible religious not to think in similar ways. We are the products of our culture.

However much we protest, we in the West inherit the persuasions of the Enlightenment, its framework of scarcity and competition and its values of personal initiative, productivity, orderliness, and efficiency.⁵ We live and breathe its suspicion of insufficiency and the pursuit of happiness, now wrenched away from its traditional moorings in the common good. In this

| <i>Management by abundance models</i> | |
|--|---|
| AGGRESSIVE CAPITALISM | RELATIONAL |
| God is stingy. | God gives in abundance. |
| Competition | Communion |
| Do more with less. | Be creative with what is. |
| Start with fear, panic over what we don’t have. | Start with gratitude for what is. |
| Not enough young people willing to sacrifice. | Young people want positive witnesses of hope. |
| Administration should spend more; vocation ministers should do more. | Leaders and vocation ministers are partners working together. |
| Resentful | Grateful |
| There’s just no time. | This is the right time. |

way, by isolating individual interest over the public good, the market economy creates, sustains and maintains insecurity in all the communities in which we live. In the market economy, no individual and no community are ever secure, since desire is infinite and satisfaction elusive. This is so because our definition of security has been re-defined and re-rooted in purely economic terms. We are culturally bound to the belief that our security depends exclusively on deliverables.⁶ Beyond this, we subscribe to the tenet that we will use any means necessary and pursue any strategy required to defend our economic supremacy over all others. Competition has been raised to a transcendental level, as Thomas Hobbes predicted in his famous dictum that we are in “a war of all against all.” This is the cultural context in which we now try to pursue our religious ideals and our vocational mission.

We are hardly aware of how deeply this horizon of expectation influences our understanding and experience of the vocational management of resources in religious life. We hardly notice that the market economy in which we have developed our new system of salaries and stipends, accountability and administration requires exhaustion and exclusion—the inevitable exhaustion of all resources, including human ones, and the immediate exclusion of whatever appears unprofitable. The market economy, in which all our enterprises are folded, has forced us to reinvent our ministries, how we work and how we relate to one another.⁷ Religious are working longer and harder, and the pressure to produce and earn in many communities is often overwhelming. The market economy in control of our religious congregations now depends on the re-invention of our desire, away from the transcendent desire for God and toward the infinite desire for goods. Vocation ministers need to attend to this reinvention of contemporary desire to make sense of the forms of their despair.

Desire for God and more

Jean Leclercq once famously described monastic culture as “the love of learning and the desire for God.”⁸ While the desire for God in vocational life is fundamentally transcendent, desire in the global economy exhibits five alternative characteristics.

First, there is the proliferation of desire. Marketing and advertising in the global economy collapse the distinction between necessity and superfluity.⁹ The reach of need and want runs to infinity. The consumer is trained to exceed his/her satisfaction and to desire an infinite array of goods, products and services. In community life, entitlement replaces service

as an operative theology. And so, increasingly, religious have to worry about career security, job promotion, salary increases, pension plans, Medicare supplements, insurance dividends and investment returns. Like so many in society, they wonder whether their hard work matches their compensation. In some communities, this economic development has heightened competition among those who earn salaries and those who don't. It has increased the freedom and range of opportunities for those in the community with means and shrunken them for those without, all within the same congregation and all in the name of poverty. As we shall see, the only real antidote to entitlement is a relational and transcendent form of austerity.

Second, there is the materialization and commodification of desire. In late antiquity, the goal of desire was the divine since, as Scripture says, “we have no true and lasting city here.” (Hebrews 13:14) In

our early 21st century context, however, desire is redefined as material want that becomes fabricated as product to be bought and sold. Secularization collapses or cancels out our incarnate view of the world, which once held that the divine and the material abide in a hypostatic union and commercium (without confusion, change, division or separation).¹⁰ Today desire has wide extension but thin depth, in that it is infinite in its expectations and demands but, according to our commercial evangelism, must be immediately satisfied, consumed and replaced. The emotional correlate of these characteristics is a hypertensive vigilance in communities, as (administrative) strategies are regularly replaced, plans reconfigured, management structures overturned to satisfy the panicked assumption that no effort is enough, no work could ever be enough, to forestall the implications of scarcity.

Finally, modern desire creates segmentation and isolation. In her catalogue of 12 retail trends for 2004 and beyond, retail analyst Marita Wesley Cough years ago predicted the eruption of deeper forms of social polarization. She warned:

Look for increased polarization—whether political, economic, religious or philosophical. Regardless of age,

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ethnicity or affiliation, individuals long for the security of alignment with those “like us.” Ethnic “tribes” within countries and cities; elite social clubs; gatherings of loyal brand devotees, as well as group identities created via fashion, language or symbols. Increasing gravitation toward communities of like minds—people whose interests, worldviews or values reinforce our own.¹¹

Desire in the global economy dissects the world into market shares where the unprofitable are increasingly replaced, marginalized or simply ignored, as the definition of common good collapses into nothing more than common wealth—whatever can be exchanged, made transparent, expanded and proliferated for profit.¹² Culture, eroded by contemporary desire in the growing market economy, loses its currency except as commodity, in favor of competition as the inevitable engine of human development.¹³

We hardly notice that the market economy in which we have developed our new system of salaries and stipends, accountability and administration requires exhaustion and exclusion.

Religious life today inherits the byproducts of the market economy in the reorganization of the desires of its religious communities. Those desires are growing, becoming more material, producing higher levels of polarization and competition both within and among congregations, and making members more insecure.

Vocation ministers work at the crossroads of today’s transcendent and commercial desires, as do the majority of their community members. If there is despair emerging among vocation ministers, it is not due to a lack of faith. Quite the opposite! It is the inevitable result of an inchoate but faith-filled recognition that the problems we face and the concerns we experience cannot and should not be addressed any longer by a theological or philosophical framework of scarcity. The Enlightenment principles of suspicion and doubt create the very scarcity and insecurity they intend to replace. Therefore, vocation programs should reconsider the management principles and administrative assumptions on which they are based. It is time to put aside the language of competition, achievement, supply and demand that has recently conditioned religious life projects. Perhaps it is time to retire the inevitable hermeneutics

of suspicion and polemics of polarization, since they have reinforced the very insecurity and scarcity they were supposed to resolve.

A relational economy

There is an alternative framework that vocation ministers can use to understand and work through the issues facing religious life today. In lieu of the competitive and aggressive global market economy standards, we are proposing that religious re-tool their operations using the principles of a relational or fraternal economy. Developed in a series of international congresses and studies by Capuchin-Franciscan ministers and scholars, the fraternal or relational economy rejects capitalism’s primary proposition that competition is the best response to protect and administer the scarce resources of a community.¹⁴ Rooting itself in seven hundred years of Franciscan tradition and research on wealth and poverty, these Franciscans maintain that the

Principals of a relational economy

TRANSPARENCY– Mutuality in all things. All the goods, economic activities, and ministerial decisions of members are at the service of the whole. There are no hidden schemes by leadership or membership.

EQUITY – Individuals and communities get what they need and contribute what they have for the common good and the building up of communion. Service replaces entitlement.

PARTICIPATION – Build mechanisms of cooperation and a communion of persons without domination or deprivation.

SOLIDARITY – Those who have more give more to those deprived. All work to undo structures of sin that serve as obstacles to communion.

AUSTERITY – The minimum necessary, not the maximum allowed. Live and work simply, so others can simply live and work.

inevitability of self-interest as the engine of human development remains unproven and that security is more adequately guaranteed by an economics founded on solidarity.

In their analysis of the development of globalization, the friars attempt to develop a “genuinely more human way” to attend to the needs of today’s poor with “values of simplicity, gratuitousness, the will to serve, respect for persons and for creation.”¹⁵ With new economic insights derived from their understanding of their relational or fraternal economy, the friars are engaging difficult questions of ownership, jurisdiction, the use of goods, the question of profit, surplus, the just wage, power and politics, property and freedom. Set in motion by a challenge to the worldwide order by African brothers convinced that “the cry of the poor” in Africa could not be heard in the present economic regime that structures in inevitable winners and losers, the fraternal (relational) economy stands as a clear, albeit vulnerable, alternative to the market economy that rules the day. Its rules are not the competition, ambition and greed that drive the market fundamentalism of contemporary economics. Its development is determined by increasing forms of collaboration and mutual dependence, courageous choices of minority, redeemed and reconstituted relationships, authority without domination, and service without deprivation.

The relational economy originates in a theology of abundance, in the Franciscan insight that God is good, all good, supremely good, all the time and to everyone. In contrast to the Enlightenment image of a stingy and reticent Creator, this new framework holds that the inner life and immanent work of God, as well as God’s economic activity in the world, are simultaneously generosity and creativity. And it maintains that this universe expresses this “fountain fullness” in its entirety and in all its parts.

Today, Capuchin-Franciscans are reorganizing their economic structures and their ministries according to the five principles of the fraternal (relational) economy: participation, equity, transparency, solidarity and austerity. These five principles constitute a prophetic criticism of a prevailing economic system that requires “permissible victims” and structures in irredeemably severe forms of poverty. These five principles proceed from a primary platform of abundance.

The theology of scarcity conditions its adherents to inevitable spasms of fear—fear that there won’t be enough time, money, help, support and care. Because members start with the presupposition of scarcity, they can never be satisfied. There is never enough to fill the vacuum.

On the other hand, a theology of abundance reorganizes

priorities away from a grammar of entitlement and toward a discourse of gratitude, with the belief that gratitude creates opportunities and gratitude is the key to creativity. The key is to translate this theology of abundance into the economic structures and administration of the religious community.

Build hope

Facing a multi-generational vocation shortage that shows no sign of abating, vocation ministers were called upon to design programs and projects to reverse or at least ameliorate negative social and ecclesial trends. Both traditionalist and progressive commentators analyzed these currents from within the framework of a theology of scarcity. At the end of the day, the despair exhibited by vocation ministers and the polarization created by traditionalists and progressives alike requires a new starting point. This article maintains that abundance should replace scarcity as our philosophical and theological vantage point, and gratitude should retire our fear.

While theologies of abundance have worked reasonably well in the personal and interpersonal sphere, they have yet been tried in the economic and administrative zones of religious life. There, principles of scarcity and economies of competition still compromise the imagination of members who are thereby more and more prone to protests of entitlement. The market economy by definition creates competition and produces insecurity. A relational economy, on the other hand, can replace vocational despair by calling for the redesign of all administrative functions so that they adhere to their foundational Trinitarian end as a “free communion of persons without domination or deprivation.”¹⁶

Vocation ministers can build hope by retiring the discourse of scarcity, suspicion and polarization and by rethinking how they administer and manage their ministries, using the five principles of the relational economy (transparency, equity, participation, solidarity and austerity). In this way, we can create a new energy for communion and, once again, have our hopes “touch upon the Infinite.” ■

We hardly notice that the market economy in which we have developed our new system of salaries and stipends, accountability and administration requires exhaustion and exclusion.

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Youthfulness and hopefulness tend to go together. These three young religious point to a dozen reasons for optimism about religious life.

What gives me hope: three young voices

By MARY CATHARINE PERRY, OP; JESÚS ALONSO, CSC; AND JENNIFER GORDON, SCL

YOUNG RELIGIOUS ENTERED their communities when the larger culture was writing off religious life altogether, dismissing it as irrelevant. The act of entering was in itself a statement of hope. Here they explain in greater detail why they are hopeful about religious life.

THE CALL CONTINUES

RECENTLY A YOUNG WOMAN (I'll call her Ann) entered our cloistered monastery as a postulant. As novice mistress I went to the parlor to greet her family and friends who had come to witness this new beginning. A woman introduced herself as a longtime friend of Ann's, took one look at me and said, "You look awfully young. I expected a much older woman!"

At 38 years of age and nearly 16 years in the monastery, I don't consider myself a "young religious" (although most of the sisters in my community do!). But Ann's friend, who was in fact only a year older than I and also the same age as our postulant, expected an "older" woman. This rather humorous incident and others like it brought home to me that society both in and outside the church has come to think of religious as older, dying out, remains of the past, and certainly not part of the future.

I have always been optimistic about the future of religious life, and my work, first as vocation director and now as novice mistress, has only reinforced this conviction. Religious life is here to stay! Following are what I identify as five signs of hope for the future of religious life.

God continues to invite

If there were no other reason to be optimistic about the future of religious life, there's this: at its very heart, the religious life is possible only because God continues to invite men and women to give themselves fully, radically to Him. Jesus continues to look upon each one with love, and his glance is so compelling and

so attractive that they know they will only find happiness when they say "yes." In my first years of religious life when people would question why I entered the monastery, I would give evasive (although true) answers. Finally I realized that I needed to say what, in the end, really convinced me. "I've fallen in love with Christ," I now respond. Sixteen years later, I'm still in love, but with a love that is mature, less emotional and, yes, rooted in faith. I'm also more aware of its demands.

The Holy Spirit continues to inspire

Many religious men and women may not say it publicly, but they often doubt if there is a future to religious life. As one sister from another congregation said to me, "As the youngest in my community I often wondered if I would be the one to turn out the lights." Throughout the history of the church, orders and congregations have come and gone. There is no guarantee that any congregation is here to stay until the Second Coming (Dominicans being the exception, of course!). We look with sadness at large congregations that are shrinking in size or merging with others for lack of vocations, and we wring our hands and become nostalgic for days gone by but fail to see how the Holy Spirit is continuing to inspire men and women to found new communities responding to the needs of today. One only need think of the Sisters of Life or the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal or the Community of St. John or the Monastic Family of Bethlehem and the Assumption, to name only a few in the United States. Of course, these communities will be tested and become tried in the purifying furnace of time, but they are evidence that the Holy Spirit continues to be at work.

Although I don't want this article to be focused on the ills of our world and society, I do think that they paradoxically provide several reasons for hope for the future of religious life.

We now have almost two generations saturated with a materialism that promises happiness. We've tried it, and guess

what: we found, some in incredibly painful ways, that this so-called freedom promised by society and especially by the media brings an emptiness of soul that is yearning to be filled.

Young people's growing awareness of the unsatisfactory nature of modern nihilistic allurements are provoking them to search for meaning and for truth. Because of this, they are fertile soil for the Word of God to take root and flourish. Many who received little or no education in their faith experience a profound conversion and transformation when they encounter the church in all her beauty and truth, especially through the example of other young men and women. The confidence John

Paul II had in young people when he told us that we were not the church of the future but of now, has drawn countless men and women to say an enthusiastic Yes! to giving their lives to Christ. Much to the perplexity of many, Benedict XVI no less continues to be a guiding light, and a true "Holy Father": "Never has anyone spoken like this man before" (John 7:46).

What they do want is a life that matches the radical call to leave all things—careers, money, travel, family, etc.—with a radical response that is clearly evangelical and consonant with the church's tradition.

Eucharist—encounter with the absolute

Although my work as vocation directress is more limited because of my contemplative life, over and over again young women tell me of the powerful effect time with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament has had on them. For some it is the honeymoon time of conversion, but for most this encounter with the Christ is what sustains them in their faith and where the first whisperings of the invitation to become a bride of Christ are heard. Many of these young women come from less than ideal home situations and bring their pain, wounds and scars to Christ in the Holy Eucharist. While not denying the therapeutic benefits of psychotherapy, it is in this time with Jesus, the true physician, that they find healing and joy. In the Eucharistic encounter they find the One who is their true friend. "I call you not servants, but friends."

In return, these women want to give their all to Christ. As one young woman recently said to me, describing why she felt called to the contemplative life: "I just really, really love Christ. I want my whole life to be a way to say 'I love you.'"

Radical call, radical response

By now, I think it is pretty clear to most vocation directors that the young men and women who are discerning a religious vocation are searching for communities that live a distinctive religious life with a clear identity and charism. To many religious, who were themselves young during the euphoric days after the council, it seems that this new generation knocking at the doors of convents, monasteries and seminaries wants to turn back the clock to the '50s or even the romanticism of the 19th century. While there are a few who think this way, most in fact do not. What they do want is a life that matches the radical call to leave all things—careers, money, travel, family, etc.—with a radical response that is clearly evangelical and consonant with the church's tradition. Surrounded by rampant individualism, they want to belong to something bigger than themselves, something worth committing to; and they are excited to "give themselves to Jesus Christ, in the radical-ness of the Gospel," as Benedict XVI said in a recent talk to religious superiors. The scandals, instead of turning young people away from the priesthood and religious life, are reinforcing their desire to belong totally to Christ and his church.

The Holy Father tells those of us in religious life that "courageous choices are needed at the personal and community level to rediscover and to show the beauty of following Christ in a consecrated life." If we ourselves are in love with Christ and with his bride the church and are passionate about preaching the Gospel for the salvation of souls, whether directly or through a hidden life of prayer and penance, then the joy of our lives can't help but attract the next generation to respond to the perennial invitation to "come follow me."

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LIVING IN AN ERA OF RENEWAL

I AM A YOUNG MEXICAN-AMERICAN who recently joined an aging, predominantly Anglo religious community at a time when some may say U.S. religious life is in crisis. My congregation's formation program has helped equip me with personal developmental tools that aid my ability to identify support structures, but more importantly, invite me to take ownership

of the mission of the congregation. Discussing the state of religious life with numerous consecrated men and women allows me to experience and observe a fascinating interaction between individuals who generally have very different formation experiences. Older religious encountered large peer groups, formators with a more rigid, almost impersonal approach to religious formation, and flourishing institutions. In contrast, those entering religious orders today experience smaller groups, more personal and developmentally challenging formation, aging communities, and increasing withdrawal from successful apostolates. Together these experiences create an intergenerational dynamic with potentially conflicting points of view, which produces an ideal environment for the necessary and constant renewal of religious life. Why? Present circumstances place young religious in decision-making positions, due to a lack of personnel. Hence, making the diversity of new members a more prominent aspect of the religious community. Although the energy of the younger generation will carry religious life through our contemporary crisis, the guidance of the aging members will allow the entire group to take a more centered and prophetic stance in contemporary society.

Meaningful dialogue

For a number of years I have routinely discussed the complex issues facing our religious community, placing me in difficult but meaningful dialogue. Such conversations give rise to a provocative tension that inspires a passionate response to the needs of our society and the church. Interestingly, our response leads to appropriate questioning of secular culture, hence, aiding our awareness of the prophetic nature of our consecrated lives—a situation made especially evident because of our reduced membership.

Coincidentally, I find myself further embracing my religious vocation, constantly renewing my profession, and lovingly welcoming others attempting a similar discipleship. I realize that maintaining the faith and zeal of a community is both a personal and communal responsibility. Thus, as a new member I am able to bring hope to others by deepening my commitment to living my life as an offering to God and a loving sign to a community “which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation. . . more adequately manifesting to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed in this world,” as stated by Pope Paul VI in his exhortation *Evangelica testificatio*. A fascinating phenomenon is produced by

this challenging period of diminishing communities and fewer vocations. It invites a constant questioning of the decision to pursue religious life, that in turn leads to a frequent evaluation of how the evangelical counsels and the charism of my community provides spiritual and personal sustenance. However these questions may be answered, the ensuing personal ownership that occurs helps me find further meaning in the values, beliefs and mission which exemplify my specific vocation. I strongly identify with the words of author Viktor Frankl in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, due to my stance that although God provides our ultimate source of meaning, our human nature demands a particular manifestation of our vocation. He writes, “Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.” Consequently, dialogue along with personal reflection produces hope since it helps me realize I am not part of a mechanized system but a prophetic individual responsible for shaping the future of religious life.

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Global connections build hope

Being part of an international community has had significant impact on my prediction for the future of religious life. This past academic year I was privileged to live in a house composed of five different cultures: Mexican, Brazilian, Ghanaian, Anglo-American and Mexican-American. Such cultural diversity presents a challenging community situation, not only because of language differences, but also because each of us had to recognize that our approach to living in community was not always amenable to the norms of other societies. Despite its challenges, this community was one of the most life-giving and hope-filled experiences I have had thus far in my community life. I found that this international setting both educated and challenged all of us. New perspectives on common issues are introduced, thus increasing our awareness of events that would otherwise not gain our attention. Cultural values are

shared and personal customs are challenged to include other ideas developed by distinct cultures. Education, therefore, allows communities to reevaluate the validity of their current ministries and possibly refocus on their specific mission within the Catholic Church. Crossing cultural boundaries impels us to construct more inclusive communities that base their foundation on promoting diversity and bringing together multiple cultures. Hope is then regained since more inclusive ideologies lead to a reassertion of the mission of our particular founders. Reasserting our original charism ignites the faith and zeal of the community, which is what brought many current religious to the consecrated life and continues to attract younger members.

Shrinking communities—signs of hope

The byproducts of fewer vocations in the U.S. have been the very things that provide me hope: small, culturally diverse communities, increased participation in the decision making

The byproducts of fewer vocations in the U.S. have been the very things that provide me hope: small, culturally diverse communities, increased participation in the decision making process, and a prayerful, faith-filled commitment to living the vows

process, and a prayerful, faith-filled commitment to living the vows. I find that this call to serve God places me at the fringes of society since our commitments run counter to the values of secular culture. Personal commitment to religious life mandates continual spiritual, intellectual and personal renewal, thus furthering my understanding of what it means to find hope in carrying Jesus' cross. The constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross state, "If we drink the cup

each of us is poured and given, we servants will fare no better than our master. But if we shirk the cross, gone too will be our hope. It is in fidelity to what we once pledged that we will find the dying and rising equally assured." My hope for the future of religious life is somewhat nurtured by tangible possibilities, but ultimately sustained by the happenings of the present.

Dedicating myself to a greater mission has provided experiences that indicate there is a strong and fruitful future for my religious order and that of religious life, therefore allowing

me to reassure the faithful that there is much to gain from our discipleship. This discipleship encourages me to sincerely and willingly invite others to pursue a similar path.

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ALIVE AND VITAL

A WOMAN I'D NEVER MET recently came into the clinic where I work. When I introduced myself as a Sister of Charity, she said, "Oh, you've had quite a few funerals lately, haven't you?" She'd read in the paper the obituaries of several of our sisters, and it was funerals that she had come to associate with our community.

In many ways, the woman was right. We have buried a number of our sisters this year, and that trend will likely continue. Celebrating the lives of our sisters as they journey home to God is simply a part of our life together.

I sensed, though, that beneath this woman's question was another, deeper question that she couldn't quite articulate. Implicit in her question about funerals was a question about the viability of religious life today. She seemed to be asking about diminishment and dying, not only of individual sisters but of a way of life. What does it mean, she seemed to ask, to be young in an aging community? What do vows of poverty, chastity and obedience mean in a world filled with consumerism, sexual exploitation and unjust relationships? How is it possible, here and now, to choose religious life?

She was, I realized later, asking me about hope. Where is the hope about religious life, about its future, and about my future in it? I am very hopeful about the future of religious life, and I am grateful for this woman's questions, both spoken and unspoken, because they invited me into a process of articulating the basis of that hope.

Seven elements of hope

1. We are mission-focused. We continue to focus more on our mission than on our numbers. For example, a friend who lives in North Carolina recently shared with me her community's plans to open a new retreat-spirituality center there. They are also planning to send three sisters to a village in central Mexico,

simply to live among the people and to respond as they are able to the needs they encounter there. In addition my community is sponsoring Cristo Rey Kansas City, a new high school that offers a Catholic, college-prep education to students who would not otherwise be able to afford it. The first students, the Class of 2010, will arrive in August.

2. We are finding new ways to be present. We are making a conscious effort to find new ways to be present to the people around us, especially young people. The Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph sponsors Third Thursdays, a monthly event in which young adults gather for Mass at the Cathedral downtown and then for snacks and drinks afterwards. There are always a number of sisters, brothers and priests who participate. In addition, five women's religious communities in Kansas and Missouri work together to host Leadership Camp, a gathering of middle school girls, each summer. This year 48 girls and 17 high school and college counselors gathered in Leavenworth for three days to swim, do arts and crafts and watch movies, but also to experience different forms of prayer and to meet religious women—many for the first time.

3. We're reaching out to newer members. Many sisters are intentionally and explicitly reaching out to welcome and to mentor newer members. Women who enter our community are surrounded by a web of support. In addition to their formation director and the sisters with whom they live, new members are connected both to an older sister who serves as a motherhouse companion and to another local community of sisters that invites the newer member in for dinner and prayer at least once a month. In addition, a Pennsylvania-based community has created a formal mentorship program for its sisters under temporary vows. The program, designed to support each sister in her transition from initial formation to final vows, includes monthly meetings, quarterly discussions on books related to religious life, and an annual gathering of the entire mentorship team. Perhaps even more important are the less formal interactions. I was walking down the main hall of our motherhouse recently when one of our retired sisters stopped me, put her hands on my shoulders, and said, "I just want you to know that I pray for you and the other young sisters every day."

4. We're creating new forms of collaboration. Many communities are forming federations and finding other ways to collaborate. Many of the communities that trace their roots to Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac and Elizabeth Ann Seton have formally joined together as the Charity Federation. Leaders, formation personnel and women in initial formation in these communities gather regularly to celebrate, to get to know one

another, to share stories and best practices, and to plan for the future. As individual communities get smaller, we find strength in one another.

5. We started small. It is easy to look back longingly to the 1950s and 1960s when communities welcomed dozens of young women each year, but it helps to remember that these days were the exception, not the rule, in the history of religious life. Most communities started when a few dedicated, courageous people heard a call and stepped out in faith to meet a need. When our community first arrived in 1858 in what was then the Kansas Territory, there were five sisters, a novice, two postulants and an orphan girl. Our call is to be faithful to God and to God's people, and that doesn't depend on big numbers.

6. There is still work to be done. I had the opportunity recently to gather with a number of young adults who work in Catholic health care in the United States. As we visited, one of the women said to me, "I'm glad there are some young sisters out there. It's so important for sisters to be in our

hospitals. It makes such a difference." I was stunned. I knew that a religious presence in the hospitals would be important to many people of my parents' and grandparents' generation, but I had no idea that people my age, in their 20s and 30s, cared one way or the other. But this woman's comments reminded me that we, as religious women, really do make a difference, not so much because of what we do but because of who we are.

7. It's all about God. Most importantly, I am hopeful about the future of religious life because it's more about God than it is about us. We see clearly that the Reign of God is not yet fully realized. We know that there is still much work to be done. In the end, though, it is God's work, not ours, and God will do it in God's own time. God is still in charge, and therein is the greatest hope of all. ■

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Dying and resurrection are central tenets of our faith. They are also central concepts in understanding religious life as it has waxed and waned over the centuries.

Religious life history and new membership through the lens of the paschal mystery

By JOEL RIPPINGER, OSB

THE CORPORATE WORLD DOES not have a monopoly on number-crunching and marketing. Communities of consecrated life are no less inclined to measure their success and influence by the numbers of members and the extent of their impact. Select any news story on consecrated life in the Catholic Church today, and the inevitable comparison will be made between the high-water mark of membership in the past and the current level, supplemented by statistics on the median age and diminished resources of a particular congregation or institute.

The result of such analysis is the creation of a skewed historical and spiritual model. It equates the most effective witness of religious in North America with the decades of the 1950s and 1960s when there was a huge influx of membership, marked at the same time by a pinnacle of respectability and accomplishment in the apostolic work and witness of religious communities. At the least, the filter of history and the lived experience of those who have bridged several generations can serve as a corrective to such a skewed model.

History recounts how consecrated life over the centuries has manifested a life cycle that is not unlike trajectories of other social institutions. Communities of men and women have emerged in response to particular needs of the society that surrounds them. Whether apostolic or contemplative, the shelf-life of these communities has been marked by the rise and fall of such historical forces as the black death in 14th-century Europe, the Protestant Reformation, the secularizing thrust of the Enlightenment, and the globalization and emergence of the Third World at the beginning of the third millennium.

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However there is a distinctive dimension to consecrated life that can help anyone who is attempting to analyze its historical course. That dimension is the theological filter of what Catholics call the paschal mystery. The underlying model of the paschal mystery is well-known to Catholic spirituality: the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus create a paradigm for every Christian. The course of progress on our pilgrimage to Christ's kingdom runs parallel with our capacity to identify with the process of transformation inherent in the paschal mystery. In unambiguous terms, the history of consecrated life shows the unvarying connection between charism and Christ's cross.

Martin Buber is quoted as having said that success is not a name of God. That may be an appropriate starting point for anyone who wants to measure the ability of consecrated life over the ages to witness to the paschal mystery. Whether it be the evangelical counsels or the signs of contradiction that take on different forms from one age to the next, the pattern of consecrated life's witness must in some clear way configure itself to the model of Christ's own kenotic, self-emptying love. At the heart of such a pattern rests the core Christian paradox of hope and new life emerging only from death, more precisely the dying to the illusory attractions of success and accomplishment offered by the dominant culture.

Signs of communities with paschal character

So what are the markers of communities that are stamped with this paschal character? Beyond any question, they must exhibit the **humility** of the Christ found in the famous Philippians hymn that begins, "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped...." (Philippians 2:6-11). This self-emptying act of solidarity with humankind has found an echo in every truly authentic transmitter of the charism of consecrated life: the life-long ego diminishment found in the ascetical regimen of the monastic

fathers and mothers of the desert, Francis' embrace of the leper and his throwing himself naked into the arms of the naked Christ, the radical self-emptying of Edith Stein and Maximilian Kolbe as they witnessed to the passion of Christ in the midst of scarred inhumanity and the banality of evil.

In our own time, such humility has had its individual exemplars, but I think it noteworthy that perhaps the single most formative event for effecting a collective self-emptying of religious in the United States has been the sexual abuse crisis. In a way that no spiritual formation programs could generate, the insistent media coverage of this crisis and the communal self-examination it has induced in communities of consecrated life has brought about a wholesale redefinition of the status and the acceptance of vowed religious in the wider context of contemporary culture. Though there was no denying the manner in which this crisis unveiled the dysfunctional culture of chanceries and clericalism in the diocesan priesthood, there was ample light to show that such dysfunctional qualities were present in communities of consecrated life. Press conferences with public apologies by religious superiors over community members implicated in sexual abuse had no precedent. Nor was there an historical counterpart to the formal expression of regret and apology given by a religious order in response to film *The Magdalene Sisters*. Neither example lessened the impact of loss of image and morale for religious life. The cumulative effect of this has been a redefined self-consciousness of personal sinfulness and vulnerability. The romanticized notion of religious as living life on a higher spiritual plane, removed from the demands and accountability of others, has been laid to rest in rather definitive fashion. In its place is a more transparently humble presence, devoid of the need to promote a sanitized witness of spiritual perfection, one that accepts its vulnerable and fragile humanity next to the self-emptying Christ.

Another dimension of this paschal character is a conscious sense of true **detachment** from so much of the conformity

exerted by the culture surrounding us. In a recent address to general superiors of institutes of consecrated life, Pope

Benedict XVI spoke

of how easily some communities today become caught in the snare of mediocrity, gentrification and a consumer mentality. Though he did not specifically mention historical examples, the Holy Father was no doubt mindful of the recurrent cycle in church history of religious orders whose spiritual vitality atrophied because they became increasingly identified with the lifestyle and worldview of the people around them. Just as the act of dying to self requires a decided act of the will to let go, so too the religious men and women of every age have been characterized by a sincere and clear renouncement of behaviors of the world and detachment from the message of a materialistic culture. Inculturation of the Gospel does not imply wholesale assimilation of the siren songs of the culture itself. Given the manner in which today's global village is saturated with the voices of that culture through modern media and technology, the challenge to resist such a lure is greater than ever. One cannot argue with the increase in numbers and morale in so many new religious institutes that embody radical renunciation and simplicity of life. A bourgeois or gentrified mode of living might still characterize some communities, but it is unlikely that such a witness will attract new members who are looking for a credible Gospel witness. Accommodation to prevailing cultural norms not only makes consecrated life less accountable to its mission, it robs it of its intended role as an independent voice that can hold others more accountable to the Gospel.

Yet another aspect of the paschal mystery that is central to the follower of Christ in any age is that of **suffering**. Suffering has formed an historical crucible for both individual religious and entire congregations. At times this suffering has been

The recurrent cycle in church history is of religious orders whose spiritual vitality atrophied because it had become increasingly identified with the lifestyle and worldview of the people around them.

concentrated in the experience of injustice, closely allied to the role of Jesus in his own passion. One thinks of the countless members of religious orders who were martyrs in the 20th century in Mexico and Spain, in Eastern Europe and Central America, as well as the poignant faith statement made by the Trappist monks of Tibhirine in the face of Algerian terrorists. Nor can one dismiss the suffering experienced by those who suffered the misunderstanding and mistreatment of their own community members: John of the Cross under house arrest and vilified by his peers for years, Hildegard of Bingen, Mary

Today suffering has an even greater potential witness power as it runs counter to the realms of media and advertising with their continual bombardment of messages telling us that pain and suffering are to be avoided at all costs.

Ward and numberless other women facing the suspicion and scrutiny of those who could not entertain a new way of witness. And of course there are the incredibly diverse historical narratives of founders facing privation and scorn, even as their faith attracted like-minded followers. Whatever the particular mode of suffering, when it was willingly embraced out of love for Christ and with trust in his promise, the fruits of such spiritual heroism were evident to all. Today suffering has an even greater

potential witness power as it runs counter to the realms of media and advertising with their continual bombardment of messages that pain and suffering are to be avoided at all costs. The path of the paschal mystery is a trail always marked by suffering as part of the itinerary.

Physical diminishment part of our suffering

One other aspect of suffering that is more pronounced today than ever is physical diminishment. In the chronicles of consecrated life over two millennia one can find eruptions of spiritual energy and growth, juxtaposed with failure and collapse. The suppression of the Jesuits in the 18th century and the elimination of religious houses throughout Europe at the time of the Napoleonic Wars stand in sharp contrast to the resurgence of numbers and renewal of life that followed a century later. Nor should one lose sight of the fact that one of

the obvious reasons for the ongoing influence of religious orders throughout history has been their linkage to the main currents of economic life in which they found themselves. For centuries, most of the major social service and educational institutions of society were identified with vowed men and women. One could indeed argue that a recurrent problem for many religious institutes throughout their history has been uncontrolled growth and over-expansion. Whether it was cataloged under brick and mortar complexes of buildings or the rank and file recruitment of new personnel, there was a presumption that ongoing growth was an inherent component of the life cycle of religious communities. Though that may still be the operative mode of a number of Asian and African communities, the reality today of North American and first world consecrated life is altogether different.

One of the most evident realities is that of a large aged and infirm population. The existence of infirmaries and an expanding segment of retired members living apart from the central community mark a novel challenge for the charism of consecrated life. On one level this is a penetrating instance of the paschal mystery at work. What appears to be nothing more than a medical stage of eldercare for some becomes, through the eyes of faith, the training ground for the last sequence of dying to new life. Moreover, many superiors of religious communities and many of the lay faithful are realizing the largely untapped reservoir of spiritual wisdom and experience that these community elders encompass. But the very real practical questions posed by the need to provide health care and allow meaningful participation of the aged in community activities are not easily solved. For those who have truly invested in the promise of the paschal mystery, however, there remains a conviction that we are most likely to be transformed, not when we find ourselves in a position of strength or power, but at our most fragile and weak.

The counterpart of this conviction on an institutional level is an understanding that the spiritual force of the charism of consecrated life is most likely to be felt when it acts from a base divested of authority and power. As many entities of consecrated life have divested themselves of buildings and properties and have gone through the trying process of conversion from large institutional apostolates, they have realized the freedom of acting from a base of powerlessness. For those who seek a prophetic stance for consecrated life, the physical diminishment of many communities will allow them to identify more readily with the marginalized and vulnerable sectors of the faithful. True to the words of the Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah, the more

religious are aware of their own inner poverty, the more they come to rely upon the God who called them.

Trust in the gift of consecrated life

Like all other charisms in the church, consecrated life is a gift. In *Vita Consecrata* Pope John Paul II underlined the importance of how it is a special gift of the Holy Spirit, one that joins its members in an intimate way with the sacrifice of Christ. The implication of this in terms of the paschal mystery should be evident. We are reminded in the liturgy of Pentecost Sunday that the Holy Spirit is sent to us in order to share more deeply the life of Jesus and so bring the paschal mystery to its completion. Rather than remain an elevated theological reference removed from the daily routine of vowed commitment, this sense of the gift of consecrated life is meant to be internalized in the life of every religious and implemented in the mission of every institute of consecrated life.

Two components of this process that have stamped the history of consecrated life are trust and hope. The trust of Jesus in the promise of the Father is enlarged and integrated in the trust of every person professing the evangelical counsels. “Uphold me as you have promised, and do not disappoint me in my hope” says one profession formula. It captures the essential attitude that has insured the staying power of consecrated life in the church. Moreover, far from moving its adherents to a point of honing survival skills or planning avenues for downsizing, it invites them to renew their hope in the promise. Like Jesus who endured the cross for the sake of the joy that lay before him (Hebrews 12:2), vowed men and women of every generation of Christians have served as beacons of hope as they undergo the transforming experience of the paschal mystery.

In short, just as the paschal mystery is at the heart of the Christian life, the profession of the evangelical counsels embraces that mystery at the heart of the church where Christ is still present. To do that today in an authentic fashion, consecrated men and women need to learn the lessons of history. If there is a category of spiritual success, it is not necessarily measured in numbers or material assets. Rather the indices of the paschal mystery played out suggest a more compelling prospect. A posture of humility is essential to such a prospect, as is a willingness to accept the graced potential of physical diminishment and suffering. The timeless tension of being in the world but not of the world will require today an emphatically contrasting witness to the popular culture, one that draws its

example and its strength from the pattern of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection. There is no better pattern to attract people of the present day, particularly when it is connected to communities that live as a sign of joyful hope in the midst of a world with heavy sadness. ■

A threefold formula has helped this vocation minister to thrive for a decade: a mixture of healthy living, spiritual groundedness and an ability to focus on signs of new life.

How I stay healthy and hopeful as a vocation minister

BY RENÉE DAIGLE, MSC

There is a line from our Marianites of Holy Cross constitutions that reads, “We accept the way of a pilgrim who lives on this earth with things unfinished, and we participate actively in the building of a kingdom which will be fully realized only in the world to come.” I have come to appreciate this sentence greatly during my 10 years of vocation ministry, and I use it as a personal mantra to keep me free when I am feeling pressured or am putting too much pressure on myself.

Before beginning vocation ministry I spent 10 years in early childhood education, most of those years in kindergarten. While teaching has its own challenges and is, I believe, one of the noblest professions of all, there is a rhythm to it. The first day of school was exciting every single year—a new beginning for everyone, another step on life’s journey with lots of unknowns to be discovered. And there was a felt sense of accomplishment every May at the close of the school year when I could recognize the children’s progress and growth since August. The above sentence from our constitutions sounded great in theory then, and it was obvious to me that the students were not “finished products” when they left my classroom, but there was a clear purpose to my ministry that was not questioned or challenged by anyone, and day-to-day life was more or less predictable. Vocation ministry has not only caused me to plumb the depths of my community’s “way of the pilgrim,” but it has caused me to reflect on every aspect of my life as a religious more frequently and more deeply than ever before.

When I was asked to become the director of vocation ministry for my congregation, I said yes enthusiastically and with hope, yet with lots of fear and trepidation as well. I had no clue

what this ministry actually meant and did not know where to begin. I laugh when I remember those first few weeks, feeling so “grown up” in an office instead of a classroom and not exactly knowing what to do with myself. After participating in the NRVC Orientation Program and receiving my Vocation Director’s Manual I had a much better idea of how to begin, not to mention enough reading material to last forever! I became active in my local NRVC Region 5 group and worked closely with our Marianite director of development, with whom I shared office space, to get our vocation promotion up and running again.

Very quickly I realized the aspects of vocation ministry that energize my personality—a flexible schedule (especially compared to school bells!), a variety of tasks, work with various age levels, journeys with women as they discern, and travel opportunities, to mention a few. I also realized very quickly the challenges to my own life that this ministry brings with it. Each time I tell my story to a group of young people, I renew my commitment, but at the same time I feel as if I am almost defending my life choice. Constantly explaining the various aspects of our life and the vows, answering the “what if” and “are you allowed to” questions, and dispelling the many myths and stereotypes that are still very much alive among young people can be emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausting. This can be especially draining when I don’t feel so excited about my life choice on a given day.

In the past 10 years many women have expressed interest in learning more about religious life, several of whom have seriously considered joining our congregation, and four of whom have actually entered. One of those four is with us today. If I let my effectiveness become defined by numbers or visible results of my ministry, I could very easily become depressed and lose all hope.

At times I find myself asking, “What am I really doing? Am I doing anything worthwhile? Does my ministry really matter? Are any “normal” young people being called to our

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way of life? How can I reach more people? How can I be “out there” more? What more can I offer people?” I have no doubt that these or similar questions plague most vocation ministers from time to time. It is in these times when the healthy habits we have cultivated can help us to maintain not only sanity, but hopefulness, faith, a positive focus, energy, enthusiasm and creativity for the life we have chosen and for the ministry we are both privileged to do and charged to do by our congregations.

Getting a perspective on my purpose

When I first began vocation ministry, it helped to make clear, for myself and for my community, that this ministry is much broader than recruiting for my congregation. If I can keep from becoming myopic and totally focused only on my own congregation, then I don't get weighed down by lack of candidates for entrance. One of my best “success stories” came from a young woman with whom I had journeyed for a couple of years. She ended up meeting “Mr. Right” and called me the day after she got engaged to make sure I put her wedding date on my calendar. Shortly thereafter I received a beautiful letter from her saying that had it not been for the time I spent with her during her discernment, she would not be able to say yes wholeheartedly to her marriage. I read that letter and thought, “OK, this is vocation ministry. She responded to where she felt God was calling her and she did it in a spirit of true discernment.” With her permission I shared part of her letter with my congregation, so that they, too, could recognize their part in her discernment. While she is not a Marianite today, I know that she has had a positive experience of religious life and will promote it in her own family and ministry.

I know that many vocation ministers feel pressure from their leadership or community members to have a certain number of candidates each year. I have to say that I am blessed in that both the leadership of my congregation and the sisters at large are extremely supportive of me in my ministry. At times

they ask how many young women are in discernment, yet it is out of genuine interest and hope rather than a numbers game. The “pressure” to encourage young people to consider our way of life and to find those numbers is not all on me—it is shared among the

entire congregation. I have often used the advice we learned in the NRVC Orientation Program. To the question by a community member, “How many do we have entering?” we vocation ministers respond, “How many did you send me?”

Hold tightly to God

As I mentioned earlier, vocation ministry has called me to deeper reflection in many respects. Being faithful to daily prayer and spiritual direction is my northern star on this pilgrim journey. In other ministries, our personal prayer and reflection nourish us for ministry and community life. In vocation ministry the ministry itself is a reflection of the life style we've chosen. It is a constant examination of and explanation of what we've committed to and why we've made that commitment. We are called to be “on” at all times, proclaiming the richness of religious life and witnessing to the joy of our commitment. While all religious should witness the joy of their commitment on a daily basis, this aspect is much more focused for us vocation ministers, and it is as if our ministry is to be “model” religious. No pressure at all! Holding tightly to the God who sustains me allows me to be authentic in my joy and in my witness.

In addition to my relationship with God, personal relationships with people who know me well and with whom I can be totally relaxed also allow me to “keep the faith” in

When I first began vocation ministry, it helped to make clear, for myself and for my community, that this ministry is much broader than recruiting for my congregation.

religious life and in vocation ministry. Friendships within community and outside of community, along with my family, are a vital part of who I am as a person, and while schedules can get a bit crazy at times, I find that when I do not take time to nourish myself through relationships that are important to me, my “*joie de vivre*” seems to dissipate. I need other “pilgrims” to both support me and challenge me to be my best self, and I need time for some serious heart-to-hearts, as well as some time with no purpose other than to enjoy the life God has given us.

At times, though, no matter how much others want to understand and support me in my ministry, only another vocation minister can truly understand. That is a main reason why I remain active in NRVC, both locally and nationally. Through this network I have built relationships with other vocation directors to whom I know I can turn if just for an ear

Vocation ministry is much bigger than anything I can ever do or be, and as soon as I realize that, I can begin to cooperate with God working in and through life’s events and in my encounters with young people.

to listen with complete understanding, and for whom I can be that listening ear when others need that from me. My six years on the NRVC National Board have afforded me not only the opportunity to serve on a broader level, but also a huge blessing of support and camaraderie. Other vocation ministers mirror to me the hope that we proclaim as disciples of Christ as we seek to develop creative and effective ways to minister.

Broad horizons

While technically I am in full-time vocation ministry, I have been involved over the years in many other things. Immediately before beginning vocation ministry I spent six months in Nicaragua helping to begin a center for street children there. I have been blessed to return there annually with groups of college students and educators, providing them with a cross-cultural experience which, for many, has proven to be positively life-altering for them, as well as for some of their students. I earned a master’s degree in education and am now completing a master’s in pastoral studies, both of which have served me well in vocation ministry, besides furthering my education for the future. I also serve on the Board of Regents for our congregation’s college,

Our Lady of Holy Cross, here in New Orleans. I cite these involvements to say that I need interests other than vocation ministry in which to devote my time and attention. If I stay too narrowly focused on the notion of discernment and recruitment, I may lose track of the bigger picture of religious life in general. It may seem hard to make the connection, but somehow being involved in venues other than direct vocation ministry extends my ministry and helps me to stick with it when the vocation picture seems bleak.

The next few aspects of how I maintain hope while ministering with things unfinished and for a Kingdom which will only be fully realized in the world to come may appear obvious. Yet sometimes the obvious needs to be stated. I believe exercise and healthy eating habits are essentials, not only to vocation ministry, but to life in general. The fact that there is hardly a routine to our life as vocation ministers sometimes makes these difficult to manage, but I have a much better outlook on life when I feel good physically. A sense of humor is another necessity if one is to remain in vocation ministry for any length of time. This seems to come easily for the vocation ministers I know, as there is never a dearth of funny stories going around the circle. Ours is a serious ministry and one with heavy responsibilities, but unless we can take it lightly enough, we will drown. And finally, it is important for me to notice the times when I can actually see what I have done, be it in ministry or otherwise. There is something about that sense of accomplishment that comes from designing an ad or brochure and seeing it in print, presenting a meal I’ve cooked, completing a candidate’s application packet to present to the leadership team, or, as has happened recently, seeing the shoe molding that I measured, cut and nailed on the floors in our new home. We do so much in vocation ministry, but rarely do we get the satisfaction of seeing our work. Everyone may not need that, but it sure does me good!

I coached volleyball for a couple of years, and there was a prayer we recited before each game that has become very special to me: “I am one and only one. I cannot do everything but I can do something. What I can do, I ought to do, and by the grace of God I will do.” Vocation ministry is much bigger than anything I can ever do or be, and as soon as I realize that, I can begin to cooperate with God working in and through life’s events and in my encounters with young people. When I try to be in control of it all and have things orchestrated according to my plan is exactly when I seem to be the most stressed, anxious and discouraged. My charge is to remain attuned to God’s grace and guidance in my life and to respond as best I can in faith, in

community life, in personal relationships and in my ministry. Only then can God work in and through me most effectively, even through the most unlikely of circumstances.

Katrina's winds are a reminder

No one orchestrated or ordered the devastating hurricanes that wrecked the Gulf Coast region last August and September. There were times when it seemed all hope was gone, and the people would never come back. I live in New Orleans, and I came back to the city for the first time on September 3, 2006 to find what seemed like total devastation. My calendar had been full of appointments, meetings, retreats, and other vocation-ministry events, and every single one of them from August 28th through November 8th was canceled. As the days, weeks and months went by and we did what we could day by day to resurrect our lives and our city, some of those questions stirred in me again—"How does my ministry matter? How does my life matter? What is really important? What do I really need to do?"

Caring for residents of a nursing home with whom I had evacuated and eventually being present to them and their families in other facilities, listening to stories of the rescue workers who had occupied our college building, sharing stories with other residents of this area, being an "MSC Mover," packing the belongings of our sisters who could not return to New Orleans and delivering them, and cleaning out refrigerators were some of the ways I spent my time. Not exactly vocation ministry, but survival was the common vocation of us all in those days!

I have come to learn that the real grace in any suffering is to see the life that can come from it. As a Marianite, I am called to stand united with Mary at the foot of the cross, but always pointing beyond the cross and suffering to the resurrection and new life. It has been amazing to me to see the signs of life and hope and the power of the human spirit amid the frustrations and destruction all around us. I can hear God saying, "I have put before you life and death. Choose life!" There are ample instances of both life and death around here these days, and I can choose where I put my focus. I choose to take note of the life and hope that abound against all odds. The fact that people genuinely want to spend time together, that Mardi Gras and JazzFest happened—both successfully, that college students from every state are spending their free time helping in the clean up, that there are children's voices in the city again, that the flowers this spring were more beautiful than ever, that people are

genuinely happy to see their neighbors return, that people are working to save their neighborhoods, churches and schools are obvious signs to me of God's grace, presence and action alive and well in this area that has been changed forever.

There is for me a parallel between the reality of religious life and the situation in the Gulf south. While religious life did not experience a hurricane, it has been in a state of transition since Vatican II. There are statistics and stories everywhere pointing to the demise and pending death of religious life as we know it. I can choose to focus on the death or on the life. Just as New Orleans and other surrounding cities are rebuilding and striving to be something new, religious life is evolving into something new as well. In neither instance can we see into the future as to what that new life will be, but if we continue to follow God's lead individually and collectively, new life will follow what may become the death of religious life as we now know it.

Just as New Orleans and other surrounding cities are rebuilding and striving to be something new, religious life is evolving into something new as well.

How can we maintain hope in vocation ministry? I believe it is to maintain hope in life itself. As long as we believe in and respond to God's providence and sustaining grace working in and through us, we will continue to participate actively in a Kingdom which will be fully realized only in the world to come, discovering it, living it, loving it as we go along our pilgrim way. ■

A seasoned vocation minister tells how he has watered a wellspring of hope through 12 years of ministry.

Hope from the trenches

By JIM KENT, OFM, CONV.

LAST YEAR I RAN INTO an acquaintance whom I had met while working in vocations in the mid-1990s. It didn't take long before he asked what ministry I was in now. As I began to respond a look of horror flushed his face. "You're not still in vocations!"

I was, and still am. Twelve years now and going strong. Sometimes the thought of it surprises me, but I still find the ministry exhilarating and fulfilling—though it certainly has its challenges.

Pressures and disappointments

Vocation work is a most unusual ministry. Unique, fickle, and seemingly—unfairly—measurable. Rarely does one have the ready-made skills to do it. Who joins a religious congregation so one day he or she can be a vocation director? And it's one of the few ministries that has all sorts of internal and external pressures. Vocation ministers are acutely accountable to both leadership and membership: How many do you have for this year? You want what for a budget? For many it involves constant travel: I've woken up more than once not knowing where I was or the day of the week—all while trying to promote a rooted communal life. That's not to mention a few speeding tickets (note: see budget line item 20c). Numerous times I've had to be the bearer of disappointing news to one very interested in religious life but, ultimately, not cut out for it. Some of these have been obvious, but some have been borderline, which made it all the more difficult. I've had countless no-shows and

unreturned phone calls and emails. I had one person (discerned, applied, presented, accepted) not show up to begin formation. Of course, some joined (rightly or wrongly) other orders/dioceses or opted for single or married life, some left while in formation, and some could just never come to a decision. But others—though it seems never enough—have stayed and thrived and brightened the future.

So much of disappointment springs from rejection. Rejection has been the constant demon that lurks at every turn and communication. "No, I'm not interested in you, your community, religious life, or even a church vocation." At times it even comes from your own membership: "You vocation ministers are always asking me to do something. Enough already." It's so easy to take the rejection personally. One fall a vocation director told me with great confidence he had five who would be applying in the spring. Not one did, and he was crushed. Absolutely crushed.

All vocation ministers have similar stories and experiences. But how do we move beyond the heartaches and setbacks and strike a balance? How can we remain hopeful without becoming cynical and jaded? How can we not only survive this vital ministry but also thrive in it?

Staying hopeful and positive in vocation ministry is an absolute and is rooted, I think, in our faith. No matter how difficult and frustrating things become, we know that Good Friday always leads to Easter resurrection. No matter how much rejection or disappointment we endure, at the end of time we know God wins. We are part of the "living stones" upon which the Kingdom rests, but the final outcome is already settled. Over the years I have often used the life of Jesus as a guidepost for my ministry. Healing and miracles happen, great teachings and insights are revealed, deceit and abandonment occur, cultural factors and powers work against him, but as St. Paul says, "when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 10) It is the Jesus story and my story. Sometimes in a culture of success and self

Jim Kent, OFM Conv. is a Conventual Franciscan Friar. He has been in full-time vocation ministry for more than 12 years. An academic background in mass communications, English and journalism along, with seven years in sales management and recruitment has helped. The rest is pure grace.

determination we think we are immune to such things, but we never are. Sure, we're doing the work of the Lord, but so was Jesus.

To put yourself in a good mind-set for vocation ministry also involves the realization that this is not "your" ministry. It's "our" ministry. It's the responsibility of the entire congregation of which you are the prime animator. When the burden is solely on your shoulders, you and your community are poised for failure. This ministry is much more effective the more membership is involved. There are more of them to ask someone, "Have you ever considered religious life?" and more of them to follow up with contacts and invite them into the life of the congregation. It's never how many do you have joining us this year, but how many "we" have. The community shares the good and not-so-good news and thereby offers more encouragement and support.

Vocation ministry is just that, a ministry. Its purpose is to help others discover, nurture and follow their call in life. It might be to your community or somewhere else. The most important element is to help them go where they need to go. I liken it to a patient coming to a physician for a consult. At times the doctor may have what they need, and at other times they are referred to another specialist who might better help them. I have encouraged some in discernment to check out a diocese, another congregation, sometimes to visit a career counselor. While the ministry does have some elements in common with the world of sales (and these can well help us in our work), we are not trying to make sales like a realtor or a stock broker. We are aiding someone who is discerning God's call in their life and not our desire to have more members.

Staring down the odds

Odds are about numbers, and I find numbers boring. But understanding the impact of numbers can keep a vocation minister hopeful. Marketers who run advertising campaigns

will point out that often a successful effort will yield less than 1 percent return. For every thousand people reached, less than ten will respond

with a purchase. Imagine that in vocation terms. You would make a hundred phone calls, emails or other contacts and be successful if just one person responded affirmatively. I once read that military recruiters had to make 325 phone calls to get one person to come to the recruiting station and sign up. There is a certain science to promoting vocations that tells us the more contacts we make, the more prospects (those interested in religious life in general) we'll have, the more prime prospects (those interested in our congregation and us in them) we'll have, the more who might apply for admissions, the more who might enter formation, the more who will take temporary vows, the more who will take final vows, the more who will live their life as a healthy, productive religious. We can do certain things to help increase those odds, i.e., better promotion plans, better formation programs, a more dedicated and committed congregation, but in the end it is still, in part, a numbers game. I don't mean to be crass about that, but I believe over the long term, the law of averages evens things out. And that can be liberating. This isn't meant to reduce people to numbers but to realize the more people we can bring into discernment, the more who will likely join religious life. We may beat the odds one year (fewer prime prospects, more new members) or the odds may beat us (more prime prospects, fewer new members), but I know it will eventually balance out.

Setting realistic goals is the counterpoint to numbers. I find goals essential for vocation ministry and the well-being of the vocation director. There are many ways to go about establishing goals. I have found that setting a goal for the number of "prime

Vocation ministry's purpose is to help others discover, nurture and follow their call in life. It might be to your community or somewhere else. The most important element is to help them go where they need to go.

prospects” is the most productive and motivating for me and the province. The more prime prospects we can attain, the more people who will apply. I do not set a goal for new members each year, so we will not be tempted to perhaps rush someone along in order to meet the goal. Finding a way to set reasonable goals will help keep you and your congregation focused. It helps put things in perspective, keeps you from getting discouraged, and gives an ongoing measure how things are going for the year. This helps prevent unwelcome surprises and the false hope that resides in unformed and unmeasurable goals.

Perspective helps

There have been days and weeks when I’ve felt everything is falling apart. Disappointments and pressures have swelled and choked me. I think I’m not being appreciated, and no one knows what I’m going through. Sound familiar? (While writing this article, two men in serious discernment had to suspend their applications; it was the right thing to do, but I still wanted to scream!) At these times I try to step back and see the big picture.

First, even though promoting vocations in North America seems like such a fruitless and daunting task, there are other areas of the world that are doing quite well. I find this extremely heartening. Second, though the challenge of promoting vocations in the 21st century can seem insurmountable, we are laying groundwork that others will learn from in the future. Our successes and failures will be a guide to future vocation ministers, here and abroad. Third, due to the demographics of religious and priests, our generation is called to do various ministries, i.e. vocations, formation, for a longer period of time. That’s just the reality of the situation. Other generations have faced different obstacles in their day, and this is ours. Having this historical perspective brings me solace. Finally, acknowledging this is a very difficult and yet crucial ministry makes me want to take it on all the more. To battle cultural and church issues, to overcome family and faith matters so that the Gospel may be better served is well worth the heartache. When I stand back and take it all in, I realize this needs to be done, and I’ve been asked to do it. I don’t want a ministry that’s easy but something that challenges me. I know that God walks behind, in front and beside me. So bring it on, even when it hurts.

To do vocation ministry for any length of time one needs to cultivate a support network. I have been very involved with the other Conventual Franciscan vocation directors in North America. We meet three or four times a year to collaborate and commiserate, to pray and recreate and to share our common—

and uncommon—experiences of this ministry. I know other vocation ministers who are active in metro, diocesan or regional groups and, of course, many take part in the various NRVC regions. These connections and support are essential to be a healthy and happy vocation director.

I also attend a biennial conference of Franciscan vocation directors from five English-speaking countries. The exchange is enlightening and the fraternity uplifting. Lastly, I attend NRVC-sponsored workshops and the group’s biennial convocation, again to learn more and to share the bond of this unique ministry with others involved in it.

Finding contentment and satisfaction

I’ve learned to make all the travel as enjoyable as possible. Whether listening to music on a plane or in a car, reading or listening to books, talking on the phone to family friends—all this makes the travel more comfortable and less a chore. It also makes me less frustrated when planes run late and traffic is snarled and stopped. Of course, laptops and wireless have made it so easy to keep up with work that I no longer come home and have to “dig out” my desk.

Having a local community to come home to for rest, affirmation and prayer has been important to my overall health and longevity. This is a group of friars with whom I can share my struggles and pleasures, my restlessness and rooted-ness, my hopes and prayers. It’s such a comfort to know they pray for me when I am not there. Having a spiritual director to keep me on track and remind me that there’s more to life than my ministry is a blessing as well.

Finally I’ve often thought of a lyric from an old John Mellencamp song: “If you’re goin’ stick around here, you better make yourself some real good friends.” I have certainly counted on my friends to at times lift me up and other times ground me, to encourage and affirm, and to offer some ports of refuge. Perhaps good friends are a necessity for any way of life, but I’ve certainly found them a needed balm while I’ve journeyed these many miles promoting vocations.

I do find hope and even joy in vocation ministry. I’ve seen those who approached me about a religious vocation end up getting married and having children. Some are still out there discerning. One of the first people I worked with in discernment all those years ago has made final vows, been ordained for a couple of years and is slated, in 18 months, to take my place. I’m not begging to leave the ministry, but it will definitely be time. And I’m happy for him and me. And for the church. ■

When a sister is asked to explain her life, she sees anew the value of living with a group whose main purpose is to be “the life of God in the world.”

Would life on this planet be any different without religious life?

BY ANNMARIE SANDERS, IHM

A YOUNG WOMAN CONSIDERING religious life recently wrote to me, “Choosing religious life today is a tough decision. Although I’m drawn to this life, I keep wondering what its purpose is in the world. Would life on this planet be any different with or without religious life?”

Her question startled me. I found myself carrying her note with me, hoping to be inspired with a sensible answer that I could share with her. Her question was one that I knew was deeply lodged within me, but one that I unconsciously silenced. Suddenly, it was begging for a response. I wondered how I could answer this question first of all for myself. What if I thought it through and concluded that religious life had little value for the future life of the world? What would I do with that? And then what would I say to this young woman sincerely searching for her own path in life? Could I share my own answers with her with honesty and integrity? What follows here is my written response to her.

Coming home to God

Forgive me for taking so long to answer your recent letter. Part of me felt foolish not having any answer to give you right off the bat. Here I am, having given so much of my own time and energy to furthering religious life, and I couldn’t readily articulate its value. It turns out that your question stimulated much thought.

I think you know that I have long been taken with the observation of Meister Eckhart: “Before I became one thing, I was

the life of God.” I believe that Eckhart’s wisdom is right on target. Our journey through life in this world is one of coming back to God and of becoming more deeply one with God. I see religious life as making the purpose of that journey explicit. Religious are called to assist the world to make the journey with open eyes and a compassionate heart.

So many times I have heard you say, “I want something more in this life. Something is missing in what I have experienced so far.” I think that you are naming what so many of us in religious life feel. Shaun McCarty, ST describes this as “an inborn thirst, hunger, restlessness that only God can fill.” We both know how tempting it is to fill hunger and thirst with other things. Our world provides limitless filler options. And I think we both know that so many of those options never seem to satiate the thirst. It persists with a vengeance.

Religious give their lives to the pursuit of this desire for oneness with God and thus with all of creation. I believe we receive the desire for a purpose much larger than ourselves. Staying faithful and centered on this journey for union is what makes our hearts tender and expands our capacity for loving. It is what makes for the creation of a more compassionate world.

This is not to say that vowed religious have a market on the spiritual journey. However, that complete fidelity to journeying precisely as communities with hearts and minds attuned to God may be our unique call. This is a fidelity to exquisitely attentive listening, to dreaming the unimaginable, to searching with honesty—in short, to a great communitarian spiritual adventure. This fidelity leads us to a deep seeing of the truth of what is and moves us to dive fearlessly into the realm of possibilities.

Does our planet need this? I would answer with an unequivocal yes. The world needs communities of people who are willing to see what is and what is meant to be. The world needs religious communities that are willing to listen for what God desires for the world and courageously name those desires and act upon them.

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I can hear you saying now, “How can any of us know what God’s desires are?” I am not sure of that answer, but I do trust the insight of the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* who wrote, “It is not what you are nor what you have been that God sees with all-merciful eyes, but what you desire to be.” I believe that there is a close correlation between our desires and God’s desires for us. A large part of the mission of a religious community is to listen closely to others, to help them to see themselves as God sees them, and then to discover the correlation between their desires and God’s desires for them. This is how I believe we become “more the life of God.”

Sometimes I wonder about how well we listen—to God, to others, to our own hearts. Slowing down to listen closely and deeply is a true discipline today. The frenetic pace of our lives can make deep listening and authentic seeing major challenges. But perhaps at no other time in history has our world needed communities who choose to live contemplatively, recognizing that their thoughts, actions, choices and relationships affect the whole of the planet.

The world needs hope, and we need to see that hope embodied in the realities of this world. The world needs to be able to perceive God in brokenness—in the victims of war and violence, in the midst of crushing oppression, in the broken bodies of the destitute.

I believe that now more than ever we need to live as Tilden Edwards has called us to live: “appreciating the beauty

and wonder inherent in a world soaked in mysterious divine energy.” With so much stimulation around us that can distract us from this beauty and wonder, we need people who will slow down and call others to slow down and take in the world around us.

I believe that the world today needs communities committed fully to a “mystical life,” persons who communally search for the presence of the Divine even in the dark. The world needs hope, and we need to see that hope embodied in the realities of this world. The world needs to be able to perceive God in brokenness—in the victims of war and violence, in the midst of crushing oppression, in the broken bodies of

the destitute. We need communities committed to the type of mysticism described by William Johnston, SJ, one that “demands a loss of self and that leads to spontaneous and compassionate movement toward the underprivileged, the poor, sick and imprisoned.” The world needs communities whose very being reflects the conflicts and sufferings of the world in which they live. As Johnston says, “that world vibrates within them, they breathe its air, they feel its frustrations, they carry its cross.” This call to mysticism is at the heart of religious life.

Sometimes I wonder if religious life was just a way of being that was needed in the past. I think about this when I look at what the members of religious congregations in the United States were doing throughout the 1900s. They were serving unmet needs. When public services were not sufficient to meet the population’s needs for education, healthcare, social services and pastoral care, religious came forth and executed tremendous works. They built the largest private school system in the country. They founded hundreds of hospitals. They sought out people in need in some of the most remote areas of this country and beyond.

But, is this why religious life is needed today? Is its primary purpose to respond to unmet service needs? Maybe. But I also think that religious life is needed for more than just the work that religious do. I think that religious are needed right now precisely because of the situation described so powerfully by Constance FitzGerald, OCD in her well-known essay on impasse. She writes that “in the United States we can find no escape from the world we have built. The poor and the oppressed cry out, the earth cries out. We are not educated for impasse. We dare not let the full import of the impasse even come to consciousness. We give in to a passive sense of inevitability and imagination dies. Everything seems too complex, too beyond our reach.”

Perhaps at no other time has our society more needed imagination and creativity. We are often stuck in thinking in old ways and working out of paradigms that no longer fit our realities. I truly believe that religious life can unleash the kind of wild imagining that is needed to see new ways of being and acting. The world needs this wild imagining around questions like: How can we provide healthcare for all people? How can we live on the earth in a way that protects all life? How can we govern nations more justly? How can we resolve conflicts nonviolently? How can we assure that all people are fed adequately and have housing? The future of our world depends on creative answers to these and so many more questions.

Now it is true there are and will probably continue to be

individuals who dream and imagine new ways of being. This kind of seeing, imagining and creating, however, can be lonely, misunderstood and hard to put into action on one's own. Religious life brings together the dreamers and provides a space where we can vision and act together. Seekers and imaginative dreamers need companionship. We also need the sustenance that companionship provides for the drier, darker times. The sharing of dreams and visions significantly increases the communal potential to make a difference in the world.

Dreamers and imaginers are needed so that we can also tap more fully into a whole other realm of communication that goes beyond what we understand at only the human, conscious level. Tilden Edwards describes that level this way: "The core dimension of our true identity and being, our soul, can interact with other souls at a level deeper than our conditioned psyches. Each such exchange reverberates the divine blessing among us. We would be surprised to know what our souls are saying to one another. Our deepest communication is only vaguely perceptible to our minds." I believe the world needs religious life as a communal center where we can more fully explore this mysterious communion and boundless resource: centers where religious delve more deeply into this mystery, so that divine blessings could be spread abundantly to all parts of our world.

A world without religious life

This has become a long answer to your important question: Would life on this planet be any different with or without religious life? I think that without the communitarian context of religious life, the earth would be much poorer in terms of living into all that God provides. Without religious life, the world would be poorer in terms of imagination, creativity, insight, wisdom, and the courage it takes to act corporately upon all that comes to us through listening and prayer. I think that without the power unleashed by communal imaginers and dreamers, the world might simply miss some of the beauty, mystery and wonder of life as God has given it to us.

So, is it worth giving your life today to the mission and vision of religious life? I would answer that with a question. Is it worth trying to be more the life of God in this communal lifestyle?

Years ago when life actually seemed a bit calmer, Thomas Kelly wrote, "Strained by the mad pace of life, we are further strained by an inward uneasiness because we have hints that there is a way of life vastly richer and deeper than this hurried existence." Today the pace of life has only grown madder, and so

the need for religious life grows stronger. My vision for religious life is one that taps into the inward uneasiness of the world and explores its possibilities. I dream of a religious life that corporately fosters greater exploration of the work of the Divine in the lives of all people. I dream of a religious life that helps the world listen more carefully to the faint whispers of God's desires for it, whispers that can be easily drowned out by other louder voices that clamor for our attention.

As the world globalizes, we will grow in our awareness of the myriad cultures and religious traditions that influence the world community. I dream of a religious life that helps all to see how these influences shape us. Religious life can help the world be conscious of the multiplicity of ways of perceiving life and draw the wisdom of those perspectives into our awareness.

I always fear becoming satisfied with what we already know of God and life. Andrew Hamilton warns, "Familiarity with God is ambiguous. It can mark the domestication of God and of human loving, which are properly wild." In a world that searches hard and long to solve mysteries, how do we accept the mystery and wildness of God? I dream of a religious life that helps us be open to God's unpredictable presence and perhaps unimaginable action in our lives.

Good questions can confound, stun, amaze, perplex and even irritate us. Yours did that for me. It caused me to examine my own life and commitment and to ask what I hope for its future. It led me back to this quote from Arundhati Roy who wrote, "Not only is another world possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." Thank you for reminding me to dream again for this new world and to slow down to listen for her breath. I don't want to miss it. Perhaps you hear it too. ■

Without the communitarian context of religious life, the earth would be much poorer in terms of living into all that God provides. Without religious life, the world would be poorer in imagination, creativity, insight, wisdom, and the courage it takes to act corporately upon all that comes to us through listening and prayer.

HORIZON Index 2005-2006

Vocation realities around the world, Fall 2005, Volume 31, Number 1

"How importing foreign-born members is affecting vocation ministry and the U.S. church," by David B. Couturier, OFM Cap, p. 3

"Nigeria: plentiful candidates bring blessings and challenges," by Rita Schwartzenberger, OP, p. 10

"Obstacles and successes in British vocation ministry, by Cath Lloyd, RSCJ and Paul Smyth," CMF, p. 16

"Great rivers of grace: vocation ministry in the Amazon region of Brazil, by Nancy Schramm," OSF, p. 21

"Vocation ministry in Canada today," by Susan Kidd, CND, p. 26

"Challenges and successes of vocation ministry in Australia, by Mary Ryan," RSJ, p. 29

"A brief overview of vocation ministry in Japan, by Ward Biddle," CP, p. 34

"Vocation realities for one religious order in Ivory Coast," by Joseph Tanga-Koti, SMA, p. 36

Health issues in prospective members, Winter 2006, Volume 31, Number 2

"How to evaluate candidates with chronic health issues," by Myles N. Sheehan, SJ, M.D., p. 3

"Ethical issues raised by candidates with health concerns," by Thomas N. Nairn, OFM and Dawn Nothwehr, OSF, p. 8

"Living religious life with chronic illness," by Mary Therese Johnson, OP, p. 13

"What canon law says about health concerns in prospective members," by Eileen C. Jaramillo, p. 17

"Developing admissions policies regarding HIV," by Jon Fuller, SJ, M.D., p. 20

"How MS or epilepsy could affect a candidate to religious life," HORIZON interviews Daniel R. Wynn, M.D. and Cathy Meyer, R.N., p. 28

"Mobility issues in prospective members of a religious community," by Louis Lussier, OSCam, M.D., p. 31

"Chronic back pain and the capacity to live religious life," by Daniel Hurley, M.D., p. 35

Theology and culture of vocation, Spring 2006, Volume 31, Number 3

"Forming a vocation culture since the Continental Congress," by Father Raymond Lafontaine, p. 3

"Two programs that further a vocation culture," by Father Raymond Lafontaine, p. 13

"Theology of vocation from a liturgical perspective," by Gil Ostdiek, OFM, p. 16

"Here I am!' Call in the Old Testament," by Dianne Bergant, CSA, p. 21

"Call and commission in the New Testament," by Jerome H. Neyrey, SJ, p. 25

"Theology of vocation through the centuries," by Paul Holland, SJ, p. 31

"Ready? Set... GOD!' Introducing high school students to prayerful discernment for life choices," by Pat Dorobek, SND; Leanne Kerschner, OSF/T; Sandy Sherman, OSU; and Randy Kin, OFM Conv., p. 36

Variety issue, Summer 2006, Volume 31, Number 4

"Sustainability: new membership through an ecological lens," by Mary Pellegrino, CSJ, p. 3

"Grow up? Not so fast," by Lev Grossman, p. 12

"Moving from inquirer to applicant," by Anita Louise Lowe, OSB, p. 19

"Lessons for vocation ministers from RCIA," by Joel Schorn, p. 23

"Creating a welcoming community that can help form new members," by Kenneth O'Malley, CP, p. 28

"Process for preparing a community to welcome and mentor new members," by Carole Riley, CDP, p. 31

"Vitality of mission encourages a vocation culture," by Father Raymond Lafontaine, p. 36

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