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Vocations and community life

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Living together, bumping up against each other and inviting a new generation

There are days when I wonder if my life's vocation as a married laywoman is a giant mistake. I've been known to mutter that it might be easier to pick up dying people from the streets of Calcutta than to deal with my ornery children for one more minute. (And I suspect they have moments when they feel the same about living with me!)

The uncomfortable truth is that faithfulness in any vocation will test our limits. It's hard to live in community. Whether the "community" is a family, a parish, or a religious community, rubbing shoulders every day will sometimes rub us raw. Wear us out. Call for depths of self-sacrifice that we never signed on for.

Some friends of mine decided to adopt three foster children. They had already raised several birth children and fostered dozens of others. Not long after the adoption, they found out their new 7-year-old son was bi-polar. He hallucinated. He threw horrible fits. He completely disrupted their family life. But they love him, and so they have struggled through trial runs of various medications, visits to the mental health center and meetings with support groups. Living "in community" with this son has turned out to be far more difficult than they ever expected when they signed on as adoptive parents. And yet they seem to love their vocation as parents.

I'm guessing that vocation ministers—while enjoying the tremendous blessings of community

life—have also experienced moments when living in a religious community is just plain hard. Any kind of honest living together is bound to bring difficulties because we are fallible human beings. Living closely means we bump up against each other; we reflect the best of each other and the worst of each other.

To keep an honest marriage and family, I have to evaluate whether I'm living "in community" well. Do I practice what I preach? So, too, for religious communities. To usher in a new generation, it's necessary for religious to ask if they are living community well. What does their particular communal life say to candidates? Our authors in this edition of HORIZON have asked that question and many others relevant to community life and the next generation of religious. In addition to our community-theme articles, we also present follow-up to the "Dimensions of Diversity" Convocation and a program outline for conducting retreats with the growing population of Hispanic young adults.

None of our authors promises that religious-community life will be easy. Only that it's worth it. Julie Brandt, SSND is clear that community living has been a deeply rewarding way of life. "What remains most true," she writes, "is that community has been a living, dynamic experience of growth into greater wholeness and holiness for me as I journey with my sisters in mission."

—*Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor*

What do we mean by community? What do candidates dream about?

by Gaston Lessard, SM

Talk about religious life and it won't be long before you talk about community. Community is at the heart of the actual life of most religious. People who are thinking of becoming religious have expectations about it as part of their future. For those who assess candidates, the ability to live in community ranks high among the topics they want to explore. In dealing with religious life, you cannot escape talking about community.

The problem arises when you try to pin down what you mean by community. The word calls up a great variety of images, accompanied by a wide gamut of feelings. The experience of male religious (to keep to what I am more familiar with) could often be summed up in the reflection of Father Urban, the man on the road in J. F. Powers' 1963 novel, *Morte d'Urban*, "Father Urban felt that a little bit of community life could go a long way with him." More recent statistics confirm that many still share Father Urban's assessment. A Canadian teaching brother was telling me last December that in his province, whereas 26 percent of those who left in the past did so because of chastity, in the last 10 years 27 percent left because of community life.

What community life has been for the people who have experienced it has a lot to do with what candidates expect from it. Disillusionment may not be inevitable, but it obviously lurks as a possibility. Religious have had their experiences and have drawn their own conclusions. Can we help candidates avoid the pitfall of misplaced hopes? How can vocation directors better assess the potential ability of candidates to live community life? How can formation directors help young religious focus on skills for community life? I suggest that how we talk about community now is crucial to how we will feel about it later. A clear understanding will favor realistic expectations.

To help me discipline my own talk about community life, I find it useful to decree for myself that there exist three worlds within the realm of "community"; they are overlapping but distinct from each other (see the accompanying diagram on page 4). Community talk may refer to any of the three, but I need to know which. These are community, common life, and communion. Community is a very broad concept that belongs to the realms of sociology and psychology; common life is a much more precise requirement of Church law regarding religious life; communion is a faith reality.

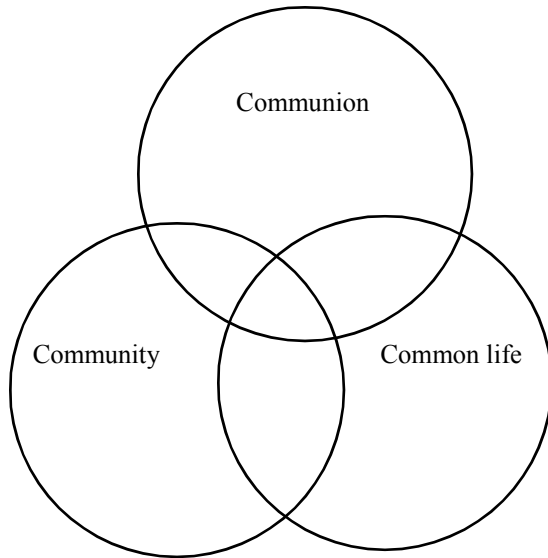
Community as a psychosocial reality

Among religious, the word community may be used loosely to refer to groups ranging from three to several thousand persons: from a local community or a house to the membership of an entire congregation. When religious use the word community, however, they rarely think only of numbers. Community life, community prayer, community spirit, refer to deeper and more elusive realities, and these, in turn, evoke strong feelings. But then religious are far from being the only ones who dream of community. The word is used constantly in sociology, anthropology, and psychology. There, too, it carries heavy emotional baggage. It could hardly be otherwise, since it touches the very heart of the human person.

In common parlance, as distinct from the language

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used by religious, community is best described in contrast to society. A society is a group of people who choose to work together for a common purpose: it is voluntary, it is limited to a certain set of activities, it is oriented to an end. The American Medical Association and the local bridge club fit that description. The Ger-



mans call it *Gesellschaft*. A community (*Gemeinschaft* in German) is spontaneous, it embraces the person as a whole, and it does not seek any particular purpose. A society is not open to everyone: you need to meet conditions, you pay dues, you are valued according to what you contribute to the group's pursuits. In a community like a village, it is enough to exist in order to belong, you are accepted as a person, whether you are a doctor or the village idiot.

"Community is a vague term, loaded with history, moral connotations, nostalgia, and romanticism" (Blakely and Snyder, 1997, p. 32). Twenty-five years earlier, Charles Abrams made a similar statement when he concluded his definition of community as follows: "Community, finally, is that mythical state of social wholeness in which each member has his place and in which life is regulated by cooperation rather than by competition and conflict. It has had brief and intermittent flowerings through history but always seems to be in decline at any given historical present. Thus community is that which each generation feels it must rediscover and re-create."

The need to belong is a key component of the human

person. Community exists to fulfill that need. Does this mean that religious life exists to fulfill that same need? It is important to raise the question, as it is important to check how candidates to the religious life would answer it. Before going into those questions, let me introduce the second concept I mentioned at the beginning, namely common life as a requirement of church law for religious.

Common life

"Religious are to reside in their own religious house and observe the common life." Thus reads Canon 665 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law in its Canadian translation. The American translation reads: "Observing a common life, religious are to live in

Canon law is willing to leave to each institute how it will define common life "with regard to food, clothing and furniture" but it draws the line at the dwelling. If you don't dwell together, you can't be said to live as religious.

their own religious house." The 1917 Code defined common life more explicitly: "In every congregation common life shall be observed exactly even with regard to food, clothing, and furniture" (canon 594 §1).

Two things can be said about the difference between the 1917 and the 1983 laws. In abandoning the explicit mention of food, clothing, and furniture as part of common life, the 1983 law was taking into account an irresistible trend that simply makes it unthinkable for religious, women or men, not to have their personal wardrobe. Today many religious have the exclusive use of a car and a computer, let alone their own socks. Nor is it rare for them to take along pieces of furniture as they move from house to house. Where one black suitcase once held the complete personal belongings of a religious, it now takes a U-Haul truck.

The second thing to be said is that the 1983 law maintains common life as an essential requirement of religious life. Canon 607, §2, defines a religious institute as "a society in which members ... pronounce public vows ... and live a life in common as brothers or sisters." A 1994 document of the Holy See on

“Fraternal Life in Community” even states that institutes, the majority of whose members no longer live in community, can no longer be considered religious institutes (n. 65, e). This means that they could lose their status as institutes recognized by Rome. In this context, living in community means living under the same roof. Canon law is willing to leave to each institute how it will define common life “with regard to food, clothing, and furniture,” but it draws the line at the dwelling. If you don’t dwell together, you can’t be said to live as religious.

Common life, then, is torn between two characteristics: a) it is of the essence of religious life, and b) it is most difficult to regulate in the concrete.

a) Why common life is of the essence of religious life is easy to understand once you remember that throughout the ages most religious congregations took Acts 4:32 as their reference point: “The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common.” What is not so clear is what is the essence of religious life. People’s attempts to live according to the teaching of Jesus as the apostles did took such widely divergent forms over the centuries that one could be excused for questioning whether there is an essence of religious life. Whatever an historical investigation might show, the matter has been settled in practice by the 1983 Roman document entitled: “Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life as applied to Institutes dedicated to Works of the Apostolate.” One can read there: “So important is community living to religious consecration that every religious, whatever his or her apostolic work, is bound to it by the fact of profession and must normally live under the authority of a local superior in a community of the institute to which he or she belongs” (n. 19). No doubt, then, in the mind of the Roman legislator, religious life entails common life, and that common life means living under one roof.

b) Law, however, can never completely embrace the complexity of life. The attempts at legislating common life are an egregious example. No matter how generously people have embarked upon the enterprise of living out the ideal of Acts 4:32, they have always had to accommodate not only individuals, but also differences in time and place. What Spanish friars accepted as a matter of course in 1560 is no longer feasible now either in Senegal or in Oregon. When the 1983 code abandoned “food, clothing, and furniture” as part of common life, it simply acknowledged that fact. Does

this mean that common life is reduced to living under one roof? Canon law may accept this minimal requirement, but few candidates to religious life would settle for it. At the very least, they see themselves seated at a

Why common life is of the essence of religious life is easy to understand once you remember that throughout the ages most religious congregations took Acts 4:32 as their reference point: “The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common.”

common table and sharing meals. But then table fellowship will not take place unless people agree upon meal time. It depends upon some sort of legislation. Why it matters for religious life, however, takes us into the theological realm of communion.

Communion as a faith reality

Communion is a translation of the Greek word *koinonia*, which means sharing and fellowship. There is no stronger image of communion than sharing a meal. Saying “this is my body, this is my blood,” Jesus Christ shared bread and wine with his table companions. His gesture lies at the heart of communion. For centuries, communion meant receiving a consecrated wafer on the tongue. You went to communion, you received communion. Vatican II, and the renewal in theological thinking that prepared it and that flowed from it, has retrieved the rich layers of meaning linked to communion since the New Testament.

Paul reminds us that the cup we bless is communion (sharing) of the blood of Christ and the bread we break is communion (sharing) of his body (1 Corinthians 10:16). Communion with Christ’s suffering is linked to communion in his glory: “We suffer with him so as to be glorified with him” (Romans 8:17). The word communion refers to our sharing of the Spirit in Paul’s final greeting that we use at the beginning of Mass: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:13).

Communion also describes how we relate to each other in Christ. The church can be said to be a communion, and the universal church a communion of local churches. The late theologian Jean-Marie Tillard was a well-known exponent of the ecclesiology of communion (*Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, 1992). The whole Christian enterprise can indeed be described as building communion: through communion in the death and resurrection of Christ, women and men are brought into communion with God and with each other.

It comes as no surprise, then, to see Tillard describe

Religious are “Christians who try *together* to live the Gospel, not as a burden but as a liberation.”

the enterprise of religious life in terms of communion. Religious are “Christians who try *together* to live the Gospel, not as a burden but as a liberation.” The enterprise of religious “is an enterprise of communion, of *koinonía*, until death” (Tillard, 2000, p. 7-8). Indeed, the language of communion is now used routinely in most official documents about religious life, among them Pope John Paul II’s 1996 apostolic exhortation on the consecrated life, which mentions “spreading the spirituality of communion” as the particular task that “the Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life” (n. 51).

Keep the three types of community distinct

Community, common life, communion. Obviously, the three realities are related to each other. I suggest that keeping them distinct from each other in our speech may clarify our understanding of how they relate to each other. When I restrict my use of the word community to the psychosocial reality described above, I make sure that the religious enterprise is not mistaken for the El Dorado of identity, acceptance, and affection. Such longings are lodged within religious as deeply as in any human being. Just like sexual feelings, they come with the individual and need to be dealt with. But anyone who looks to religious life as the haven of community is in for a letdown.”

Common life is a necessary ingredient of religious life. Unless people agree to be together at some point, there

will be no common life. Whether such agreement takes the form of a rule that applies to a whole congregation or of a timetable for a particular house, it pertains to the realm of regulation or legislation. Centuries of thorough regulation have been followed by decades of deregulation. How much regulation is necessary and helpful is open to debate. The debate will be more productive if people are clear about its object. The concrete demands of common life are one thing; my quest for identity and acceptance is another, and communion in Christ is yet another.

The affective dimensions of community underlie the life of any group. Commitment to living together is proper to religious and inevitably entails dealing with the particulars of food, dress, and lodging. Communion in Christ is the gift and the task of every believer, and therefore also of religious. Communion in Christ means communion in his death and resurrection. It brings us into communion with the Father and the Spirit, and with all our sisters and brothers, before all else with the sisters or brothers with whom we have committed ourselves to live until death. Working for communion is not the same as seeking fulfillment in community. It can take place under a wide assortment of lifestyles. Our talk can help make it clear that religious life is about communion in Christ. ✚

Author’s note: I wish to thank Rev. Raymond P. Carey, with whom I discussed these ideas and who encouraged me to put them into writing; and François Lévesque, a student of anthropology at Laval University, who provided the reference to Blakely and Snyder.

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What I was looking for in community and what I found

by Julie Brandt, SSND

I recently returned home from a provincial assembly meeting and found myself renewed once again by a sense of belonging to the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Strangely, in the midst of a weekend holding a great deal of tension and conflict, I found myself feeling very much at home. This was indeed the overwhelming emotion for me.

Reflecting on this experience helped me focus on this article's theme: what I was looking for in community and what I found. After agreeing to write this article, I was struck by a fear that in doing so, I may be shunned by my community for what I would say. Or I've thought that I may be called to accountability for not living up to the things that I claim I believe and desire. My fear paralyzed some of my early attempts at writing.

And then came the weekend assembly. What became most real again was that in the midst of our struggle to come to some form of consensus or agreement, a deeper level of caring about one another shone through. In our discussions there was a willingness to stay with one another and talk about the differences of perception that existed. Although the topic did not come to a final resolution, there was a movement within the group to hold a value of caring for one another higher than the need to decide at that moment. There was also a sense of a growing challenge to look at what God was calling us to in this decision. Even as we journeyed through this difficult discussion, we

could still come together as one community in times of prayer and celebration and be one with one another as sisters. Underneath the challenges of the meeting was a greater bond of faith, which unites us to one another as community.

This sense of working together for the common good is part of what drew me to community in the first place. To be part of a dynamic experience of communal discernment in action reaffirmed what I hold true about community living.

A "newcomer" for 15 years

I entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame community 18 years ago, and I recently celebrated 15 years of profession. Despite the years I've belonged, I am still considered one of the newer members by many in the community. Only a handful of members are younger than me. I fit right in the gap between being a late Baby Boomer and being one of the first of Generation X. I was born in 1962—a month before Vatican II began—and so my experience of church has been shaped primarily by the constancy of change. I remember little of the pre-Vatican experience of church. I was greatly influenced by my parents, who placed strong value on their faith and did all they could to assure that each of their four children had opportunities to grow in faith and religious practice.

My desire to enter religious life grew slowly out of a curiosity about the lifestyle of the sisters I had as teachers. While I never intended to be a sister, I found myself with a growing fascination about sisters. While attending a girls' high school sponsored by our community, I became an astute observer of the sisters whom I admired as teachers. While fascinated by their lives, I was unable to admit until much later in my high school years that this could be a lifestyle I might choose. Then one day Sister Roxanne asked me

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if I'd ever considered being a sister. I think I was more shocked than she was when I answered yes.

Suddenly I was caught wondering what it was that I felt drawn to. Why did I say yes and know in my heart that this was the right answer for me? For one thing, these were women with a deep passion about something greater than themselves. They were very much alive and not afraid to be involved in life. Any notion I held that sisters led boring lives—working and praying all day—was slowly eroded. I came to see them as women alive with a common call and mission who also found time to enjoy a game or two of tennis.

Wholeness and holiness are one and the same call. When I enter fully into the process of living in a manner that leads others and me to wholeness, I believe that I am also on the path to encounter God.

While many of my college classmates worried about finding a career that would bring the most wealth in the quickest manner, I found myself searching to be about something more. I desired to make a difference in whatever career I chose. The “me centered” focus of my generation seemed repulsive. And so, community life and living the Gospel call attracted me because of their counter-cultural values.

As I continued to ponder where God was calling me, I felt a sense of restlessness, which would not be satisfied until I gave religious life a chance. My peers did not understand my decision, although I had enough of a support group among friends to risk what seemed like all to me.

One of the first things that hit me upon entering community was that living community life was not going to be easy. Over the years I've often had a conversation with my mother in which she claims she doesn't know how I can do it—live with several other women peacefully. I find myself taking the other side of the argument—how has she been able to live with one other person for 45 years? Probably the thing that helps me deal with this reality is to remember that no life commitment is easy. Living an authentic life, which invites one to growth and some degree of inti-

macy with others, has its costs. I've grown to know that the effort is worth the cost.

Within my first few years of formation I also discovered that this process of entering into religious life would indeed continue to shape and change me. In order to live this life well, I would need to continue to grow. (Unfortunately at times I continue to be surprised that the project is far from finished!) I've learned to be gentle with myself in this growth. In my early years (particularly in formation, when it sometimes felt like all the eyes of the community were upon me) I often felt like the challenge to grow was there because I wasn't good enough. So naturally I resisted growth. The more I see this as a natural process for all people, in whatever lifestyle, the easier the growth process has become. It also helps that others in the community are authentic about their own challenges to grow and develop.

At some time during my experience of living community life, I came to a realization that has remained critical for me. As I was considering the call to growth and wholeness, I came to believe that wholeness and holiness are one and the same call. When I enter fully into the process of living in a manner that leads others and me to wholeness, I believe that I am also on the path to encounter God.

Different formation for different generations

One of the real challenges of living community life has been that while I experienced a very strong self-growth style of formation, many with whom I've lived did not. For these sisters, formation focused on cleaning and manual labor. While many older sisters have developed skills to be self-revealing and open to new growth, many struggle with this facet of life. Here's what I've experienced: sometimes when someone in community is able to express her own preferences or share from her own perspective, those who feel less secure in doing so will give over their personal power to someone else. This turns something as easy as a community decision about where to go to eat for a special occasion into a source of conflict. All too often I find some sisters unable to express a personal preference during decision making. Then later the very same people, through their passive-aggressive behavior, let us know we've made the wrong choice. This generally leads to indigestion for all! Such situations leave me feeling like I ought to take a defensive driving course for communal living!

An essential set of skills for community living is to be able to name your own needs or desires, and to be able to take part in the give and take of decision-making. Unfortunately what I sometimes see happening is that a new member lives with people who lack these skills. She doubts her suitability for living this life, and

Facilitation enabled me to grow in my ability to express my own needs and desires and also to listen with reverence to others. This tool could benefit many community situations.

unless supported by others, she may end up leaving the community. At the same time, if others in the community are not able to express their piece of the truth, newer members who really *don't* have the skills for living community life may be allowed to go unchallenged.

I experienced one very helpful tool during my years prior to final vows in this area of community growth. Our province required any community with newer members to have regular facilitation as a part of their community living experience. That is, an outside “facilitator” would help during meetings. This was a somewhat novel requirement at this time. None of my peers from other provinces or other congregations had such a requirement. While facilitation was sometimes very challenging, I certainly was glad that my province required it. The neutral facilitator allowed each person to be heard in the community. Listening to the struggles of some of my classmates in community, I realized that if facilitation were a regular part of their communal living, they might have had a much healthier experience. Facilitation enabled me to grow in my ability to express my own needs and desires and also to listen with reverence to others. This tool could benefit many community situations—whether or not the community has a newer member.

Tied to the ability to communicate and to be self-revealing is the desire and ability to participate in regular faith sharing. This was an area of growth for me throughout my formation experience, as I had little experience in faith sharing prior to entering. I feel it is essential we take time during communal prayer to share with one another how we see God acting in

Scriptures and in our daily life. If we can't share on a faith level, I wonder what the purpose is of living together. I've never felt that faith sharing is easy, as sharing God's actions in our daily life can be very intimate. Revealing ourselves on a deep level requires a risk, which for me is well-worth the effort. I've come to believe I need this time to share with community to help all of us discern how God may be acting in our lives. For many reasons some sisters continue to find faith sharing difficult. Thus, one of the rubs of community for me has been when others are not willing to invest in this process.

Corporate identity gone fuzzy?

Another area that continues to be a source of frustration for me is our communal expression of corporate identity. For me what seems pertinent is the question, “How are we choosing to be about the mission of Jesus together as a community?” Maybe I emphasize that question because I entered at a time when I could have done any of my ministries on my own, but I chose community life because I didn't wish to be a Lone Ranger. There is a greater strength and witness value in being about something in mission together. My experience since entering, however, is that we sisters seem to be becoming more and more independent in the way we choose ministry. Unfortunately I, too, can fall into this trap rather easily if not challenged by others to live differently. We seem to go where we wish to go more often than we respond to a call of the community to look at particular places of ministry or to minister where we as a community may have made a corporate commitment. We as a community seem to have lost some of the communal nature of this process of discerning ministry choices.

While I believe the blind obedience, which was called for in days past, may have been equally harmful, I wish that we could discover some middle ground on this issue. I believe our lack of a corporate sense of commitment to ministry is seen as a weakness for potential new members who are looking for a community that has a clear sense of mission. While it may not be realistic for us to all work in the same ministries in pre-designated places, I do believe that we would have a greater sense of mission if we wrestled with the question of corporate commitment. What would it cost us and what might we gain by taking on sponsorship of specific ministries that match the charism of our community? I think the gifts would far outnumber the cost. Additionally, I believe that when we call and invite each other to consider different ministry opportu-

nities, we affirm gifts and abilities in each other that may not have been recognized if we are always acting as free agents with regard to discernment. I know I was initially rather resistant to considering my current ministry with Native Americans. It seemed so foreign, I just didn't know if I could do it. But a sense of being "called beyond" by the mandate of our General Chapter, and the encouragement of others that saw gifts in me that I didn't see, enabled me to say yes to the experience. Through this I have found a richness of opportunity to stretch myself in a place I would never have chosen on my own.

Give younger members a voice

Another challenge is that there are fewer newer members in my community than in the past. While I was aware of this reality prior to entering, I do think that as a community we need to continue to be aware of the needs of our younger members to feel like they have a voice in the community. The life issues that I may be dealing with or the perspective I have as a member of Generation X differs from the older Baby Boomers and Silent Generation members of the community. When you are a solitary voice, it can be difficult to claim your own reality and go against the grain of the perceptions of so many others. I know I found myself wondering if I really fit into my community several years ago when our province named five directional statements for the next several years. While I didn't specifically oppose any of the directional statements, I was aware of feeling like a minority when I did not hold the same passion as others for several statements. These directions simply were not the issues that compelled me to consider community life. I found myself without the passion to embrace them wholeheartedly. But at this gathering, our sisters of the Silent Generation had certainly found their voice on these issues, and the Baby Boomers were letting their perspective be heard with resounding clarity. Was I alone in lacking excitement for most of these directions? I certainly didn't feel comfortable letting my voice be heard in the midst of this large group if I was alone in my thinking. It was only months later that I heard others, primarily of my own generation, share that they too lacked enthusiasm for the directional statements.

I believe a real challenge to community at this time in history is to provide legitimate opportunities for younger members to have a voice in the community—especially when looking at issues which directly impact the future of the community. It may be too late to start asking to hear our voice 20 years from now.

While I am certainly willing to wait my turn in respect to my elders, I also believe that in community we must strive to listen to all the different voices who have a vested interest in the livelihood of our community. My experience within the Lakota culture has helped me to understand in a new way that each of us sees reality in a different light. While I may not always see things the same way as someone else, being able to hear and respect their perspective helps me to re-evaluate and refine how I perceive reality. This listening to one another in dialogue is a part of my understanding of our call to live the vow of obedience.

Surprises have also been very much a part of my experience of religious life. One of the most treasured surprises I have experienced has been the opportunity to develop significant relationships with sisters I never dreamt I'd feel so close to. It has been a gift to form intergenerational friendships. These have taken shape primarily through living in community with sisters of varying ages. While intergenerational living is not always easy, I have been blessed by some wonderful experiences. I continue to treasure the opportunity I had in preparing for final vows to live with two sisters who were both more than 40 years my senior. They were wonderful examples of the possibility of living faithfully the call to religious life. They also were great wisdom figures for me at a time that I was seeking answers to lots of questions. At the same time they gave me the wings I needed to continue to be the person I was at that stage in my life's journey. Living with the two of them was a big reason I was able to say yes to this lifestyle—forever. Additionally, friends who are 10 to 20 years older have been mentors; they're women I continue to look to as role models. I have been graced by their example of living this life well. Additionally, these are my sisters who have challenged me to become my best self. This gift of relationships in community is one I treasure most dearly.

Has community been what I expected? Have I faced unexpected realities? I think I could honestly answer yes and no to both questions. Yes, community has been what I expected and no, it's not been. It's usually been much more! What remains most true is that community has been a living, dynamic experience of growth into greater wholeness and holiness for me as I journey with my sisters in mission. It is for me the pearl of great price hidden in a field, which I have found and is worth giving my all to attain. Would I give it up? No way! I'm at home being a School Sister of Notre Dame. ✚

Community life in the monastic tradition: a call to conversion

by Anita Louise Lowe, OSB

From its beginnings, monastic life has held the concept of community as one of its guiding values. Life in community is the place where we learn our frailties as individuals and where we practice the value of love for neighbor as taught by Jesus in the Gospel. Even those who live the monastic life as hermits recognize the place of community in their lives. A story which illustrates this point was taught by John Cassian, a monk and ascetic writer who introduced the rules of Eastern monasticism into the West:

Abba John, abbot of a large monastery, went to Abba Paesius who had been living for forty years far off in the desert. As John was very fond of Paesius and could therefore speak freely with him, he said to him, "What good have you done by living here in retreat for so long, and not being easily disturbed by anyone?" Paesius replied, "Since I have lived in solitude, the sun has never seen me eating." Abba John said back to him, "As for me, since I have been living with others, it has never seen me angry." (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pages 113-4)

Community life is the place where we encounter our own limitations mirrored in the limitations of those with whom we live and interact on a daily basis. It is in living in community that we learn to recognize the face of God in each person—even when that face is of one who, at the moment, is extremely irritating to us!

In the first chapter of his Rule, St. Benedict describes four types of monks: the anchorites or hermits, who according to Benedict have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time before becoming a hermit; the sarabaites, who make up their own rules and follow their own desires, calling it holy; the gyrovagues, who drift from place to place, never settling down; and the cenobites, those who live in a monastery under a rule and abbot, and for whom he wrote

this rule. New members coming to the monastic life are seeking community. Yet, they, like their monastic ancestors before them, face a variety of temptations to become like the sarabaites or gyrovagues mentioned by Benedict.

No place to run, no place to hide

One of the greatest temptations is to run, to withdraw from community during times of difficulties, to avoid persons with whom we have differences and with whom we disagree. The monastic life, however, calls us to stay with the community and the person in question—not just to tolerate the person but to continue to find Christ in him or her. This is a part of the process that leads us to grow in holiness, to become more like Christ ourselves.

When we commit ourselves to this particular community of people, we cannot know the difficulties that will face us or the personality quirks of individuals that will irritate us. We do not choose the people who form this community with us, yet we are called to love one another, to be Christ for one another. Avoidance is not an option. Day in and day out we sit with one another in prayer, we eat at table with one another, and we work side by side. We constantly rub shoulders with one another, and through this, we wear off the rough edges we each possess. It is as if the community is the tool used by God to create us into a person made in God's image and likeness—the file that smooths the roughness.

Much of the research on Generation X and the Millennial Generation states that those who belong to these

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generations are seeking community. This fact can make our way of life an attractive possibility for some of these young people. However, the definition of community is an issue that needs to be addressed. What are people seeking when they say they want community? Are they seeking a place to belong? A group of people to accept them? If this is the only sense of longing for community that a person voices, we in vocation ministry need to be cautious. Our communities are more than gathering places, more than groups of people who will accept each of us as we are. While we seek to be communities of hospitality, we need to differentiate between those to whom we minis-

What are people seeking when they say they want community? Are they seeking a place to belong? A group of people to accept them? If this is the only sense of longing for community that a person voices, we in vocation ministry need to be cautious.

ter by our hospitality and acceptance, and those who are called to join us in ministering to others by becoming people of hospitality, people who seek God.

On entering a monastic community, an individual gradually is incorporated into the “family” of the community. This means that the community becomes primary, and our natural families and friends take a secondary placement. This is usually a point of difficulty that cannot be avoided. Just as a newly married couple creates a different way of being with their individual families, so new members to community have to learn how to juggle the needs and expectations of community with the needs and expectations of their natural families. It is not an easy thing to learn. Nor is it an easy thing to teach our families and friends.

Joining a community calls us to put the community needs first, even ahead of our own individual desires and needs. This is seen most clearly in terms of ministry choices. For members of monastic communities who have external ministries, choosing a ministry involves more than looking at personal interests and talents and having a desire to serve. The person is called to examine a choice of service that allows her or him to live in community as fully participating members. Ministry can help us live a balanced life of prayer, work, study, and recreation, but our choice of ministry

needs to allow us to spend time and energy participating in various community activities and functions. For a monastic, community life is our mission. It is in living in community, then, that we are energized for our service to others. Community life is the food that nourishes us, allowing us to go forth in service, sharing the gifts we have received from the community.

Prospective members need to consider this dynamic. Future ministry choices will not be a solo decision. The impact of an individual’s ministry on the community must be weighed. Part of this impact includes the member’s ability to be engaged in community activities and the capacity to live in a community setting. Ministry choices are made through a process of mutual discernment between the individual member and the prioress or abbot of the community.

As we journey with women and men in discernment, it is important to explore with these candidates their understandings of community life. What have been their experiences of community? What have been their expectations of the others with whom they have shared these experiences? What leads them to believe that they can live in community with people of all ages and differing family histories and cultural backgrounds?

Community life is really about living in relationship with others. It is, therefore, also important to explore with candidates their experiences of relationships. How do they react to injury? What do they do when they get angry or upset? How have they solved disagreements with siblings or friends? The answers to these questions can give both the vocation minister and the candidate some clues as to how he or she will relate to members of the community in the dailyness of life.

Our current culture of individualism becomes another factor in the transition of candidates into community life. Our society is telling us constantly that we can stand alone, that we can care for ourselves, that we need only pay attention to our own needs and wants. What a shift to come from this way of thinking into a life where, as Benedict says, each is to “try to be first to show respect to one another with the greatest patience in tolerating weaknesses of body or character... No one in the monastery aims at personal advantage but is rather concerned for the good of others.” (*Saint Benedict’s Rule 72: 4-7*)

This way of thinking forms the essence of community life. Each tries to be the first to show respect to the

other. We support one another. We pursue first what is better for someone else, rather than thinking only of our individual desires and needs. For the monastic, this is what it means to belong to a community.

A number of daily practices of the common life can also prove challenging to incoming members. These include sharing meals in common, following the daily horarium (monastic schedule), and being accountable to one another. In a society filled with fast food restaurants, the concept of the family dinner seemingly has disappeared. For many new members to community sitting together at table on a daily basis may well be a foreign idea, out of their realm of experience. Yet, for the monastic, this action is repeated daily. Gathering at table is about more than feeding our bodies. This is community time. It is a time to nourish our souls with the presence of Christ found in one another. As Sister Karen Joseph, OSB, prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri, said at a recent ongoing formation day for our community, “Something happens when we look eyeball to eyeball, when we share a meal, when we serve one another, when we pass the salt and pepper to one another.” Mealtime moves beyond the utilitarian into the realm of communion.

Following the monastic schedule or horarium calls us not to be slaves to a clock, but rather to attend to one another, to journey the day together, supporting one another through our presence at communal prayer, at meals, at work, and at leisure. The horarium helps bring us balance so that we can focus on the relationships. Presence is the important factor. It can be difficult to get up day after day to go to morning prayer or to respond to the bell calling us to midday or evening prayer when we are in the midst of other activities. Yet, by responding we acknowledge the gift of the others in community and share the gifts we possess with them. There are days when I am not sure I can give anything. On those days my sisters support and uphold me. On other days, I am the one supporting and upholding one or more of my sisters.

Accountability is another value that can be difficult for new members to make a part of their daily habit. Our society is quick-paced. We have many things to do and many places to go. It is difficult to let others know where I am going to be. The call to be accountable is a call to do just that, however. Living in community, it is important to let others know when I am away. Sometimes this is a practical consideration, such as letting the kitchen know to prepare one less meal. Be-

yond that, however, is the call to be focused on each other. If no one knows I am gone, how can anyone respond to me when I return? Accountability calls us to share our lives with others and to be attentive to one another’s comings and goings.

In our world today we need the witness of community life, and young people are hungering for this witness and this experience. In the aforementioned ongoing formation day, Sister Karen Joseph said that “the work of the cenobite in living the common life is fruitful and fertile in itself; it is a witness to a divided world.” Living in community is a witness that people of differing backgrounds, cultures, ages, education, and occupations can live together in harmony and peace. While we all know that the reality of our community life is less than ideal, the striving and the desire to live together in peace is itself the greatest witness.

Together we are on the journey, seeking God together. In the process of living community life our rough edges are rubbed off, and we become more Christ-like while simultaneously becoming more able to recognize the presence of Christ in the persons surrounding us. Eventually, like Abba John, we also will be able to say that, since we have been living with others in community, the sun has never seen us angry. Community life, for those called to live it, is the way to conversion. We become more like Christ as we live as he did—not apart from others but intimately connected to one another, sharing our gifts, our limitations, our struggles, and our talents. This is the value of community life we offer to those who come seeking to learn more. This is the ideal we uphold for ourselves and for those who join us in this way of life.

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Community: ready or not?

by Kathleen Bryant, RSC

Wouldn't we all be delighted to have an influx of new candidates eager to transmit our charisms to the next generation and to engage in our ministries with us? Or would we? With fewer people entering our various communities, some of us have not been particularly challenged to go out of our way to welcome new members and adjust to the dynamics created by these additions. In a quiet, subtle way we have become so used to things as they are, that the new member can seem like an intrusion rather than a welcomed and long-awaited member of our local communities.

In preparing for this article, I asked men and women to share with me their experiences of both brief live-in stays as well as their experiences of entering religious communities. They come from a variety of communities, and they have been honest and grateful, wise and reflective. I have assured them of their anonymity.

I think that we, vocation directors, often have an unspoken concern about how new candidates, whom we have nurtured and encouraged, will be received in the local community. Perhaps we have known a man or woman over a number of years and grown to respect him or her. They begin a live-in experience or enter as a candidate, and we hear their reactions and reflections. What do we hear?

For the most part, I have heard gratitude. Candidates are grateful for having been given an experience to live religious life. They are grateful that we open our doors and invite them to enter into our lives. Those of us who attended the Continental Congress on Vocations in Montreal, April 2001, remember the cry of young adults for us to open our doors. Their cry was for hospitality so that they could truly see what religious life is about. The openness of religious commu-

nities to receiving the "stranger" into their very living rooms, into community life, is deeply appreciated. The reactions to this from candidates borders on wonder.

I would like to share some common themes that emerged in listening to the experiences of discerning adults who have had both short live-in experiences as well as longer periods of initial incorporation. Some common threads ran through all their experiences.

Authenticity

Are we who we say we are?

Even though our candidates are entering a little older and more mature, they still have an initial, wonderful idealism about religious life. Thank God for that idealism! It kept all of us going during the difficult trials of postulancy and novitiate. However, our aged cynicism can destroy the hope of the beginner in ways that border scandal. Moving from our Web sites, brochures and videos into our households, the candidate moves into the daily routine of our community life. These new candidates expect a certain authenticity about our lives, and they deserve to find reflections of what they have heard about and seen in our advertisements. Although there is a natural demythologizing of religious life that is bound to occur in the process of early incorporation into a community, there is also a call to the community to be more authentic in living out its charism and spirituality.

The generation gap disappears when religious share their commitment to and love for Jesus with newer members. When religious are most authentic in word and action, younger members find resonance with their own call. Then the supposed difficulties with age dissipate. A young woman commented, "First the generation gap had to be overcome—a readjustment period for all—the idea that although there are a number of years between myself and the other sisters, remembering that we are all here for the same reason. In that, age disappears and you grow together as friends and mentors to one another."

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The great thing about accepting new candidates into community, is that *they* call us to live out our commitments more authentically. We are called not only to fidelity to our chapter vision statements but down to the daily, ordinary expressions of Gospel generosity, forgiveness and simplicity. And let's not fool ourselves, *we* are being observed. I remember the days of my novitiate. We novices were the ones being observed about every minute detail. It is ironic that now *we* are also the ones being observed, and it is not with regard to minutiae but with regard to our lived authenticity.

What have some newer members observed that questions our authenticity? An example would be frustration from a religious who is inconvenienced by another sister's illness. Or when a community member is unwilling to share his car with a brother in a desperate situation.

Honest communication

What will be expected of me?

Every candidate who gave me feedback mentioned how important it is that community members be up front about expectations. The candidate needs to know precisely what he or she can expect from the community and what the community expects from him or her. Contemporary candidates want their questions answered honestly. They do not want the "party line," or the pious explanation. One candidate said how much she appreciated the answer, "I don't know," as opposed to people making up something edifying!

If a candidate is not working out, it is important to not string along him or her. As one candidate said, "We are all looking for God's will." The mutuality of the discernment process needs to be discussed from the beginning. This way it's clear from the start that entrance or a live-in experience does not guarantee profession or ordination in the mind of the candidate.

If a candidate spends a week or so with a community, and is clearly not called to the community, it is the charitable move to be honest with her or him. It is unfair to avoid the truth. It's a cop out to use age or some other excuse. I know a candidate who invested about nine months with a community and was then told that she was over their age limit. Since her age was disclosed up front, she felt cheated out of those months of discernment. Another candidate told me that after a few months' live-in experience, the community told him that they did not have a formation program in place, and would have to "let him go." These two individuals had invested time, discernment and emotional

energy, and they were treated unjustly. Even in the first interview, if you can see that a candidate is never going to be accepted by your community, it is unfair to continue inviting him or her to the community vocation events.

Adult participation

What voice will I have? What part in decision making? What is my role in the community?

Since the women and men entering our religious communities tend to be older than the high school graduates of yesteryear, our programs have been adjusted to accommodate more mature candidates. Many, many of the candidates entering religious life have commented on how communities have welcomed their ideas, suggestions and participation in community life. This is a sharp contrast to the previous model whereby postulants and novices did not interact with professed members and were expected to keep quiet about their ideas for the community. Suggestions were not usually welcomed from novices but rather seen as presumptuous.

Contemporary candidates and those in formation enjoy being a real part of the community. Many of those who participate even in short-term live-in situations, enjoy being included in household chores, community prayer and discussion. Some of those in their candidacy year said they feel that they have a voice and can participate in community meetings. One candidate said that she knew there were some discussions that she did not participate in, and she respected that "community discretion" as she called it.

"I am there to learn what the life is about and the only way to do so is to actively participate. So, in turn, if I was not involved in house decisions then I am not really learning. My feeling is if I am able to participate in the cooking and cleaning, I should be able to participate in the decision-making too."

— A 22-year-old woman in candidacy

Communities differ in their openness to the participation of the candidate. One woman in her 30s said that she "has been able to be an active member of the community at different levels. This did not happen overnight." Now that this woman is in her second year of pre-candidacy, she has more clarity about her role. "Now that I am in my second year, I am much more involved in all aspects of the decision-making process. I am still not quite involved with the decisions on finances since I am still financially independent, but other than that, I am a member of the community

really—I prepare meals, prayers, lead local chapter meetings, help in planning of liturgies, attend meetings and community gatherings, help in giving suggestions for changes in the house or ways we can help the environment and the *sisters treat me as one of them*. I am also more comfortable in doing this.” This woman is doing very well in community, and I hear very positive reports from the vocation/formation director. You can hear in her words her respect for the community and

Newer members have said that the most lifegiving and affirming times in community for them have been spontaneous, informal gatherings.

for the process into which they have invited her.

One of the tendencies in welcoming new members may be to overextend the sympathetic welcome and desire to help in a way that the candidate may interpret as condescending. One man who entered last September said, “Never, never baby the new man. Don’t relegate him to the bottom of the totem pole.” We, religious, who are so concerned about justice and inclusivity can often be guilty of hierarchical habits in our own local communities. The new adult member needs to feel welcomed as an adult, eager to learn but also ready to participate as an adult in community life.

Healthy welcoming spirit

How will I fit in?

This a common concern. Newer members have said that the most lifegiving and affirming times in community for them have been those spontaneous, informal gatherings. When a community member invites them for coffee or asks them to join a few others in going out for a movie or simple fun, they felt part of the group. The interaction between community members in these informal gatherings is extremely meaningful for the new members.

We religious are used to community meetings, prayer and events being scheduled in advance. We can fall into a habit of being present at community happenings and yet fail at being present and available to new members in an informal way. One of the men who recently entered community commented, “Starting a

conversation with a new candidate, not waiting for him to initiate (works well). The new man is lost in a completely strange world. He is mourning over the death of the old life and overwhelmed by the new surroundings.” Sitting down to simply listen and to initiate a conversation has worked well in welcoming new members.

One male candidate said that even the simple touches made him feel welcome...such as having a few bottles of water in his room. Availability of the community members to answer questions, show one around, and just “hang out” made him feel at home.

Mutuality

Community and candidate both discern

From the beginning of the process, vocation directors try to explain that the process of discernment is mutual. The community will be discerning whether the candidate is called to this particular order at the same time that the candidate is discerning God’s call. When a candidate comes for a short live-in experience or moves into candidacy, it is time to call to mind the mutuality of this discernment.

A man in his 20s commented, “The mainframe idea that all of us together are looking for God’s will for that particular individual gives much peace. It is not so much this or that vocation, but how and where God is guiding a soul. And admittance into one or another group does not assure that the person will arrive at perpetual vows or priesthood. This must be made extremely clear for the good of the candidate and family or friends that surround him. We already know too many horror stories.” This man had an experience of living religious life and leaving. He recently entered another community.

In our excitement and enthusiasm as we welcome a new candidate, we need to maintain a respectful and reverential spirit of discernment. One woman told me that when she went for a live-in experience, she was given the rosary of an elderly sister who had recently passed away. She was told that when this sister was dying, she said she would be replaced soon by a new candidate. The gift of the rosary held a price! Her freedom to honestly discern was sabotaged by the enthusiasm of the community to have a new member. When she said that her mother objected to her call, one of the sisters told her that her room was already ready, and the sisters could phone her mother. The freedom of the discerner needs to be honored, as does the freedom of the community

to be honest about a person's viability. Regular conversations with candidates that honor both their experience and the community's can help facilitate this mutual discernment. How is the candidate experiencing community life? What does he or she find lifegiving? What are the challenges? The joys? How does the community experience this candidate? Does the community feel that he or she fits in? Can the community be at home with her? Can the candidate feel at home with the community? Does the candidate seem too strained by the community life? Can candidates be themselves in the community? All of these questions help with mutual discernment.

Time

Be patient with me!

All the candidates that offered feedback mentioned how it takes time for them to feel at home and welcome in community. Even if the community is clear about expectations about the concrete assignment of house chores and prayer responsibilities, the personal, relational and community roles are less clear. One candidate said it was hard to define these roles ahead of time. "I think that the community and the entrant need to be aware that it *will* take time. I think the most important thing with these questions is the understanding that it will take time and patience to see how you're fitting in." (This was written after a candidate's two-month, live-in experience.) "There is a lot of truth in the idea that just as I am finding my place it is time for me to leave."

Beginnings are an awkward and uncomfortable time. Our sensitivity to these feelings in the newer members will help ease their own inclusion. There is no way we can rush the process. Our gentle, hospitable presence will be a soothing balm for their anxiety. Even the newer members are telling themselves to be patient! As one woman shared, "I think a pitfall for an entrant is to expect everything to come easy and right away. You have to give it time and know you are going to make mistakes. I mean, come on! Morning and Evening Prayer are not easy! I know that it is OK for me to make mistakes and that the sisters are there to help me. I have been told that and have been shown that through their actions. I have been blessed with a wonderful experience and great teachers." What a compliment to this community of women!

Common pitfalls in community

We all have our community mythology—those stories of novitiate days, of religious who were characters in

the congregation, and of times of trouble and tribulation. In retelling these stories, we may forget that the newer member has no frame of reference nor does he or she know whom we are talking about. If we assume candidates know the lifestyle or common understanding of these narratives, we will make them feel left out.

Some of the newer candidates said that they needed to be affirmed in their own identity by being invited to share about their own life, where they have come from. If all they hear are stories from the past inside jokes, they will feel alienated. The bottom line is good manners. It is rude to talk about someone or something with a third party who has no idea what we are discussing.

The newer member can feel like he or she is nothing. I have discovered that the men and women who entered from professional careers with significant responsibility feel like they are lost and have no value upon entering. The transition is difficult. As one man put it, "Make him feel important, that he matters a lot, without being patronizing."

If we are too busy for new members, we don't deserve them. They deserve some quality time and attention. If we do not want to be inconvenienced by the extra effort or the changes a new member makes in community, then we cannot cry out about fewer vocations to religious life.

We, as religious, have been on the forefront of justice issues. Justice has been defined as "right relationships." Our call to welcome new members is all about fostering those right relationships. We are living justly when we build a sense of inclusion for new members—treating them as adults with a voice and giving them a chance to participate. Let them speak. Let them participate as adults. Invite them to tell their stories. In the stories we will also be stretched and challenged to be more authentic in our own call. As a vocation director, I am often challenged by the candidate's desire to live our convictions more zealously than we older members sometimes do—to live more simply, to pray more frequently, to give more generously in community and ministry. I know that God speaks very clearly to me through their stories. Sometimes, too clearly. Yet, this is our way into a future full of hope. We can choose between life and death. Let's choose life and build a future full of hope for our communities. ✦

Community, *communitas* and downward mobility

by Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp

When we think of the word “community,” a number of images come to mind. We all have ideas, both of what community is or is not, and what it could be. If we can identify the distance between an actual community and the idea or ideal of community we have formed in our mind, we might be able to acknowledge some of the very real limitations of communities and even look for life-giving alternatives.

In a nontheological sense, dictionaries identify a number of components of community, as well as a number of different kinds of community. In the first place, the word “community” refers to people living in one locality or under one big roof. Community may actually apply either to the people or to the locality or to both. A community may also be a group of otherwise disparate people sharing a common cultural, religious, or ethnic identity. Beyond that, community refers to much broader concepts, such as the “European community” or the “Protestant community,” which are really ideal types and much too big to be encountered as such.

Reflecting on the intentions of Jesus and his commission to the Twelve, to the disciples in general, and by extension to the church, we notice that it is the com-

munity and not simply a single individual or a group of individuals that is commissioned. As sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) demonstrated, a community properly is not simply a group of people but a *corporate* group of people: a group that actually acts like a corporation or a single body. The Christian community is indeed and explicitly intended to be a corporate body, widely differentiated internally but with one head (Jesus Christ) and a unity of purpose.

This theology is elaborated splendidly by Saint Paul when he addresses abuses at Corinth and begs the fledgling community to live up to its high calling. The theology is further developed throughout the Pauline correspondence (For example, 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Ephesians 4:3-13; Galatians 3:26-28).

Mechanical and organic solidarity

Durkheim explicitly—and implicitly Saint Paul before him—identified *mechanical* and *organic solidarity* as two very different forms of community. Mechanical solidarity might be what unites a school of fish or a colony of termites. Less attractively, it may describe the people at a parish liturgy. The fish and the termites might at least be said to have a common purpose, even though none of them individually actually has it in mind; the same cannot always be said for people who foregather for some liturgies.

By contrast, organic solidarity is expressed in the teamwork of a group of footballers or the marine exploits of the crew of an oceangoing yacht. Organic solidarity is manifested by a group of people acting in unison; and though each person has a different responsibility, the outcome of the whole group depends on the commitment of each individual.

Organic solidarity can produce world records and generate an indomitable spirit. Mechanical solidarity is not without possibilities, but those possibilities are

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predictable and less than inspiring. It is possible, though, for mechanical solidarity to lead to organic solidarity, providing there is trust, imagination, and something to galvanize the members of the group. Whatever the future of the institutional church may actually look like, it will only have a future if it develops its potential for organic solidarity, because mechanical solidarity simply does not have the capacity to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Thus communities become institutionalized and suffer the same fate as any other institution. Unless they too undergo radical regeneration, they slowly become sclerotic, and they too die.

Is it conceivable that the Christian churches as we have known them may have to undergo a very long winter, not in peaceful hibernation but in a fight for survival, before a new spring breaks through? The tension and the paradox is that the church worldwide, and in its many denominations, is an institution, and inevitably so, but that institutions are crippled by their own structures. Unless they slough the dead growth and regenerate, they die. Thus communities become institutionalized and suffer the same fate as any other institution. Unless they too undergo radical regeneration (in theological language, conversion or refounding), they slowly become sclerotic, and they too die. Many Christian churches are established as autonomous entities, whatever they proclaim about their desire for unity. How can the constituent communities of the church remain in some communion, corporate and organic, in the face of forces of institutionalization and mechanical solidarity? Much more problematically, how can the unity for which Christ prayed ever become a reality?

Such unity can be achieved. In some measure it has already happened. But great clarity of purpose, vision, dedication, and living hope are required if there are to be further significant breakthroughs in church unity. In the end there will have to be an ecclesial reality rather different from that with which we are familiar, whether that be a universal united Christian church or renewed and reinvigorated denominations and local congregations. Inevitably, Christians, too, will be

rather different from those who are familiar to us, those who identify themselves as Christians yet fail to rise above intermittent expressions of mechanical solidarity. The Christian church—and churches—of the future will, necessarily, be slimmed down and streamlined, if only because it is like leaven or light-source rather than great mass or raging wildfire. The Christian community will be once again as it was in the beginning, “a peculiar people.” If the Holy Spirit is allowed to come with fire and to renew the face of the earth, we simply cannot predict what the outcome will be because we are not God. But some strong clues exist in the New Testament—clues suggesting that forms of noninstitutional, ecumenical, and most certainly countercultural Christianity will abound. It will not be sufficient—indeed it never was—to call ourselves “Good Americans” or “Good Australians” or “Good Britons,” and expect thereby automatic passage into the realm of God.

Creation and community

The popular image of the very first moment of creation—incandescent heat or the “big bang”—is an image of unharnessed, boundless, elemental energy. That image, transferred to a “founding moment” or, even earlier, to the actual Pentecost moment can raise our consciousness and ignite our imagination. In fact, ignition is another contemporary image that speaks of raw power and primal energy: “Ignition!” is the imperative mood that, at the touch of a button, can boost a rocket from inertia to supersonic speed in a matter of seconds.

Another simple thought-experiment will enable us to imagine that moment when the founder of a new religious movement—a religious order perhaps—transmits his or her dream to a handful of companions. The moment is brief, but its formative value, its effect on the small company and on an unsuspecting world, is immeasurable. The moment is characterized not only by its brevity but equally by its intensity and daring: the dream must be impossible, the companions *must be* insufficient, and the audacity of imagination or faith *must be* total. There is no room here for rational plans and equality of opportunity.

In 1703 in Paris, an idealistic 23-year-old seminarian, with a handful of young students, imagined a world in which the penniless and exploited chimney sweeps of Paris would be cared for and protected. Between Claude-François Poullart des Places and this motley group there passed a kind of incandescent burst of en-

ergy, and from that moment their minds and hearts were fused round a common and impossible goal. What would become the Congregation of the Holy Ghost was born in that moment.

This occurrence is not unique: it is repeated, one might almost be tempted to say, routinely, at the founding moment of a hundred different congregations and orders, and of many other less canonical but no less creative undertakings. The common factors are outrageous imagination, insuperable odds, little practical likelihood of success (and thus high statistical probability of failure), and burning commitment both to the idea and to the community. This brief moment of in-

In those first days, when nothing is too much for the founding members and when energy is high, everyone is expended for the sake of the dream. But human beings cannot live like solar flares, and they seek a more sustainable life. Community is the institutionalization of communitas and is as necessary as it is inevitable.

candescent energy generates what can be called “communitas.” It is *not* a community in the usual sense. In fact, a small group of this kind, united in trust and committed to a Gospel ideal, fired by God’s Spirit and launched on the adventure of a lifetime, is definitely not to be confused with a conventional community.

Community and communitas

The power of communitas is fragile. It is not the power of the self-important. The power of communitas is to be found, paradoxically, in its vulnerability and modesty. The small group of people committed to undertaking a seemingly impossible task is touched not by hubris but by humility: the rootedness and groundedness of those who know their own very limited abilities, yet have abiding trust and enduring faith in the God of miracles. Communitas-power is not full of itself but is filled with nothing less than the power of God working through human instrumentality.

Communitas is the very opposite of structure: it is anti-structure. Its context is not organized routine or predictable timetable. When the impossible dream is captured by the group, no one would think of creating timetables as an organizational framework or job descriptions as a check on efficiency. On the contrary, meals will be infrequent and unscheduled, sleep a luxury, and comfort and security simply not an issue. “One for all and all for one” is the spirit that characterizes the group. Communitas is marked by zeal and energy, enthusiasm and collaboration. It actually generates a great deal of energy, because communitas is rooted in hope, united around a common vision, maintained by trust and inspired by great generosity. For a brief moment, a group experiencing communitas is both tireless and scheduleless. It is utopian, idealistic, and risk-taking.

Just as a flame struck from a flint surges, steadies, and slowly subsides, so does the incandescent power of communitas begin to abate even as its flame becomes visible. A match, once struck, will burn brightly only for an instant, for its relatively fierce heat and great light are already waning. It may be kept alive, even as it dies, if it is rotated and dipped so that the flame is sustained a little longer. And so it is with communitas: it lasts but a moment and then begins to die.

In those first days, when nothing is too much for the founding members and when energy is high, everyone is expended for the sake of the dream. But human beings cannot live like solar flares, and they seek a more sustainable life. At the moment when someone first suggests a modicum of rational organization—a fixed time for prayer, a regular schedule for meals, the distribution of responsibilities but, above all, a meeting—at that very moment communitas has become community. Community is the institutionalization of communitas and is as necessary as it is inevitable.

Communitas can carry people through moments of drama and high energy, risk and unpredictability; community sustains people for the long haul. Communitas produces the energy for takeoff; community sustains level flight. Communitas produces dreams and visions; community maintains works and programs that keep dreams alive and creates strategies that serve the vision. Communitas is ignited by a small group and is radical and pathbreaking; community is maintained by large numbers and is conservative and routine.

Both communitas and community are necessary for long-term undertakings. But in the long term, renewal

can only come from a rediscovery of *communitas*, since community lacks the imagination and fire required by true conversion. Unless, however, the spark of *communitas* can be struck again and again from the flint of community, the momentum of a group will slow. The group will run out of ideas, its creativity will evaporate, and ultimately boredom and disinterest will replace inspiration and fire. *Communitas* is to community as the flame is to the coal, as the spark is to the flint, or as the fuel is to the rocket. Both are necessary, but the active agent is *communitas*. When the flame dies, when the spark fails, when the fuel is depleted, no coal will produce heat, no flint, flame, and no rocket, liftoff.

The energy and inspiration of *communitas*

There are religious communities today that pay for advertisements and pray for vocations. However, the only real success this strategy can produce is if, within the community itself, what is advertised is actually lived; if, in other words, the fire of *communitas* still burns. There are church officials today who speak of the equality of all and of collaboration among the people of God. But the only success this talk can produce is if, within the church itself, what is preached is actually practiced, if the fire of *communitas* still burns.

A community—or the church—may possibly attract rational human beings with rational plans and rational expectations, but only *communitas* can attract generous souls with hearts on fire and lives to lay down for a dream.

A community—or the church—in search of recruits may be looking to maintain itself and its works. If so, it needs rational people who can undertake rational tasks and sustain community projects. On the other hand, a community—or the church—may be actively seeking to rekindle the fire that burned in the founding moment, generating heat and light that has now been lost. If so, it needs generous, creative, imaginative people whose zeal can be ignited by the vision of a daring and not quite rational undertaking. But communities—or the church—whose current membership is overtired, fragmented, and philosophically disunited are unlikely to attract generous, creative, and imaginative people.

If *communitas*-energy can be likened to incandescent fire and community-energy can be likened to the steadily burning but imperceptibly diminishing flame, it is not difficult to see what needs to be done in order

to sustain the combustion. The second law of thermodynamics can help us here: it states, in essence, that heat or energy cannot be transferred from a cooler to a hotter body within a system. In other words, community-heat or community energy lacks the capacity for combustion, because community itself represents a cooling down, a tendency toward equilibrium and indeed entropy—the loss of energy and the gradual breakdown of a system which leads to internal disorder. Consequently, only if *communitas*-energy can somehow be regenerated can the fire continue to burn and the light to shine.

When the flame of a burning match begins to flicker and show signs of dying we know the moment of incandescence that engulfed the match cannot be recaptured. Other matches may be struck, and other bursts

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of incandescence may be generated. Alternately, the dying match may be placed near kindling and the flame may perhaps catch again as it is taken up by dry wood. Still, in each case, the first incandescence will not be repeated and the uniqueness that was the light of that first match will be lost as the new fire takes hold.

But what if there is another match, not yet struck but ready for the striking? What if, instead of using energy to strike that second match against the rough surface, it is simply brought to the dying flame of the first match! Then there is reignition as the flame of the first match becomes the very flame of the second. New fire is created, but with all the energy of the old.

As a small boy I used to serve the early Mass at my parish in Manchester, England. In the wintertime, the coal fire in the kitchen at home would sometimes have survived the night, having been banked with dampened coal-dust or “slack” by my father as he went to bed. Sometimes, in the morning, before leaving for Mass, I could fan it into flame, but not every

day. Unless the ash beneath the fire had dropped through the grate—or was raked out so that the air could pass through the embers—the flame would not take hold. With no air to feed it, the fire inevitably died, even though it still retained some heat. I became quite proficient in riddling the grate and rekindling the fire. But there was a further lesson to learn: unless a critical mass of identifiable coal remained, and not simply a pile of hot ash, there would be nothing left after the riddling. With nothing to build on, there could be no reignition. Then I would return from Mass—to a cold and silent house—and have to set a new fire and start all over. I can still feel the cold and recall the shivers.

It is critically important for a community to assure continuity. It does so by socializing its members, turning the raw material (newborn infants) into the finished product (responsible adults).

Could this experience offer an image for those disciples who want to find a way to carry forward, in a new form, a flame that was first ignited long ago? Such people do not simply want to warm their hands at the dying embers of an old fire or even to try to kindle a flame where there is only ash and memory. They want to see actual evidence of fire: then they will fan it so that it bursts into flames. Such people exist, of that there is no doubt. But many of them see in the contemporary church or contemporary religious life only the ash and the memory—or perhaps a dying ember. This residue is not worth living for, let alone worth dying for.

Communitas is characterized by high energy but not by numerical strength or physical power; on the contrary, communitas energy is generated by, and in, a small, vulnerable, uncertain and socially insignificant group. Yet not every small, vulnerable, uncertain, and socially insignificant group will automatically produce communitas. A common dream, unity of purpose, deep commitment, idealism, daring, and indomitable hope—these are the indispensable ingredients of communitas. Something more is needed, however, without which the ingredients will never produce the kind of communitas that can change the world.

Initiation and communitas

In traditional societies, when the time of initiation comes round, a group of young boys or adolescents (and this can apply with equal force to a group of girls) are removed from the routine of daily life to undergo a process of transformation. Ages of the peer-group members may vary by up to three or four years and occasionally more: but the group can truly be called an “age group.” Children of chiefs and of rank-and-file community members together leave the security and predictability of the village for a period of separation and trial. They now become *liminal* or marginal: neither within nor completely outside the community (they are accompanied by senior adults, mentors, or midwives). They will have an experience of life-changing importance, not only for themselves but also, in particular, for the wider community, including the not-yet born. This experience is of communitas.

It is critically important for a community to assure continuity. It does so by socializing its members, turning the raw material (newborn infants) into the finished product (responsible adults). Initiation is one of the most important components of socialization, requiring people to pass through a formative stage of liminality, to forge an experience of communitas, and to reemerge as same-but-different and able to make a major contribution to the larger community.

In the experience of initiation, liminality and communitas converge. The former is expressed in the equality of everyone in the group: there is no hierarchy, no privilege, no single leader. On the contrary, there is a reduction, a leveling down, a stripping away of status. The boys or girls are without status or social identity, emptied of all they were and all they knew, so that they may be filled with all they will be and all they do not yet know. A kind of dying, a series of privations—of food, of sleep, of comfort, of predictability, and even of safety—is associated with this experience. At the end of it all, however, there will be a kind of rising, associated with indulgence—of food and clothing, of gifts and compliments, and particularly of status.

Those who went away as boys or girls returned transformed, as men and women: not biologically but socially, even spiritually. The status of child has been stripped from them, leaving them for a time without identity or place in the structure—liminal, marginal, “nobodies”—only to be replaced by the totally new status of adult. The bonding of these young people will

have a profound impact on the broader society as these new adults take up responsibilities consistent with their status and become productive and reproductive providers and parents. This is by no means all that happens, for the liminality has also left each individual with an age-group of peers, formed by a common experience, fused by common memories, and committed to common ends. No longer are they marginal; now they are central to the community. No longer do they experience *communitas*; but as they become part of the mainstream community they remember the experience

The little band gathered around Jesus has the quintessential experience of *communitas*. The group is small and its members are not very significant. Certainly they are not people of status or power. Its founder has a vision and an impossible dream, of a movement with minimal structure and no predictable routing.

of transformation and commit themselves to the future and to life.

Creative marginality and discipleship

Jesus gathered a group of people around himself and withdrew with them periodically as he tried to turn them into something more: disciples. They were a group of peers, but still too interested in hierarchy and status. “What about us?” says Peter. “We have left everything and followed you.” But Jesus offers them only intangible payment—with a bonus promise of persecutions (Mark 10:28-30). When they asked which among them was the greatest, Jesus pointedly declined to choose from among them: he called a child (marginal, liminal, a nobody who lacked status) over to them and told them to become like this child lest they be excluded from heaven (Matthew 18:1-4). James and John persisted, asking to be seated to the right and left of Jesus; but in response he only promised a taste of his cup with its bitter dregs (Mark 10:35-40). And to drive home the point that hierarchy was not part of his plan, he stated unequivocally, “It is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant....For the Son

of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45). This expression is one of intentional and creative marginality that can lead to life.

The little band gathered around Jesus has the quintessential experience of *communitas*. The group is small and its members are not very significant. Certainly they are not people of status or power. Its founder has a vision and an impossible dream, of a movement with minimal structure and no predictable routing. A scribe who wanted to join the group is told: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). Clearly, Jesus does not have an explicitly formulated rational plan, but he certainly does have a vision and a strategy.

Communitas attracts people who are “betwixt and between,” marginal to structure, and not the self-important or status-seeking. (Yet sometimes there are individuals in the group who have ambition and airs above their station: this will change as the liminal experience proceeds. The Twelve certainly show evidence of such ambition.) But though *communitas* requires people who may seem as though they have nothing to lose, it certainly does not offer them any easy options. Actually it demands their willingness to risk everything they have. They must be willing to gamble with their life. This potential for risk is precisely why *communitas* proves attractive to generous, noble souls: it is not that they have nothing to live for, but rather that they discover that they have everything to live for. No longer do they want to “save” their lives, as they might save money; now they want to “spend” their lives as they might celebrate an achievement. They do not want to lose their lives but to find them, and as Jesus promised, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39).

Communitas requires liminal people, people committed to a common undertaking in a spirit of corporate solidarity and with no personal ambition. Lacking authority or status they are particularly able to carry universal moral values, to embody truth and justice and equality and compassion without any limitations. Because liminal people are neither inside nor outside but marginal, distinctions of insider/outsider or us/them do not exist: liminal people are best placed to become the inclusive “we.” In fact, it is only by becoming a liminal person and by laying down or being deprived of personal status that one can actually begin to erase the

barriers and boundaries that distinguish and divide people everywhere. *Communitas* is therefore intentionally countercultural, because culture needs distinctions and divisions, stratification and hierarchy, insiders and outsiders—all of which are antithetical to *communitas*. *Communitas* is also utopian; or, better put, it is an illustration of the in-breaking of the realm of God.

The story of the Good Samaritan exemplifies the dimension of liminality characteristic of *communitas*. The story starts with a person on the edge, crossing a boundary, neither insider nor outsider, as he travels between Jerusalem and Jericho. Having been attacked

The only way to avoid the crippling effects of dominant hierarchy is to counter them with dedicated service. Yet faith-filled pioneers, creative persons, generous souls, visionaries, and innovators also need *communitas* in order for the dream to continue and for the fire to burn brightly.

and robbed, he becomes even more liminal, hovering between life and death. The Good Samaritan was also a traveler, and certainly liminal to the people listening to Jesus tell the story. They were Jews (or gentiles) with very strong animosity toward Samaritans. Nevertheless, the Samaritan in this story not only acts nobly but puts to shame those socially significant people—the priest and the Levite—from whom more was to have been expected. It is not that the Samaritan has nothing to lose by helping a fellow traveler. Rather, he would have lost his own dignity and integrity had he failed to do so. It is not that he was unafraid of dying, but rather that he could not have lived with himself if he had failed to show compassion. And having made the point, Jesus said to the self-righteous lawyer, (and by extension, to those who hear the story): “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:29-37).

Some people appear to want something that looks, at least superficially, like *communitas*. What actually may develop, however, is a community of servants or sycophants around one person who holds all the authority. This model is one of patron-and-client, and Je-

sus was quick to warn against it (Matthew 20:25-28). The only way to avoid the crippling effects of dominant hierarchy is to counter them with dedicated service. Yet faith-filled pioneers, creative persons, generous souls, visionaries, and innovators also need *communitas* in order for the dream to continue and for the fire to burn brightly. However, *communitas* is like wine without a bottle: it needs some structure-community so that it can be sustained over time. But community is like an uncorked bottle of wine: it needs *communitas* lest the flavor escape and the contents turn to vinegar. If *communitas* alone produces burnout, community alone will give rise to torpor. Together they can animate and sustain the founding vision, but only if vigilance is exercised lest *communitas* become suffocated or community paralyzed.

Permanent liminality and downward mobility

Some wonderfully imaginative initiatives and clearly marginal ministries can, after a few generations, turn into comfortable and predictably routine operations. Once it was very dangerous to go to the “foreign missions.” Between 1859 and 1900 the life expectancy of young missionaries (Holy Ghost Fathers, Spiritans) embarking for Sierra Leone, West Africa, was less than ten months, and the average missionary died before reaching 30 years of age. But there were always more people waiting to replace the missionaries who died.

In the 19th century, women like Cornelia Connolly of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, Anne-Marie Javouhey of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, or Katharine Drexel of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament pioneered girls’ education and inspired generations of women to rise to the challenge in less than hospitable environments in North America, Europe, Africa, and on Native American Reservations.

Today the life expectancy of those in overseas ministry is comparable to that of those at home, while girls’ education no longer needs pioneers. Still, today’s ministry, wherever it may be, cries out for dedicated teachers willing to commit to marginal situations; and, meanwhile, a host of new pioneer situations have arisen—from AIDS care to hospice, from rehabilitation of child soldiers to ministry among child prostitutes. The successors of the Spiritans—or of the Connollys, Javouheys, and Drexels—are not as numerous now; but those who remain must rekindle the fire if they are to be credible and creditable sons and daughters of their founders; and other inspired people—women and men—must step for-

ward as advocates for today's needy and forgotten people. This replenishment of the ranks is so, simply because such dedication and initiative is the lifeblood of Christianity. Without it, Christianity would deserve to die. The fastest-growing group of people on earth today is the poor. Even in the United States, there are more than thirty million people below the poverty line; they are dying, not immediately but by degrees. Worldwide, more than a billion people are in abject poverty, dying with every breath they take. A curious

History will hold the rich nations accountable for the decimation of nations through AIDS and genocide. Their apathy, dressed as nonintervention, is an abdication of moral responsibility. And as a small percentage of the world's population can choose retirement-with-benefits around the age of 50 and expect the benefits to last them another 30 years or more, a huge percentage of the world's population has neither the hope of retirement-with-benefits, nor even the expectation of life beyond the immediate future. If we bring the earlier reflections—about *communitas* and creativity, liminality and loving service—into engagement with these brief reflections on contemporary needs and the faces of injustice, we should be able to draw some conclusions that can be applied to our own lives as disciples. ✚

With every single increment in our standard of living, every single decimal point of upward mobility, we are thereby falling further away from the poor, to whom we, as Christians, have a responsibility in justice.

statistic appeared recently. Less than 20 years ago, the very rich were estimated to have 50 times as much as the very poor; now they possess 72 times as much. Those figures represent such a gap as to be almost meaningless, but they illustrate a highly significant point. With every single increment in our standard of living, every single decimal point of upward mobility, we are thereby falling further away from the poor, to whom we, as Christians, have a responsibility in justice. It is not enough for us to claim that we cannot do anything: we can, and must, do some thing. Simply because we cannot do everything does not give us permission to do nothing; and if we do nothing positive, we are doing something negative: we are sinning by omission.

In the 20th century, life expectancy for people in the privileged nations increased by almost 70 percent—an unprecedented and unrepeatably factor. In 1900, women's life expectancy in the U.S. and Europe was around 47 years, and men's a little less, at 46. In the year 2000, the life expectancy of women in the U.S. and across Europe had risen to around 80 years, while men's was further back, at around 76. In 2000, the life expectancy for all people in Ethiopia was actually less than 40 years (Pears Factfinder 2002, Penguin Books, New York, 2001); and with war, AIDS, and genocide accounting for so many deaths in Africa, life expectancy in several countries on that continent was less than in Europe a century ago.

Outline of a successful vocation retreat for Hispanic young adults

by Clemente Barrón, CP

A vocation minister who doesn't collaborate with others in this ministry may soon suffer burnout. At the same time, vocation promoters today are aware that collaboration can be valuable at all levels of church life. It has become a way of life for many of us in church ministry.

The need for collaboration is even greater when we promote vocations in the Hispanic community. The vast majority of our vocation promoters are not Hispanic, and, while a good number of vocations are arising from the Hispanic community, I believe many more Hispanic young adults are still overlooked. I'd like to share my experience in sponsoring retreats for this overlooked sector of Hispanics in collaboration with El Movimiento Familiar Cristiano/USA (or MFC, which, in translation, is Christian Family Movement/USA).

For the last nine years, the MFC national leadership has been looking for ways to promote vocations to religious life and ordained ministry. This commitment to promote vocations grew out of the group's own need, as MFC leaders realized that they did not have enough priests, brothers and sisters to accompany them in their spiritual life and ministry. (See "Keys to reaching forgotten Hispanics" on page 28 for more information on MFC.) At the same time, awareness of the lay role in promoting vocations to religious life and priesthood was being reinforced by the revised editions of the MFC "temarios," which are guide books for small group reflection. When the editorial committee noticed that there was no explicit encouragement for the families to promote vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life, they promptly added one called: "Vocations to Priesthood and Religious Life." Now every family that belongs to the MFC is asked to take responsibility for promoting vocations to priesthood and religious life, starting with their own family.

First efforts

The first attempts to promote vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life in the movement were good efforts. At the MFC national conventions, a workshop on vocations to religious life and priesthood became standard fare. The MFC leadership wanted to make sure that the families were aware of their responsibility to promote such vocations.

Another vocation effort, modeled on the "Called by Name" program, stumbled. But MFC regrouped and developed plans for a new format for promoting vocations. One thing MFC does well is weekend retreats, offering many of them during the course of the year. So we decided to develop a "vocation awareness" retreat for the sons, daughters and friends of adult retreatants, thus building upon one of MFC's strengths. We also needed a model that could be used in different locations. We chose northern California as our first site and the Houston area for our second one, and we eventually held the first retreats in 2002.

To put together a strong retreat team, we needed to look for those Hispanic men and women religious who have lived here in the United States for a good period of time or who were born and raised here. We also wanted religious who understood the process of vocation discernment as practiced by the majority of religious communities here in the states. Providentially,

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we were able to put together very good teams for both California and Texas. We developed our program by means of conference calls and a meeting just prior to the retreat. While this approach may not have been ideal, it worked well for us. We were also fortunate to have experienced vocation directors.

Identifying our target group

As we began to prepare for our retreat, the first question we tackled was who to invite. We really wanted to

We really wanted to target a population that was not being reached by the vast majority of vocation directors and religious communities—that is, young adults whose first language is Spanish.

target a population that was not being reached by the vast majority of vocation directors and religious communities—that is, young adults whose first language is Spanish. Vocation directors usually are in touch with more visible Hispanic leaders, those in charge of programs like *Cursillos*, charismatic renewals, choirs, or *Hijos e Hijas* (Sons and Daughters). Vocation outreach tends to overlook other Hispanic young adults who are not front and center in their parishes. These overlooked young people generally are newer immigrants with lower incomes. As we considered our target population, we certainly were aware that not everyone was going to be completely Spanish-dominant, but the vast majority of the participants were going to be speaking Spanish as their language of choice. We also wanted to target young people between 18-30. We recognized that targeting such a young population exclusively has not been the norm for most vocation retreats. Those I've been part of tend to attract older adults.

On the other hand, we knew we were embarking on uncharted waters. No doubt some of our target population had been approached by a few religious communities from Mexico or other countries. To my knowledge, however, this was the first time U.S. religious communities were collaborating to offer vocation discernment retreats in Spanish. As it turned out, this kind of retreat presented a much bigger challenge to the retreat team than to the participants. Several of the team members were not Spanish-dominant, even

though they were Hispanic. Some of us struggled to get our message across in Spanish.

Defining our goal

Our goal, then, was to help young Hispanics consider a vocation to religious life or ordained ministry as a life-long commitment. This vocation retreat would not so much reap the fruit of the harvest, as plant the seed for the harvest. We wanted to bring into conscious awareness—in a safe, loving environment—the unspoken desires of these young people, where they could dare say, “Maybe God is calling me to consecrated life or ordained ministry,” without feeling out of place.

It made sense, then, to invite participants who had not yet thought about a church vocation, along with those who were already giving this life choice serious consideration. The retreat team thought some of our targeted young people were choosing marriage or the single life because they really did not know that they had other options. We wanted a chance to open up horizons for retreatants, to let them see new alternatives, and to let them know that religious communities really wanted them to consider a life-long commitment with them.

Making the retreat culturally appropriate

In our planning we had to ask ourselves what we wanted to accomplish with these vocation discernment retreats. If our target group was younger, predominately Spanish-speaking, did this mean that we would have to develop a different vocation discernment retreat? Couldn't we just take the vocation retreats that are working well elsewhere and translate them into Spanish?

These were some of the questions we wrestled with as we tried to define our goal. To be sure, we did not always deal with such questions and concerns directly. As we vocation directors talked with each other, we realized that each session needed to be tailored for our particular target group. We would say such things as, “Remember, these young men and women do not have an experience of church where this suggestion makes sense. We need to give them something that they will understand.” Since most of us on the team had grown up in families and communities similar to our participants, we began to adjust the sessions accordingly and intuitively.

It was not until after the retreats that I was able to put

our goal into words. We wanted to help young, Hispanic men and women consider a vocation to religious life or ordained ministry as a real option within the Catholic Church of the United States. We weren't looking to help the retreatants take that last step, to move into a formal relationship with a religious community or a seminary. Rather we wanted to help them begin their discernment journey, where they could say to themselves, "The U.S. church really wants me to consider seriously a vocation to the vowed life or to the priesthood. Now I know what I can do to explore

such an option." That was the kind of understanding that we wanted our participants to take home with them.

Inviting participants through MFC

Since our goal was to invite Hispanic young people between ages 18-30 to this kind of a retreat program, then our challenge was to find them and encourage them to sign up. This is why our relationship with the MFC was so important. Many of the MFC families have

Keys to reaching forgotten Hispanics

HORIZON interviews Clemente Barrón, CP

Why do you encourage vocation directors to reach out to other groups of young adults besides college students and professionals?

If you start looking, you'll find that there are many young adults who don't fit the typical vocation profile but who have the gifts and qualities we desire in religious life. However, they're not at a point in their lives where they can articulate a strong spiritual sense of themselves using the language of the dominant church culture. They're often not on the college campuses. They're not in Catholic high schools in any great number. They aren't the parish leaders. They might be poor, new immigrants working long hours in dead-end jobs. These young adults are not going to show up for a diocesan "Theology on Tap" session because they don't feel they fit into the more Anglo, upscale crowd.

Our notion as vocation ministers of who makes a viable candidate—educated, spiritually articulate people—may well be excluding Catholics who also have genuine vocations to religious life or priesthood. I truly believe we need to do more to reach out to these more marginalized groups in the church.

What is El Movimiento Familiar Cristiano/USA (MFC)?

This movement has been serving Hispanic families here in the United States for well over 40 years through small faith-communities, retreats, regional gatherings and other forms of outreach. Through this movement, Hispanic families have

experienced their faith in a way that allows them to grow spiritually and culturally at the same time. MFC has provided a means for Hispanics to become more bonded to their Catholic roots, which often leads to a burning desire to evangelize and catechize. Furthermore, because it is a lay movement, it becomes a school for lay leadership within the church and society.

How do we know when it's appropriate to use Spanish for outreach to Hispanics?

It's true that not all Hispanic youth and young adults use Spanish. The key to knowing when and with whom to use Spanish is to be in touch with lay leadership. They will guide you and help you to know which language is appropriate during retreats and other forms of outreach.

The retreat you outline in the article was developed by Hispanic vocation ministers. Because they're Hispanic, they understood the target population and could intuitively adjust the standard vocation-retreat model. How can Anglo vocation directors, who may not have experience in Hispanic ministry, effectively work with Hispanic young adults?

Again, collaboration with Hispanic lay leadership is essential for cross-cultural outreach. The families in MFC gave us tremendous insight into our target group. It also helps simply to be *aware* that you are reaching out to people whose culture, language and way of being in the world is different. Knowing that you need some help from lay leaders to be effective is an important first step.

sons and daughters within this age group, and thus MFC families become our entrée into our target population. Moreover, the MFC has the acceptance and respect of the parishes where MFC is present, and so the local MFC people can be a conduit to Hispanic young adult programs. If we were going to get participants to come to these retreats, then we needed the MFC to help us identify and invite them.

As the retreat planning continued, I was constantly amazed at the dedication and enthusiasm of MFC families, beginning with the national presidents. These families did not weaken in their resolve, even when we faced difficulties, such as trouble finding a suitable place to have the retreat, or slow responses from young adults. These families were not about to give up. When one door closed, they tried another.

A crucial advantage in having the MFC do the recruitment for these retreats was their understanding of the social, cultural and economic situation of our target group. For the most part, we were looking at young adults who had two or three low-paying, part-time jobs, who were living in crowded conditions, far away from their family and country of origin. Some were closely linked to their parishes or young adult groups, while others were friends of friends, who had little contact with church. These were not unfamiliar social conditions for MFC families. They knew how to invite, and they knew how to read the non-verbal messages that those invited give. This gave us a major advantage in our cross-cultural situation.

With the help of brochures made for our retreat program, MFC families began to contact young men and women they thought would make good participants for our retreats. In both cases, we were pleased with the turn-out. We had about 25 participants in Northern California, and 40 in Houston. Between the two groups, we only had five or six participants who were older than 30.

Also, we believe that a majority of the young adults who took part in this program were being asked to consider religious life or ordained ministry for the first time. We were able to give them an opportunity to reflect, pray and talk to someone about a possible religious vocation. And we gave them resources on how to discern.

Retreat objectives

Given our understanding of the background and cul-

ture of these participants, we decided to develop a discernment retreat that used ritual and process, with some presentations and teachings integrated into the program. Our key rituals were: baptism, reconciliation and illumination. Our objectives were:

- to help the participants understand that everyone has value, everyone has something to contribute;
- to assist the participants in understanding that all vocations flow from our baptism;
- to identify the support systems in vocation discernment for ordained ministry and/or religious life and help the participants learn how to use them.
- to help the participants name the next step in discernment for themselves.

For this kind of a retreat, the first session is always

We really wanted to target a population that was not being reached by the vast majority of vocation directors and religious communities—that is, young adults whose first language is Spanish.

crucial. For the most part, the participants are strangers to one another. They usually come in groups of friends, and these groups become security blankets for them. The retreat team needs to create a sense of inclusive community from the very beginning and break up those pre-existing cliques, while at the same time integrating the loners—those who don't feel a part of the group. The goals and objectives of the discernment retreat need to be "owned" by all of the participants right from the start. That's why the first session is critical to the overall success of the retreat.

Saturday morning: introduction to vocations

A baptismal ritual of some sort is a powerful and moving experience. We use this ritual for Morning Prayer on Saturday, placing bowls of water around a small water fountain. Scripture and liturgical music on this theme are abundant, so we had no problem creating a prayer service with appropriate readings, music and symbols. We included in this ritual a rite of blessing, wherein each participant blesses the assembly. We wanted to let our participants know that our privilege to bless others comes from our baptism.

The rest of Saturday morning is focused on the theme of vocations, with a significant amount of time spent on vocations to religious life and/or ordained ministry. This is definitely a teaching moment, and it is structured to involve the participants. Saturday morning is also the time to address such issues as a false understanding of being a priest, brother or sister. In addition, we plant the notion that our own understanding of what it means to be a sister, priest or brother develops over the years, a reality that many of the team members were able to speak about from their experience.

Saturday afternoon: vocation discernment

The Saturday afternoon session addresses issues of vocation discernment as lived out in the Hispanic community. Since it takes place right after lunch, we have the participants role-play several situations. One is about a young man or woman telling parents and family about his/her decision to enter a religious community. Another one is about telling a boyfriend or girlfriend the news about entering into serious discernment with a vocation director. A third is about breaking this news to friends and pals. Lastly, we have a role-play of what happens when a vocation director comes to visit someone's home. As with all role-plays, the participants ham it up, and by the time we finish, we are rolling on the floor with laughter. This format brings to awareness some of the serious and important vocation issues that need to be talked through. By the end of the session, we have touched upon some of the more crucial issues that are uppermost in their minds regarding vocation discernment without ever having to bring them up ourselves.

The next session is definitely one of the more challenging ones for the participants. We begin with the Emmaus account, followed by a short reflection. Then, we pass out blank cards. We use a greeting card designed by artist Gene Mullan depicting supper at Emmaus. (Gene Mullan cards are available at 1-800-554-5052.) We send retreatants off to reflect on what they believe their vocation call to be. We give them an opportunity to talk with someone from the team as well and ask them to write a message in the card, addressing it to themselves. The cards are then sealed and placed upon the altar. We mail them after retreat. We finish before supper with a prayer service, giving individuals a chance to speak if they so wish.

Saturday night: recreation and reconciliation

After supper, the MFC families come to sing and rec-

reate with the participants. Then we have the final session of the day, which focuses on reconciliation. This can be a powerful experience, because many of the retreatants are now ready for the sacrament of reconciliation. They are beginning to see that each one is called by God to live out a special vocation, and God's love and mercy is overwhelming and ever present. Many are coming to terms with God, themselves, their families, their friends and their future. It is a good way to end the day.

Sunday morning: prayer and Eucharist

We use a theme of light for the Sunday morning prayer. We fill the worship space with candles. A votive candle is there for each participant to take home. The theme is that we need the light of Christ to help us make good vocation decisions. Again, more than enough Scripture and liturgical music exists to create a wonderful prayer experience.

Only one session is left, and that is to help the participants integrate what they've learned about God, themselves and their future. However this session is organized, it needs to end with a "statement of intent." This is a little form that allows each person to begin stating the direction his or her life is taking at this moment. The choices are: marriage, the single life, a religious vocation, a vocation to ordained ministry. We allow multiple choices. We also ask if the participant wants to have a follow-up get-together, and if he or she wants to stay in contact with anyone from the retreat team. We ask retreatants to fold their responses and place them on the altar. About a third of the retreatants indicate an interest in meeting with a vocation director. Most want to meet again as a group, although the participation rate tends to go down. Thus far, the retreat team has not developed a solid system for building on the retreat's momentum, but it's an area we're looking at.

We close with Eucharist. The participants' creativity and enthusiasm really shines forth here. We also invite parents and other families of the MFC to join us. We definitely leave on a high.

As with any outline, many details have been left out of this account. I've presented the more important parts of the retreat with broad strokes. Moreover, we are still learning as we go along how best to do this. After our first Houston retreat, we had a wonderful debriefing with the team, and we came up with many suggestions for improvement. Thus far, we've held

this retreat three times, twice in Houston and once in Northern California. A new team is currently putting together another for Northern California in summer 2003.

Reach the marginalized with new methods

I began this article by emphasizing the necessity of collaboration in vocation ministry, especially as we invite Hispanics to become members of our communities or ordained ministers. This experience has taught me that we can and must reach out to our Hispanic brothers and sisters in ways besides our traditional approaches. We need to rely more on lay movements to help us with these types of retreats. This means estab-

This experience has taught me that we can and must reach out to our Hispanic brothers and sisters in ways besides our traditional approaches.

lishing some kind of a relationship with these lay movements, relationships that are mutually helpful. Doing so is, indeed, a commitment of time, energy and service, but it is also an investment in our future.

We cannot pour old wine into new wineskins. We need to be flexible as we prepare for these discernment retreats. Our target group is different from the typical vocation retreat; our goal is somewhat different, and the participants' experience of church is different. All of these factors told us that we needed to create new formats based upon an understanding of our target group. We couldn't arrive at these new ways by ourselves alone. We needed the MFC families to play an instrumental role. And most especially, we needed the support of the faith community of the people we serve. It is out of these communities and out of these families that new members will emerge and lead our congregations into the future.

I hope that our experience inspires you to reach out as a vocation minister to other ethnic groups and to collaborate with laity from those groups. After all, our vocations are a gift, and our diversity is a gift as well, and these are gifts given to us by the same God. For that, we are grateful. ✚

Follow-up to NRVC's "Dimensions of Diversity" Convocation

by Susan Kidd, CND

In the winter 2003 issue, HORIZON presented the text of all the keynote presentations at Convocation 2002. The following two articles are a follow-up to the ideas our members generated in response to those presentations. Below, NRVC Board member Susan Kidd, CND provides the context for the "Dimensions of Diversity: Our Response" Convocation, as well as some thoughts on moving forward with that information. As we present this article, NRVC also invites its members to contemplate their own community's response to the Convocation. If your community has developed a process or program that helps address the many "dimensions of diversity"—both joys and challenges—we invite you to share that program with the wider membership of NRVC. Contact the national office (listed on the inside front cover) about how best to share your program or process. Finally, we extend our thanks to Gayle Rusbasan, OSF who tallied the written feedback from Convocation participants.

Setting the stage for Convocation 2002

Think back. Further. Go way back, before Convocation 2002. Yes, even before the Continental Congress in April 2002. Do you remember Convocation 2000? Does "Building Bridges Between Young Adults and Members of Religious Communities" sound familiar? Almost like ancient history, isn't it? I was new on the National Board at that Convocation and had been told "Enjoy it, next one ... you work!"

Actually soon after Convocation 2000 ended, the Board began to plan Convocation 2002. As we brainstormed a theme, we realized many groups and organi-

Susan Kidd, CND is vocation director for her community, the Congregation of Notre Dame. She is based in Toronto, Ontario and is also a member of the NRVC National Board.

zations were addressing topics of diversity, especially cultural diversity. We wanted to expand our look at diversity, to widen the net. We chose to include sexual, generational, spiritual/ecclesial, cultural and racial diversity. We wanted to respond as an organization to the needs, the challenges and the joys that diversity in its fullness offers religious communities. Quite a goal, don't you think?

We carefully chose our speakers for their individual areas of expertise. We asked each speaker to focus on his or her own area, but also to be aware of implications for the other dimensions of diversity we had named. We wrote to the four speakers: "We assume that two key areas of focus would be sexual diversity and cultural/racial/ethnic diversity. We hope that the following questions will not only help focus those areas but will also give attention to other key aspects of diversity in community life today, including differing ecclesiologies and theological training and generational differences." And we went on to provide specific questions, under an umbrella question: What does it mean to live in a diverse world and community from the perspective of working both with candidates and community members?

Questions we wanted to address

Implications

- How is a person in formation sustained if he/she is the 'lone presence' (ecclesiologically, sexually, generationally, culturally, etc.) in a house?
- What are the skills needed for communities to raise awareness and talk about diversity in its many dimensions?

Ramifications

- What are the different kinds of support needed for candidates of diverse backgrounds making a vocational choice?

- How do you invite candidates and community members to greater openness and conversion?

Awareness

- What skills do we need to look for in candidates to help them cope with the diversity in community?
- How do we as vocation directors respond to the statement from the Catholic public, that the clergy is becoming increasingly homosexual?

Ownership/identity—Fostering a healthy sense of self

- When dealing with developmental stages, how do we help candidates find the balance in appropriate disclosure?
- What is culture? How do we name our own reality?

Our intention was that each speaker would include references to how differing ecclesiologies and theological training and generational differences add another layer to their specific area of diversity. Given the diversity in community and in candidates, speakers were asked to make specific references to finding a comfort level with diversity and how to search for the “common ground” in community.

Presentations

As mentioned in this article’s introduction, each of the presentations was published in the winter 2003 issue of *HORIZON*. Some have also been printed in *Origins*, a publication of the U.S. Bishop’s Conference. Donna Markham, OP spoke on “Issues of sexual diversity and the call to religious life”; Seán Sammon, FMS spoke on “Sexual diversity and contemporary U.S. religious life”; Father Virgilio Elizondo addressed “Welcoming ‘the other’ in our midst”; and Marie Chin, RSM offered, “Toward a new understanding of cultural encounter in our communities.”

Evoking a response from participants

Wanting to tap the resources of our membership and Convocation participants, our time together included “table talk.” Each table was given the following focus questions to discuss.

1. What from the speaker’s presentation resonated with you?
2. From what you heard, what calls you to action?

Feedback to the large group included clarification questions to the speakers and ideas for furthering the

conversations. Comments also addressed the “fear factor” that comes when difficult topics are raised in community; the current climate, which is not “diversity friendly”; and the caution that must be exercised when airing issues of diversity within religious communities. The sharing was insightful and helpful in naming the current reality. Given that the Convocation theme also called for our response to the dimensions of diversity, naming the dimensions was not enough. What are we doing with the gift and the challenge that is our diversity?

Back to the participants

After hearing the four presentations and having an opportunity to discuss them in formal and casual conversations, we then gave participants the following questions to discuss with others at their table.

- Of the areas of diversity addressed at this Convocation, which two areas are the greatest sources of tension for you in your community?
- What do you think needs to happen so that your community can address these tensions?

We asked participants to hand in their responses to the questions. The Board recognized that much was said and heard over the few days and perhaps our questions were premature. Some participants might have preferred to take home the content, reflect on it, and then set a course for action. And many did that. However, we wanted to tap the resources of our own membership for input and further potential resources. Convocation is an opportunity, offered every second year, for us to gather for our own professional and personal development. It has been our experience that sometimes the discussion leads us to an idea for a resource or to a theme for a future Convocation or workshop.

Feedback gathered

Many thanks to Gayle Rusbasan, OSF for compiling the information gathered at Convocation 2002. Altogether, 240 participants responded. If you attended Convocation, you might want to review your notes. Or any *HORIZON* reader can review the texts of the presentations to recall the challenges put forth for participants. In responding to the first question (the two greatest sources of tension), the labyrinth of cultures as presented by Marie Chin struck a chord with many. More than half of the respondents (58%) mentioned Marie’s four groups: essentialists, existential-

ists, feminists and liberationists. The tension between essentialists and existentialists was mentioned the most often.

Another widely reported source of tension is ethnic and cultural diversity (42%). The areas specified covered a broad range: different ethnic groups of the same race and the challenges of diverse ethnicity; predominantly white communities wondering how to attract and welcome people of other races; the culture of religious life and ethnic culture. Age diversity was mentioned and often was coupled with cultural diversity as some new members coming in are also of various races, thus presenting a two-fold challenge.

“The great unmentionable” was mentioned. According to the feedback received, sexual diversity, sexual orientation and sexuality in general are rarely, if ever, discussed. Responses indicate that community members desire change and openness.

Of interest is the tension caused by accommodating behaviors, fear/avoidance coping strategies, and the inability to communicate. While these responses are actually ways of dealing with underlying issues, they are not the issues themselves. We’re invited to look deeper to see what issues are being accommodated, avoided or withheld.

In an attempt to “push the envelope a bit further,” the second question called for action (what needs to happen to address these tensions?). We hear a call for dialogue, sharing and authentic listening. We need courage, time, open and honest conversation. Our current climate necessitates providing a “safe place” to “walk the borders” and “live the gaps.”

Suggestions include an outside facilitator to lead discussions of diversity, the need for education of our members. Other thoughts include the following.

- Forgiveness/healing
- Trust/risk taking
- Openness/acceptance
- “Be enticed by the spirituality of vulnerability”
- “Be willing to be vulnerable”
- Prayer and reflection
- See the prejudices in oneself and be aware of them
- Need for change and conversion

Of the areas of diversity addressed at this Convocation which two areas are the greatest sources of tension in your community?

58% listed the four cultures named by Marie Chin. (See chart on page 35.)
42% listed ethnic and cultural diversity.

30% listed sexual diversity.

What do you think needs to happen so that your community can address these tensions?

45% listed dialogue/sharing/authentic listening

26% mentioned education

What’s next?

We have set ourselves quite a road. While the larger portion of the Convocation audience was vocation ministers, the invited guests included leadership and formation personnel as well. The challenges presented are not solely in the portfolio of the vocation ministers. But we may be able to put forth the Convocation’s questions to our communities. We may be able to call the questions in our communities and offer resources to address these issues on a local or regional level.

And so we go back to you, the HORIZON readers: What initiatives have you put in place since Convocation 2002 to help your community? What ideas have you had that you want to bounce off other NRVC members? We’d like to publish articles in future editions of HORIZON that offer ideas for responses that others have tried or even ideas that people *want* to try. Imagine a “how to” list, a way of sharing the riches of the Convocation with your community members. Or perhaps, you have an idea for an NRVC resource that will help you and your community address issues of diversity. What is *your* response to the dimensions of diversity? +

The labyrinth of cultures

During her Convocation 2002 presentation, "Toward a new understanding of cultural encounter in our communities," Marie Chin, RSM referred to a "labyrinth of cultures," drawing on the work of David Couterier, OFM. Following is a breakdown of these four cultural patterns. Keep in mind that each culture has distinct rituals, spirituality, prayer forms, behavior, language and values. Adherents have a strong emotional investment in their culture.

Essentialist

Religious in this culture were taught and continue to maintain that the primary task of religious life is the sanctification of their souls and the faithful transmission of the essential principles of Christian doctrine. They display unquestioning loyalty to the institutions of the church and expect order and clarity of mind and will consistent with what they believe to be the world's natural order of perfection. Trained in a hierarchically ordered cosmology, they see grace as having an ascendancy over nature, mind over body, common good over self-interest. Of major importance—hearing explicitly "what the church teaches," that is, the clear directives of the hierarchical church and magisterium, and the explicit mandates of religious superiors before committing themselves to action.

They are uncomfortable in discussions, dialogue, "shared faith." A group vote rarely holds the same weight as an explicit directive from religious leadership. Their rituals, literature and interpretations hold firmly to tradition and customs.

They continue to be faithful, pious, spiritual, devotional, and extremely loyal members of their communities. They organize their world—no matter how "renewed" they are—according to the lessons of order, precedence, status, sacrifice, discipline and self control of their early training.

Existentialist

The primary metaphor of this culture is the promotion of human and spiritual maturity of the individual influenced by Vatican II's emphasis on "the people of God" and the concept of personhood. Individuals are capable of making free choices, of becoming self-reflective and personally responsible for their own development. Existentialists recognize that an individual's authority comes from personal and free choices. It becomes enough for them that individuals find their own way in religion.

They often seem to have little patience for the construction of a shared vision and mutual respon-

sibility for the future of the community. At meetings, they are likely to be satisfied with garnering the personal meaning and individual import of discussions and may fail to negotiate a compromise with others in the group.

The corporate/communal aspect may not be a high priority. They have difficulty developing or seeking harmonious interactions with other cultural groups in the community. They dislike what seems to be uniformity. They desire to root the religious project in a secure personal understanding and appropriation of the implications of Gospel living. The starting point for mature discussion in any arena, church matters included, is sincerity, authenticity, personal growth.

Liberationist

The primary metaphor for liberationists is a conscious conviction about the priority of God's preferential love for the poor and the priority of justice as a precondition for the exchange of faith. Their emphasis is on solidarity and insertion.

Social analysis is important. The spirituality and theology is political. Its prayer and ritual center on the powerful reputation of God as universal love. That reputation is at stake in every act of injustice that is tolerated or ignored.

Liberationists tend to be outwardly critical of unjust structures within society and in the church, a habit that impresses other religious as disloyal to the institution of the church. Discussions that do not focus on the inclusion of God's poor at the common table of creation and redemption leave many members of this group feeling disenfranchised or ignored. More than that, it leaves them feeling irresponsible in the face of enormous human suffering.

Feminist

The primary metaphor for feminists is the empowering of oneself and the empowerment of others. These lead to relationships of mutuality and reciprocity (sometimes described as shared power) as well as a trust in experience. This cultural group is about revisioning and re-imaging, i. e. basically seeking an alternative mode of seeing, being, acting—a transformation of consciousness. Feminists seek wholeness and well-being—both/ and rather than either/or. They value inclusivity.

This culture is profoundly affecting our vision of reality, our spirituality, values, behavior, life-style, ritual, etc.